



Overgrown

A CAROLINA REAPERS NOVEL

SAMANTHA WHISKEY

BROGAN

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To Those Who Never Back Down

BROGAN

“*I*’m telling you, this is our year,” Sterling said as we jogged on the trails behind the housing development we called *Reaper Village*. All but a few of the Carolina Reapers, our NHL team, lived in the subdivision, including me.

“Stop saying shit like that,” Maxim snapped, shaking his head as we started up the last hill of the trail. “You’ll jinx us.”

“I don’t believe in that jinxing shit,” Sterling argued. “Luck is only what you make of it.”

Sometimes it was hard to believe the two were brothers. They’d been raised by different mothers in different households, but though their asshole dad, NHL legend Sergei Zoltov, who had basically hidden Sterling away like a dirty little secret, had played a front-and-center role in Maxim’s childhood. Most days I thought Sterling was probably better off.

Then again, what the hell did I know? My parents had died when I was six, and I’d been raised by my aunt and uncle who didn’t exactly have much time for another mouth with the eight kids they already had. I’d had my fill of kids growing up and had zero desire to *ever* bring one into my life on a permanent basis, which was good considering I’d probably make a shit parent.

“I’m just saying that we’re looking good,” Sterling continued as we crested the hill, our shoes crunching on the red gravel of

the trail as we kept a good pace. “We signed some good rookies—”

“Which was the only benefit of losing during playoffs last year,” Maxim interrupted.

“And from what I’ve seen, we’re all still in pretty damn good shape,” Sterling continued.

“If London keeps feeding you cookies, you’re going to be in a *round* shape,” Maxim quipped, a smirk tilting his lips.

“Fuck off,” Sterling shoved his brother in the shoulder, sending Maxim into the tall grass for a few strides. “What do you think, Brogan? Do we have a shot at the cup this year?”

I shook my head at both of them, my breathing even and steady, whereas Sterling’s was starting to strain a little. The guy wasn’t out of shape—we’d just finished seven miles—but Maxim and I were both still going steady as ever. *That’s what happens when you get married and your priorities change.*

Fuck that noise. My only priority was my career and taking my team as far as we could get this year. Everything else was taking a sideline.

“Come on, I know you have an opinion,” Sterling urged.

“My opinion is that you two should shut the hell up and let us finish this run.” I threw them a wicked grin and kicked on my afterburners, tearing up the trail as I raced toward the open, wooden fencing that marked the start of the neighborhood.

“Fucker’s fast,” Sterling muttered.

“Just faster than you!” Maxim called back, hot on my heels.

Sweat poured off my body as I beat them to the opening in the fence, courtesy of our run and the August humidity South Carolina was known for. It was supposed to get up to one hundred and four today, and it was already in the eighties at seven a.m..

“You. Two. Fucking. Suck,” Sterling wheezed as he met us, leaning over and bracing his hands on his knees as he gulped in air.

“It’s the cookies,” Maxim said with a laugh as we started walking again, taking the trail that ended just before the start of the cul-de-sac.

A smile tugged at my lips as we walked down the sidewalk, cooling down.

The neighborhood was a mix of styles, from modern farmhouse to minimalist, each house somehow exactly fitting the personality of the player who lived inside. The rules of the community were simple. You didn’t have to live here as a Reaper, but you couldn’t live here unless you were one. Asher Silas, the tech billionaire who started the franchise, had built it for the express purpose of making our team feel like a family, and in that he’d succeeded.

We were loyal at best and dysfunctional at worst, but we were a family.

A red sedan sped down the street, blowing by us way faster than the twenty-five-mile-per-hour speed limit in the neighborhood.

“Slow down!” Sterling shouted at the taillights. “Kids live here!” The car zipped around the curve in the road, obviously not hearing Sterling, or not caring.

“Asshole,” I muttered.

“Fuck,” Maxim swore, wiping the sweat from his forehead with the bottom of his shirt. “Good thing school’s not in session or some of the kids would have been on the sidewalks.”

We didn’t have a ton of kids on the Reapers, but there were more than a few in the neighborhood.

“And this is where I leave you,” Sterling said with a wave, heading down the street toward his house.

“For the good of the team, lay off the fucking cookies!” Maxim shouted after him.

Sterling flipped him the middle finger in return.

“Give your brother a break. He’s in great shape,” I said as we approached the section of the street that belonged to us.

Maxim lived next door to Sterling—which had caused hellish conflict our first year here, but I lived across the street from Maxim, just where the cul-de-sac opened up.

“I just enjoy fucking with him,” Maxim admitted with a grin. His brow furrowed as he looked over my shoulder. “Looks like you had a package delivered.”

I turned, spotting the dark parcel just in front of my front door. “It’s too damned early for deliveries.” A few strides later, and I was at the front steps that led up to my southern-style wrap-around porch. “What the actual fuck?”

“What is it?” Maxim called from across the street.

My stomach lurched sideways.

It was a fucking car seat, the kind new babies rode around in, like the one Axel had been toting his son, Colin, around in since he’d been born a couple of weeks ago. Was this some kind of prank?

“Brogan?” Maxim asked, his voice sounding closer as I took the stairs slowly.

Yep, that was a baby carrier. The black shade with pink piping was up, disguising its contents, and there were two carry-on sized suitcases flanking it.

“What the hell?” Maxim asked, appearing at my side. “Were you supposed to babysit Colin or something?”

I gave him a *WTF* look. “Do you honestly think I’m signing up for babysitting duty?” I fucking hated kids. Well, not *all* kids, just most of them. They were messy, noisy, and made constant demands for things I wasn’t capable of...things like unconditional affection and love.

“Good point,” Maxim answered, both of us taking that last step so we stood on the porch, just a few feet away from the baby carrier.

“And it’s not like Langley would just leave Colin to hang on my porch while we were running,” I noted, kind of wishing that wasn’t the case. At least *that* would have been an explanation for whatever the fuck was happening right now.

“Maybe it’s a prank,” Maxim suggested as we both leaned forward, our feet planted like we were both incapable of taking another step.

“It’s probably empty.” *God, please let that fucking thing be empty.*

“Yeah. Totally.” Maxim nodded, his dark brows furrowing.

I reached forward once, then snatched my hand back. “What if it’s not empty?”

“It’s empty,” Maxim answered. “It has to be.”

“Right.” I nodded.

The car seat rocked back slightly, and the distinct wail of a pissed-off infant filled the air.

“Oh fuck,” I muttered, jolting forward. I gripped the black carrying handle, and turned the carrier around to face us.

A baby—a girl, if all the pink was any indication—looked up at me with teary, indignant eyes and shook her fists as she let out another yell.

“That’s a baby,” Maxim said slowly.

My chest constricted as I stared at the infant. Her hair was dark and her eyes were a brilliant, bright blue, but there was something about the shape of those eyes that had my pulse pounding an erratic beat. The tiny upturn at the tip of her nose and the heart-shaped face were familiar enough to knock me on my ass.

The kid looked just like baby pictures of my mom.

And the way she was screaming at the world? Like someone had dealt her the shittiest hand possible? That was all *me*.

What the actual fuck.

* * *

kay, and what other proof do you have?” Asher asked an hour later as we crowded into his glass-walled office at the top

of Reaper Arena.

““O” Besides the baby with my mom’s eyes and the letter stuffed into her car seat that says, ‘Hey, remember that one-night stand you had in Miami last August? Well, this is your daughter, Skye, and now she’s all yours?’” I motioned to the note Asher held in his hand as he leaned back in the chair behind his desk. “That’s it.” I sat back on the edge of the desk and stared at the red-faced infant that was supposedly mine.

“She’s the cutest!” London said as she bounced the baby on her hip, making laps around the conference table that took up the rest of the office. Apparently, that was the only way to calm the tiny human down. Maybe she hated that pink, one-piece pajama-looking thing she was wearing. It looked like she could hardly stretch out in it.

“Don’t get any ideas,” Sterling said to London with a smile, enjoying his seat at the table as Maxim looked on with a furrowed brow.

“There’s no paternity test,” Asher muttered, flipping the letter over and examining the back. “Do you remember anyone named Tiffany?”

I shook my head. “That whole fucking weekend is a blur.” It had been a single guy’s trip—the last before the season started—and I’d tied one on pretty fucking well.

“Well, that’s encouraging,” Asher said, cocking a brow at me.

“She obviously knew where you live,” Maxim noted, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on the table as London passed by, carrying the baby.

“That’s not hard to find online,” Asher countered. “And look —” He put his hands up. “I’m not saying that’s not your kid, but I’m not about to sit by and let you get taken advantage of if she’s not.”

I nodded, which was pretty much all I’d managed to do since calling Asher from my front porch. His answer had been instant and easy—meet him at his office. He handled every issue on our team as a family matter first and foremost.

Holy fucking shit, did I actually *have* a family? Was that kid mine?

I always wore protection. *Always*. But what if I'd been so trashed that I'd slipped up? How the fuck would I have let that happen?

The door burst open and Axel, our captain, appeared. The giant Swede was carrying a car seat that looked just like Skye's, except blue. His firecracker of a wife, Langley, walked in right after him.

"You're supposed to be on maternity leave!" Asher snapped.

Langley narrowed her eyes at Asher, which was something not many people did without fear of repercussion. "I think this calls for an exception, don't you?"

"Fuck, Langley, you just had him like four days ago or something," Asher muttered.

"It's been two weeks," Axel countered, "And trust me, I did everything I could to keep her at home, short of tying her to the damned bed." He set the carrier down on the floor, clear of London's pacing path.

London passed us again, and I turned in my chair to watch. The baby was gnawing on a fist in between spurts of yells that bounced off the glass walls and only seemed to increase in volume.

"Well, she yells like you," Langley said with a slight smile.

"I'd be yelling too if I'd just been dropped on my porch, too," I muttered, tearing a hand through my dark hair, which I realized was the same shade as Skye's. "What are we supposed to do?" I asked Asher. "Procedure wise, we call the cops, right?"

The women in the room gasped and both spun to face me, outrage lined on their features.

"What?" My jaw ticked. "If someone abandons a kid, you call the cops."

"They'll put her in foster care!" London hissed, covering one of Skye's ears like she'd understand.

Shit. When had I started thinking of her as *Skye* and not *the baby*? Wait. Foster care? Nausea rolled up to my throat. I'd been in foster care for the first month after Mom and Dad died and I wouldn't wish that kind of hell on my worst enemy.

"You don't know if she's yours!" Langley argued.

"There's something to be said for that," Asher said slowly. "I'm not saying don't inform the police. But maybe we should have a rush paternity test done before that happens. You have a better chance of keeping her in your house with one of those in hand."

In my house?

What the fuck was I supposed to do with a baby? Ice-cold tendrils of panic raced up my spine, freezing my muscles and my thoughts. *Father.*

I couldn't be a father. That kid—hell, any kid—deserved someone a hell of a lot better than I was. They called me *Demon* on the ice, and it wasn't just because I was faster than a bat out of hell. It was because my temper was legendary. I was one of the Reapers' enforcers, a fighter by nature. My hands were built for beating the shit out of my opponents, not holding a baby, and there was way more to parenting than holding a baby. There was...everything.

Shit, she was still crying.

"Does she have a bottle or something?" I asked, my grip tightening on Asher's desk. The sound of her cry made me want to rip apart the room until I found something to make it stop.

"Now I know why the army uses baby cries for psy-ops," Maxim muttered, flinching when she hit an especially ear-piercing pitch.

"I already fed her," London said, adjusting her hold. "She's clean, too."

Thank God, because I'd never changed a diaper. Ever. Fuck. Diapers, wipes, cribs, clothes, bottles, formula...babies needed a lot of stuff, and I had nothing.

She might not even be yours.

The logical thought kept beating around in my skull, demanding to be acknowledged. NHL stars were banks to some people, and there was a good chance that this was just a scheme cooked up for an easy payday.

But there was something...an intangible, unidentifiable feeling that defied logic and screamed that she was *mine*.

“Brogan, are you listening?” Langley asked, waving her hand in front of my face.

“Sorry,” I muttered, shaking my head a little. “I can’t really think with her screaming like that.”

Her eyes softened with compassion. “Yeah, that happens. Just wait until it’s three a.m. and your brain quits.” She gave me a soft smile. “It’s going to be okay. I already have a plan.”

“Of course you do,” Axel said with a quick smile and a roll of his eyes.

“Hey, why isn’t *yours* making that noise?” I asked him across the room. I was the only guy on the team who didn’t have to look *up* to Axel because we were roughly the same height—considered giants as hockey players.

“Because mine is blessedly asleep,” he flinched. “But he won’t be for long if your daughter stays that angry.”

Your daughter.

She wasn’t just any baby, she was a *girl*. What the fuck did I know about girls? My closest cousins were all boys, and even when I’d lived in that chaotic AF household, I’d never had to care for any of the younger ones. I’d just blended into the pack, easily forgotten amidst that much mayhem. Skye was going to be forced into way more mayhem if we called the cops right now.

As if she’d heard my thoughts, she let out a particularly loud bellow.

London passed by again, and I stepped into her path. “Give her to me.” I held out my hands.

London's eyebrows shot up.

I'd only held her for the length of time it had taken to unbuckle her from the car seat and hand her straight to Sterling's wife when we'd gotten here. Hell, it had been Maxim who'd figured out how to secure her seat in my car. I couldn't even do that.

"Here we go, little one," London cooed to Skye. "Here's Da—" She slammed her lips shut and pressed them in a straight line as she passed Skye to me.

She was so fucking tiny in my hands. Bigger than Axel's son, thank fuck, because I probably would have crushed one that little on accident, but still...tiny. I held her beneath her arms and she quieted for a second as we stared at each other, my hazel eyes meeting her blue ones.

I tilted my head and she matched the gesture, a tiny smile erupting on her face to reveal two little teeth. Good, that meant she could bite if someone fucked with her.

She wiggled, her face scrunching for an instant before she screamed the roof off the arena.

"Fuck," I muttered, then winced. "Shit, I can't even *not* swear."

Axel laughed. "She doesn't understand you. You're fine."

"Here," Langley stepped in. "Put one hand here—" She moved my palm to the bottom of Skye's butt. "And tuck her in like this." She brought the baby to my chest and adjusted my other hand so it braced her back. "There you go."

Skye let out another cry, then another. "Seems like this position only helps deafen me," I mumbled, but I started patting her back out of instinct more than anything.

Her cries softened, but didn't stop.

"Like I was saying," Langley continued with a proud smile as she watched me awkwardly tap on Skye's back with my fingers. "I have a plan, or at least an idea."

"I'm all ears."

Skye bellowed, and I winced.

“Maybe I’m down to one ear, so you’d better talk fast.”

“I’ve already called a nanny,” she blurted with a grin. “She’s background checked, interviewed, has a doctorate in child psychology...” Her brow puckered. “I mean, really she’s actually overqualified, if anything—”

“Then why isn’t she *your* nanny?” I asked, adding a little bounce to the whole back-patting routine.

“She would’ve been if Axel hadn’t demanded we hire someone who speaks Swedish.” She shot Axel a look.

“Hey, it’s important that he speaks my language, too, and you know you like Nora.” Axel crossed his arms over his chest.

“I adore Nora,” Langley assured him. “But I’m telling you, Fiona would have been my first choice,” she whispered to me as her cell phone dinged. “Oh! She just got here. I’ll be right back.” She disappeared through the door and we all stared at Skye, who was making her displeasure widely known.

“Fuck,” I mumbled. “Maybe foster care is better for her. I don’t know that the hell I’m doing. I’ll probably drop and break her.” That icy feeling caught hold of me, cutting into me with the sharp claws of logic.

“You’re not going to drop her,” Sterling said, shaking his head.

“You’ve got the best hands on the team,” Maxim added.

“They’re tougher than you think,” Axel weighed in. “You’re not going to hurt her.”

She lurched back out of my arms, going rigid with another cry, and I caught her easily, holding her so she couldn’t buck out of my hands again. “Bold strategy, little girl,” I said, looking into those sky-blue eyes. No wonder her name was Skye.

“What do you want to do?” Asher asked.

Every second I stared at her, the shock wore off little by little. Those were my mother’s eyes. Fate already hadn’t been kind to this little girl because she was mine, I knew it in the marrow of my bones. “Schedule the paternity test.”

“Already done. The lab guys will be here in twenty,” he responded.

The crying started up again, and I brought her to my chest like Langley had shown me. “Little girl, I will give you half my paycheck if you stop that.”

Apparently she wasn’t after money, because the crying only escalated.

“Here we go!” Langley said, breezing through the door, another woman hot on her heels. “Brogan, this is Fiona. Fiona, this is Brogan and Skye.”

Fiona. I repeated her name silently so I wouldn’t forget it. I was shit with names. Her dark hair was piled into a knot on her head, and more than a few strands had busted loose, giving her a just-rolled-out-of-bed look. Then again, it was only eight-thirty on a Sunday morning, so I couldn’t fault her on that one. Her sweatshirt hung haphazardly off one shoulder, and—wait, were those Crocs? Yep, she was rocking a pair of electric green crocs at the end of her black leggings.

Skye’s cries escalated to torturous, all hitting the same pitch in the same rhythm.

Fiona blinked, watching her for a few seconds before stepping forward and looking up at me with a set of Caribbean-blue eyes rimmed with a set of thick, sooty lashes. “May I hold her?” she asked, her voice this soft, soothing tone that made me blink.

Right, because it was my choice who held Skye. The weight of that responsibility settled on my shoulders and shockingly didn’t take me out at the knees. I looked Fiona over again, this time objectively. Her hands were outstretched, so she was eager and willing. Her frame was lithe but strong, so she could probably handle Skye’s meager weight. The Crocs didn’t speak to her coordination, but she hadn’t tripped or anything while walking in, so I was just going to have to trust that she wouldn’t drop Skye.

And if she’d passed Langley’s tests, then she was qualified.

“Sure,” I said, pulling Skye away from my chest.

Fiona flashed me a quick, distracted smile as she concentrated on Skye, taking the baby from my arms and give her a once-over. “When was she fed?” she asked the room.

“About a half hour ago,” London answered. “And burped.”

“Hmmm,” she hummed, walking toward the table. “Does she have a blanket?”

“Here.” Sterling pulled the pink blanket out of the car seat.

“Excellent.” Fiona spread out the blanket on the table, then laid Skye in the middle of it, watching her for a minute as she continued to cry.

I was about a half-a-second from taking her back.

“Does anyone have scissors?” Fiona asked, already unsnapping the pink pajama-looking-thing.

“I’m sorry?” I moved forward. “Why the hell would you want scissors?” The woman might have some pretty eyes—fine, *stellar* eyes, but she wasn’t cutting my kid up into little pieces.

“They’re for her jammies,” Fiona responded, pulling Skye’s little, chubby legs out of the outfit. Fine, baby legs were cute, and her tiny toes weren’t awful, either.

Asher appeared with the scissors, placing them in Fiona’s hand.

Fiona snipped off the pajamas at the ankles, then buttoned Skye into them again. “She might not like to have her feet bound up,” she said absent-mindedly.

That made two of us, since I couldn’t stand anything confining my feet besides my Nikes and skates. My aunt called it sensory issues. I called it common fucking sense.

“Did she come with a pacifier?” Fiona asked.

“I’ll check.” Langley dug into one of the suitcases and popped out a teal green piece of plastic, handing it to Fiona.

“Thanks.” Fiona wrapped Skye into the blanket with some kind of sorcery that turned her into a burrito, then popped the pacifier in her mouth and held her tight against her chest,

rocking while she shushed her loudly, her mouth close to her ears.

Skye stopped crying.

Fucking. Magic.

Everything in my chest eased up a little, like a vise slowly loosening, and I took my first full breath since I'd found the baby on my doorstep. My brain cleared, too, as if it had been too preoccupied with Skye's cries to function properly.

I stared in wonder at Fiona, and I wasn't the only one. Every head in the room had turned to watch her rock and shush the now-silent Skye, who gave a delicate little hiccup as her eyes shut.

"She was just overstimulated," Fiona said softly, continuing to rock. "There's a lot of nervous energy in the room and she picked up on that."

My mouth opened, but I couldn't find a single word. Not one. The woman was a fucking enchantress when it came to my baby, and I was here for it.

My baby. Mine. All ten fingers, ten toes, and hellacious lungs—she was all mine, and I was damned if I was going to send her into foster care where it would take only God-knew-how-long to get her back out of it just because of some legal tape. Paternity test first, because I wasn't stupid, but I was already certain. Skye was mine, and whatever I had to pay the magical nanny in front of me to keep her content just like that, she was worth it.

"What?" Fiona asked, looking up at me as her dark brows furrowed. "Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Because you're hired."

FIONA

I stared at my open drawers and scanned the contents inside, curious as to what exactly I needed to pack.

“Knock knock!” Madeline—one of my best friends—called from the front door of my apartment.

“We brought coffee!” Daisy—my other best friend—followed up as they both found me in my room.

“You’re a lifesaver,” I said, grabbing the coffee from Daisy’s outstretched hand. Her brown curls hung to her shoulders, and she looked fresh off a writing session in her crop top and book-themed joggers.

“I know,” she said, winking at me.

I took a glorious sip of the double Americano and breathed out a contented sigh. Yesterday had thrown me for a serious loop, and I needed the caffeine boost if I was ever going to get my head on straight and finish packing.

“Going somewhere?” Madeline asked, eyeing my opened suitcases. Her eyes suddenly lit up as she turned to face me, her long, blonde hair flying in the perfect flip behind her. “You said you accepted a job,” she said. “Does that mean you’re finally putting your doctorate to use? Somewhere that requires you to move?”

“Oh?” Daisy chimed in, then frowned. “Not out of state, right?”

I shook my head, waving both of them off. “No,” I said to Maddie. “And no,” I said to Daisy. I took another sip of the coffee before setting it on my chest of drawers.

“But you called us over here to talk about your new job,” Maddie said, sinking onto my bed next to my suitcase.

“I did,” I said, grabbing a pile of my soft cotton T-shirts and loose pants.

Taking care of a three-month-old full-time would require an insane amount of clothes. I had ten brothers and sisters, all younger than me, and I’d pretty much been their live-in nanny too. I knew exactly how much newborns throw up, just as I knew you could never have too many backup-outfit options. I tossed them in the suitcase before grabbing another handful.

“Spill the deets,” Daisy urged.

I put the next armful of clothes in my suitcase, then barely suppressed a laugh. Daisy would go nuclear in three, two...

“I’ve taken a full-time, live-in nanny position for Brogan Grant.”

“What?” Daisy shrieked, nearly bursting my eardrum. She hopped up and down, staring at me in shock. “Are you serious?”

“You’re not serious,” Maddie said before I could answer.

I laughed. Daisy was a die-hard hockey fan, the only one in our little friend group, and when the Reapers had come to town a few years ago? She’d hopped on that fan train without a second thought.

“Brogan. Freaking. *Grant!*” she said, still giddy. “He’s like the fastest left wing in the league. He had thirty-six goals last season, and rumors are flying about how amazing we’re going to do when the season starts!”

Maddie and I blinked at her for a second, just like we always did when she started spouting off hockey stats. We weren’t opposed to the game, we just hadn’t grown up loving the sport like she had.

“Okay,” I said, returning to packing.

“I didn’t know he had a baby,” Daisy said, furrowing her brow before sipping her own coffee.

“He didn’t know he did either,” I said, then glanced at them both with my serious face. “This info doesn’t leave this room.” I eyed them both, and they nodded. They’d been my best friends since our freshman year in college, and I trusted them both with my life, so I knew I could give them the details without worrying. “Someone left a three-month-old baby on his doorstep early yesterday morning.”

They gasped in unison, and I nodded. Anger simmered in my chest, but I took a deep breath.

“Did he order a paternity test? Is the baby healthy?” Maddie asked, switching to full Doctor Madeline Ross in the span of a blink.

“He ordered the test,” I answered. “And she looked healthy to me, but I’m no doctor. She was just overtired. I got her to sleep, though.”

Daisy shook her head. “What kind of mother would do such a thing?”

I sighed. “A bad one,” I answered honestly. Whoever she was, she’s lucky it wasn’t sweltering that early in the morning. She was lucky Brogan returned from his run instead of catching a ride with Maxim to the arena for practice. She was lucky—

I clenched my eyes shut, stopping the train of angry thoughts.

“You know how I was interviewed for Langle Nyström’s part-time nanny position?”

“Yes,” Maddie said, sighing slightly. “And you know how I tried to talk you out of interviewing for that and using your damn doctorate instead?” she teased lovingly.

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I remember. Anyway, she called me yesterday explaining the situation to me, and I rushed over there. The only reason she hadn’t hired me was because I can’t speak Swedish, but she fully trusted me to recommend me to Brogan, who is in a serious bind.”

Maddie sipped her coffee, nodding. She understood, but she still wanted me to actually use my doctorate in child psychology. And I *would*—someday.

“So you took the job,” Daisy said. “For Brogan Grant.”

I laughed again. “Are you going to sing-song his name every time we talk about him because, for the foreseeable future, I’ll be living at his house.”

Another squeal slipped past her lips that got Maddie laughing too. “I’m sorry,” Daisy said. “But, I mean, he’s Brogan—”

“Grant,” Maddie and I said in unison. “We got it,” I added, hurrying to finish packing.

“He’s so damn hot, Fiona,” Daisy said. “Like, haul you over his shoulder on the dancefloor, take you out of the building, and fuck your brains out in the alley hot.”

I dropped the pile of pants I’d been holding and gaped at her.

“What?” she asked, shrugging at Maddie and me. “Have you two not seen him?”

“I met him yesterday,” I said, and swallowed hard. Sure, he’d looked attractive, but I didn’t really get to study him because he was having a straight-up crisis on his hands. And I’d been more focused on soothing the baby.

“And?” Daisy scoffed. “You’re telling me you didn’t notice all that alpha has-the-nickname-*Demon-for-a-reason* goodness?”

“He’s not hard to look at,” I admitted. “But no, I wasn’t envisioning him sweeping me off my feet or anything.” At least that was the truth. And with the panic in his eyes? I’m sure he was racing through all the women he’d swept off their feet a year ago while trying to figure out how this happened.

“More like bend you over a desk,” Daisy joked, and I shook my head at her.

“Stop,” I said through my laughter. “He’s officially my boss.”

“Hence the desk,” she teased, and I threw a pair of pants at her. She laughed and tossed them in my suitcase.

“How long is he your boss?” Maddie asked, and I shrugged.

“I’m not sure. He’s waiting on paternity test results, but they’re rushing it, so hopefully he figures that out soon. And then...” I shook my head. “He has to locate the mother. She’s bound to come to her senses at some point, right?” Even though I couldn’t fathom ever allowing a child to be in the care of someone so fucking careless, but again, not my baby. “And then that’ll be my cue to leave.”

“So, you’re still going to be on the hunt for a clinical position,” Maddie said, and I smiled at her.

“Yes, *Mom*, I will.”

She blew me a kiss. “I just don’t want all that hard work of yours to go to waste.”

“It won’t,” I assured her *and* myself, if I was being honest. “But you both know I’m drowning in student loan debt. And I’m more than qualified to be a live-in nanny. He’s in a bind, and I need the cash. This is a win-win.”

“No one is doubting your mama skills,” Maddie said. “With how many siblings you’ve practically raised over the years?” She sucked in a breath. “I’m shocked you had time for school at all.”

I nodded and zipped up my suitcase. My mother was a serial marry-er, if that was a term. Since I was eight, she’d had a dozen husbands and nearly a child with every single one of them. I loved my mother, but God, that woman had turned me into a parent before I’d turned ten years old. Since I was the oldest, it was always on me to help take care of my younger siblings, and with her divorcing and marrying every other year while also popping out kids, there was a ton of responsibility that fell on me.

Of course, that same responsibility is what led me to want to be a child psychologist, so I suppose I should thank her for that. It’s also the experience that allowed me to be sought out by an NHL millionaire. I couldn’t really complain.

“When do you move in?” Maddie asked as I grabbed my coffee and sank onto the other side of the bed.

“I leave in a couple of hours,” I said, leaning against my suitcase.

“You’re not breaking your lease, are you?” Daisy asked, eyeing my tiny apartment.

“No, of course not,” I said, and she laughed. “I’ll still use it for nights off and keep most of my stuff here.”

“But most of your nights will be spent at...Brogan’s house?” Daisy managed to say his name without squeaking.

“Yes. Three-month-olds don’t really have a nine-to-five schedule,” I teased.

“Forgive me, Ms. I-Can’t-Commit-To-Anything,” she joked.

I faux-gaped at her like I was offended, and Maddie laughed.

“She has a point,” Maddie said. “You’ll be living with this guy and his newborn day in and night out. That’s not really your style.”

I shrugged, drinking my coffee. They weren’t wrong. Thanks to my mother’s string of husbands, babies, and houses, I had a huge issue with committing to anything. In fact, college was the longest relationship I’ve ever had outside of my mother and my siblings. Sure, I was still cordial with some of my ex-step-fathers, but when it came to relationships, the last thing I ever looked for was long-term. It didn’t seem logical to me—not with what I’d witnessed with my mother. She fell out of love so fast after saying *I do* and it hurt so many people along the way, I was terrified to end up like her. Better to live one day at a time and enjoy the present than worry about hurting someone in the future.

“It’s a job,” I said. “Just like college was. Nothing more.”

They both shared a concerned glance, but let it slide. They loved me and worried about me, my little chosen family, so I couldn’t blame them.

“Well,” Maddie said. “We’re here for you. Always. You know that.” She arched a brow at me, pointing at me with her coffee. “And if this *Demon* ever crosses a line with you, you just let me know. I’m a doctor. I know *all* the ways to kill a man.”

Daisy and I both laughed at that, and then we each tapped our coffee cups together. With everything changing, it sure as hell was great having friends I could count on.

* * *

The drive through what Langley had told me was dubbed “Reaper Village” was a peaceful one, if not a shocking one. The housing development was pristine, with beautifully manicured lawns and gardens, white fences, and gorgeous homes nicely spaced apart.

I don’t know why I was shocked or why I expected a man like Brogan Grant to live in a high-rise penthouse instead of an idyllic suburbia, but I was. I shook off the shock easily enough, even finding some peace in the notion that at least—if the baby truly was his—he had a really nice home to raise her in.

I used the key Langley had given me yesterday, letting myself in as instructed by the lone text I’d received from Brogan earlier. I couldn’t fault him his short reply when I said I was heading his way—becoming a father overnight had to be the last thing he ever expected to happen.

“Hello?” I called out as I shut the massive door behind me. The home smelled fresh with a clean, crisp scent and had rich wooden floors, textured walls, and vaulted ceilings. The kitchen looked like a chef’s dream and was entirely pristine, almost as if he never used it. But, as I walked farther into the house, I realized everything in the place had its own place—the couches in the living area complimented the end tables, the built-ins had perfectly placed books and knickknacks, and even the artwork lining the hallway looked to be placed with intent.

“Up here,” a gruff voice called from the second level of the house.

I walked up a giant staircase, heading toward where I heard his voice. A wailing cry—followed by a desperate sigh—had me hurrying down another hallway, past what I could clearly tell

was a master bedroom, and toward another bedroom down the hall.

I lingered in the open doorway, finding Brogan on the carpeted floor, his eyes closed in frustration, a screwdriver in one hand and a whole lot of wooden pieces belonging to what appeared to be a crib spread out around him. Skye cried in a bouncer next to him, and I saw the rise and fall of his chest as he tried to center himself.

“Hi,” I said, tiptoeing over the array of wood until I got to Skye. I unbuckled her from the bouncer, gently lifting her onto my shoulder and starting the bounce I knew in my bones. Skye’s cries stopped, and Brogan sighed heavily.

“Hi,” he said, the word rough and ragged. From the purple beneath his eyes and the tension in his shoulders, I could tell he was beyond overwhelmed and exhausted.

I peeked inside Skye’s onesie, making sure she wasn’t wet, then smoothed my hand over her back as she nuzzled her head against my chest. Warmth spread in my chest as she relaxed against me, and I scanned the room more thoroughly.

“That looks like a very serious crib for someone who isn’t sure this is his baby,” I said, hoping like hell I could jostle his stress for a second with a joke.

He grunted.

Well, that was something at least.

“She didn’t sleep last night, did she?” I asked, still bouncing up and down slightly while rolling my hips in a figure-eight motion. I’d nailed the move years ago and had soothed many a colicky sibling with it.

“How can you tell?” he asked, continuing to work on the crib.

I glanced around the room, noting the chaos. “Just a wild guess,” I said. When Skye started nuzzling my chest again, I patted her butt and said, “I’m going to go make her a bottle.” Before turning out of the room.

One bottle of formula and a few good burps later, I had one very tired Skye in my arms and Brogan had finished the crib. I

sashayed into what would be a nursery, if it had anything other than the crib in it, and gently laid a freshly swaddled Skye into her brand-new crib. I hovered for a good ninety seconds, keeping my hand on her little chest before slowly removing it. She was definitely overtired, which made sleeping about ten times more difficult, but she had a full belly, and her eyes stayed closed as I turned around. Brogan stared at Skye with a sort of lost and amazed look, and I tugged on his massive arm to get him out of the room. I shut the door behind me, heading down the stairs with the giant following behind me. I mean, the dude had to be at least six-four, a delightful beard along his strong jaw, and with muscles and a scowl to match? He could give Jason Momoa a run for his money. Not that I was noticing him at *all*.

I wound up in the kitchen, leaning against the pristine marble island, wondering if I should go grab my stuff or talk to him about it first.

He heaved a sigh as he sank into a barstool across the island and rubbed his temples. “I’ve never, not once in my life, known anything was capable of crying so much.”

I bit my bottom lip to hold in the laugh, my heart going out to this NHL star. Not that he didn’t play an obvious part—allegedly—in creating this baby, but still. It’s one thing to be told you’re having a baby and another to be sprung with the news in the span of a night.

“Every baby is different,” I said. “My little sister Gene was an angel, never cried, slept through the night, ate well.” I shrugged. “My little brother Joseph never stopped crying. In fact, his voice is super rough due to all the crying he did as a newborn.”

Brogan looked at me with those wide hazel eyes of his. The flecks of honey brown and gold stood out amongst the green, and there was just a hint of panic growing there. Panic, but also a solid sort of resolve I couldn’t help but admire. Not to mention, they were pretty nice eyes to look at. Well, when he wasn’t scowling, that was.

Okay, even with the scowl, he somehow managed to pull it off.

“You found the formula, okay?” he asked.

I bit my lip, trying not to laugh as I glanced at the can of formula that he’d left out on the counter behind me.

“You mean the super expensive, wholly organic formula you put over there?” I teased, and he nodded.

I had peeked around his kitchen while warming the formula, and I had to say I was shocked. Everything in the cabinets was organized to the nth degree, with the brand labels facing out. It looked like one of those professional organizers’ Instagram kitchens. Not what I expected from the millionaire hockey star, who looked like he could be comfortable swinging a trident around while fighting for an underwater kingdom.

“I’m surprised you haven’t created a label and custom spot for the stuff yet,” I teased again, noting a hint of levity returning to his hazel eyes.

He shrugged. “I haven’t had time to make one yet,” he said, and a pang of sympathy hit me dead center in the chest. He wasn’t in denial, wasn’t trying to push Skye off to the system until he had one-hundred-percent proof she was his. He was giving it his all, and I had to admire that about him.

“You’re a pretty organized person,” I said.

“I like efficiency,” he said. “I’m not really into wasting time. If everything has its proper place, I’m not wasting time trying to find it.”

I bit back a laugh again. “You know babies kind of throw a wrench in that whole routine, right?” I asked, wanting to be real with him from the get-go. “I’m not saying you can’t have a baby *and* a clean house, but I want to help give you realistic expectations.”

He grunted. “Everything that has happened since yesterday has been pretty unreal.”

I nodded. “I understand,” I said, then furrowed my brow. “Well, in all honesty, I don’t understand.” I sighed. “I don’t understand how a mother could drop off her baby like this.” I flashed him an apologetic look, and he stared at the counter, his mind in a totally different place.

“Do you have any idea who she might be?” I asked when he hadn’t responded. When he continued to look at that counter like he was seeing a flashback of everyone he’d slept with in the past year, I turned around and opened his fridge. I grabbed two bottles of water and headed around the island to hand him one.

He blinked a few times, taking the water from me, looking up at me from my slightly raised position as I stood in front of where he sat. “I don’t exactly keep a roster,” he said, his tone wholly defensive.

I tilted my head at him, reaching out a hand and placing it over his tensing forearm. “It’s all good,” I said. “You shouldn’t have to. And we’ll figure it all out. One step at a time, okay?”

Surprise flickered in his eyes, and I drew my hand back. “You’re not judging me?”

I huffed a laugh. “Why would I?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “Maybe because a baby was left on my doorstep, and there could be over a dozen possible women who are the mother. None of which I know personally.”

“The woman who left Skye on your doorstep is…” I cut myself off, taking a deep breath. “Severely damaged. That’s not on you. And the rest? Like I said, I’m here to help. We’ll figure it all out.”

Brogan released a sigh so deep and long it sounded like he’d been holding it in since he found Skye yesterday.

“Thank—” A knock on the door cut him off, and he hurried off the barstool toward it.

I lingered in the kitchen but slowly moved to a place where I could see through to the entryway as Brogan swung the door open.

A younger man held out a manila envelope to Brogan. He took it, thanking him before closing the door and staring at the envelope like it held the key to his future. And I couldn’t help but want to rush to him, to this giant of a male who suddenly looked *terrified* of an envelope. But I held my ground, and my breath, as I waited. After all, he was a stranger and now my

boss, and there were a whole lot of professional lines we couldn't dare cross.

BROGAN

She was mine.

It was all spelled out there on the lab results the nervous kid had handed me about two minutes ago. Skye was my daughter. Buzzing filled my ears and my lungs stopped processing air. I. Had. A. Kid.

Who the fuck was her mother?

I had vague memories of a brunette in a shimmering, silver dress, but it wasn't like I could really depend on memories when I'd been drunk off my ass in a Miami bar. All I knew for certain was that I'd woken up alone. No note. No name. No phone number.

"Everything okay?" Fiona asked.

I sucked in a full breath and shoved the results back into the envelope. "Yeah. She's mine."

Fiona's mouth dropped open slightly as I walked past her, headed for the office. The room was a lot like the rest of the house, with clean, modern lines and the subtle details of southern charm. I passed right by the massive desk that sat in the middle of the room and headed for the safe just behind it. It beeped as I held my finger to the reader, and then popped open.

"What are you doing?" Fiona asked from the doorway.

"Filing the results," I answered, tucking the paper into a file marked *personal records*. "Fuck. I don't have her birth certificate. I probably need one of those. And I don't know her

social security number. I'm supposed to know that, right?" I closed the safe and turned around, leaning on the bookcase that held the safe.

"Is there someone you'd like me to call?" she asked, concern lacing her tone.

"Call someone. Right." I wasn't alone here. I had a whole team full of friends. I tapped out a quick text to Maxim, and within moments, he walked through my front door.

"Brogan?" he called out.

"In the office!" I answered.

Fiona moved out of the way as Maxim walked in, his brow furrowed. "What's the news?"

"She's mine." The words tasted funny in my mouth.

His eyebrows shot up. "Then congratulations are in order!" He walked across the room and put his hand out.

I stared at it.

"Brogan?" He slowly lowered his hand.

"I'm just going to give you guys a few minutes," Fiona said, shutting the door behind her as she left.

"Congratulations?" I tore my hand over my hair, tugging at the strands. "I'm the last person who should be a father. I don't know the first thing about caring for a baby. I don't have fucking...anything for her. Nothing. I bought the first crib I found that could be delivered within two hours and a pack of purple sheets because I'm already overwhelmed by the amount of pink in her suitcase. It's all...pink. Like little girls can't like any other color?" My pulse pounded like I'd run a marathon and the buzzing in my ears grew to a fever pitch.

"I'm sure she doesn't give a shit what color the sheets are—" he started.

"It's not just the sheets!" I snapped, pushing off the bookcase. "How the hell am I supposed to take care of her?"

"That's what you have the hot nanny for," Maxim replied with a shrug.

My gaze flew to his. “I’m sorry?”

“Like you haven’t noticed that your nanny is wicked fucking hot?” His forehead puckered.

“I’ve been a little busy going through shock to check out her ass!”

“Right.” He winced and rubbed the back of his neck. “Sorry. Okay, so what do we need to do first? You know everyone’s ready to jump in wherever they can, they’ve just been giving you a little space since...you know...yesterday.”

“I don’t have the first fucking clue where to start.” I always had a plan. *Always*. Growing up in sheer chaos meant I liked shit neat and orderly. I didn’t fly by the seat of my pants. I didn’t blow through my money in case an injury took me out before my prime. I almost never got so blitzed out of my mind that I couldn’t remember sleeping with a woman, and yet here we were.

“Okay, then let’s ask the nanny—”

“Fiona,” I corrected him, coming around my desk. “Her name is Fiona.”

“Fine, then let’s go ask Fiona what we do. Langley said she’s got a doctorate—”

“In child psychology,” I muttered. “Not parenting.”

We found her putting away a box of snacks into the pantry, and I bit back the urge to correct her on the shelf placement of her Cocoa Pebbles. Who the fuck ate that sugary shit?

Apparently she does.

I blinked as she rose up on her toes and lined the boxes up. Maxim was right. Fiona had a body meant to make men crawl, and those yoga pants were certainly showing her ass to its best advantage.

Stop ogling the fucking nanny.

“I need some help.” I forced the words out. Help was not something I liked to ask for. It put me in a position of weakness, a position where I could be let down, and that shit

wasn't acceptable. Self-reliance was the only way of living, and yet again...here I was.

"Sure!" She turned and gave me a smile that took her from beautiful to a fucking *stunner*. "What can I help you with?"

"I have no clue what I'm supposed to do now," I admitted slowly.

Her brow furrowed and she glanced at her watch. "I thought you guys were supposed to be on your way to practice. That's why I'm here, right?"

"Fuuuuck," I growled, my head falling backward slightly. "How the hell am I supposed to do all of this with the season starting?"

"That's why you have me," she answered with a little nod and eyes that were entirely too compassionate not to like.

"Right." I braced my hand on the kitchen counter, concentrating on the cool feel of the smooth granite beneath my fingertips and not the swirling vortex of what-the-fuck in my head. "Okay, we need to tell Asher. He'll know the right lawyers."

"Anything come to you about who her mom is?" Maxim asked, crossing the kitchen and pulling two bottles of water out. "Want one?" He asked Fiona.

She shook her head since she still had hers from earlier. I'd already killed mine. Did stress cause dehydration?

He tossed one my way, and I cracked it open, draining it halfway down before I spoke. "I remember a silver dress. Brown hair. That's it. What was I thinking?"

"We were all more than a little trashed that night." Maxim shook his head. "I don't remember much past that eighth round of tequila shots, but I know you were alone when I came to get you for brunch."

"So all we know is her name is Tiffany and she was in Miami with you," Fiona said slowly.

"It's not like I make women sign NDAs or keep notches in my bedpost," I grunted.

“Now that you say it, the NDA isn’t a half-bad idea,” Maxim mused.

Fiona rolled her eyes. “Okay, so finding out who her mom is goes a little lower on the immediate list.” She drummed her fingers on the counter and pursed her lips, her gaze shifting as she obviously thought something over. “She needs a checkup first, and then we need to go shopping. Most of everything in her little suitcase is a size too small, and one pack of diapers is only going to last you a day or so.”

“Doctor. Right.” I fought off the buzzing that threatened to overtake my head. I knew shock from experience, and I wasn’t about to do my daughter any good if I gave into it now.

Daughter:

“I can call my friend Madeline. She’s a pediatrician,” Fiona offered.

“Is she any good?”

Fiona’s eyebrows rose.

“I mean, if she’s not, then I don’t want...” I rubbed the bridge of my nose. “Fuck it, call your friend.”

“She’s a great pediatrician,” Fiona promised. “And I’d be more worried if you *didn’t* care if she was good instead of questioning if she is,” she finished softly. “Why don’t you guys get to practice, and I’ll see if she can fit us in this afternoon?”

I nodded. “I would appreciate it.” Panic washed over me. “Wait, should I be going to practice? It’s just a pick-up game.”

“Trust me, a little time doing what you love will help you clear your head,” Fiona suggested. “That’s what I’m here for.”

“I bet Mia would love to help shop,” Maxim offered. His baby sister was the only person in the world he went soft for. “Evie, too.” Mia and her best friend, Evie, were pretty much attached at the hip.

“Yeah, that would be great. Tell them to buy whatever they want.” My eyes snapped up to meet his. “But all the reviews

on it have to be the best.” Shit, she needed the best *everything* if she was going to be balanced out with having me as a dad.

“Sounds like a plan. Now let’s get you on the ice before your head explodes.”

* * *

“**T**welve pounds, eight ounces,” the nurse said as Skye squirmed on the basket-looking scale later that afternoon.

“Is that okay?” I picked up Skye and took the blanket Fiona offered so I could wrap her up. Was it just me, or was it way too fucking cold in this exam room for a baby to get stripped down?

And what the ever-loving-fuck was with the six-foot-tall mural of Donald Duck on the wall? Shit was terrifying, and I was a grown man.

“Absolutely,” the nurse answered with a smile, entering numbers into the portable computer station. “She’s actually just a little under the fiftieth percentile mark, both in height and weight, so I’d say she’s doing just fine.”

Relief swept through me, taking some of the tension out of my shoulders. She wasn’t underweight. Wasn’t malnourished or neglected. *Fine* had never sounded so good.

“Let’s get a little family history, shall we?” the nurse asked, and I answered everything I could think of, which wasn’t much.

“You don’t know?” The nurse’s brow furrowed when she brought up cancer.

I shrugged. “Didn’t know my grandparents, and my parents died when I was in first grade. They didn’t exactly get a lot of time to develop any cancer. As far as I know, my aunt is healthy as a horse, but I haven’t spoken to her since my eighteenth birthday.”

Fiona's lips parted and something flashed through her eyes—sadness? I looked away from those blue eyes quickly. Her gaze was palpable—something I felt as I turned toward the nurse. Maybe it was her degree in psychology, but man, those eyes of hers saw too much and asked questions I didn't have answers for.

“That’s okay,” the nurse said with a look that had a little too much pity in it for my liking. “What about you, Mom?”

Wait. What?

Fiona and I looked at each other with an equal amount of confusion.

“Mom?” the nurse asked again, staring at Fiona.

“Oh, no, I’m not—”

“She’s not her mother.” We answered at the same time.

The nurse blinked once, twice, and then shook her head. “Oh, I’m so sorry. It’s just that their eyes look so much alike.”

Fiona’s cheeks pinkened slightly. “I’ll take that as a compliment. I’m just the nanny.”

I glanced back and forth between Skye and Fiona. Huh. Their eyes were pretty similar, but Fiona’s had more of that light, aqua color, while Skye’s looked just like what she was named after. With their dark hair and eyes, they could pass for mother and daughter.

Did Tiffany have the same color eyes? Shit, why couldn’t I remember anything?

There were two brief knocks on the door, and the doctor walked in, immediately scanning the room and grinning at Fiona. “Hi there! I’ve been looking forward to this appointment all day.” She looked to be in her late twenties—about my age—which made sense since she was Fiona’s friend. Her hair was up in a no-nonsense blonde twist, but she had friendly energy about her.

“Hey, Madeline!” Fiona gave her friend a quick hug. “Thank you so much for working us in. Means the world to me.”

“Not a problem.” The doctor turned to me. “I’m guessing you must be Brogan Grant.”

“Are you old enough to be a pediatrician?” It just kind of came out.

She laughed and pointed to her name badge. “The hospital thinks so. This one,” she nodded toward Fiona, “is a doctor, too. She just *refuses* to practice.”

Fiona rolled her eyes. “I just haven’t found anywhere I want to commit to,” she corrected her friend. “And that’s working out for me just fine right now, isn’t it, Skye?” Fiona grazed the back of her finger down Skye’s chubby cheek.

“Well, let’s get this little gal looked at,” Madeline reached for Skye and I hesitated for just a second, glancing down at the name badge to verify that—yep—she was a doctor.

Madeline—*Dr. Ross*—took Skye and put her on the exam table, and then started firing questions at me as she examined her.

“How is she sleeping?”

“Uh. She isn’t.” I rubbed the back of my neck. “She conks out for maybe a few hours at a time, but that’s it, and it definitely isn’t at night.” I’d only had her one night, but the girl seemed to hate anything to do with a normal schedule.

Madeline’s lips rose in a slight smile. “That’s normal. She’s probably hitting a growth spurt.”

“Can’t she grow during the day?” I was going to be a hot fucking mess if I didn’t get some sleep at some point. I’d been sluggish as hell on the ice this morning.

Madeline laughed. “She can, but she’s probably cluster feeding. How much is she eating?”

“A lot,” I answered.

“About five to six ounces at a sitting,” Fiona answered.

“Is that normal?” Fuck me, what if I was feeding her too little? Too much?

“Perfect,” Madeline answered, testing her mobility. “Wet diapers?”

“A lot. So many. Diapers fu—” I barely caught the swear word. Pretty sure there was a no-swearing-in-front-of-Donald-Duck policy in here. “Freaking everywhere.”

Madeline laughed. “Great. We worry when there aren’t.”

I shifted my weight as she continued the exam, anxiety rising in my throat at the thought of what the doctor would say.

“She’s fine,” Fiona whispered.

I grunted in response. There was no way to know what Skye’s first three months had been like, or Tiffany’s prenatal care for that matter. I knew virtually nothing about the squirming infant on the table except she liked her formula warm, preferred to be kept moving, and bellowed louder than I did.

“From what I can see, she’s perfectly healthy,” Dr. Ross announced. “You can get her dressed.”

Relief swept down my spine. “You’re sure?” I moved in front of the table and took a clean outfit out of the small duffel bag I’d grabbed from my storage closet. Guess I needed a diaper bag. *Shit better not be pink.*

“There’s only so much we can tell from a physical exam, but she looks good.” Madeline typed at the computer. “Her height and weight are good. Mobility is good. Immunizations?”

Nausea hit hard and fast. “I don’t know.”

Madeline glanced at Fiona, then back to me. “How about this. We’ll schedule another appointment for a month or so, and we’ll see if you can’t track down her records. It won’t hurt her to delay that month.”

Her records. Holy fuck. I didn’t have a birth certificate, or shot records, or fucking...*anything*. For a man who could afford pretty much whatever the hell I wanted, I was seriously lacking in the department that mattered most at the moment.

“Don’t worry,” Madeline said softly as I finished closing the impossibly small metal snaps on Skye’s outfit. “Fiona is the most capable woman I know. You’re in good hands. I can’t

even imagine how much shock you must be in, but you're doing great. Skye looks *great*."

"It's only been two days." I hadn't had enough time to fuck up yet.

"And the most important one is already passed," Madeline assured me. "Fiona, just call me if anything pops up."

The two embraced as I put Skye into the carrier, careful to adjust her straps just like the YouTube video had shown.

"Perfect." Fiona gave me a reassuring smile. "Let's get her home."

I nodded, my mind running too fast to form verbal words.

We were almost home by the time my mouth started working again. Even driving made me nervous now. Why the hell was everyone going so fast? "I need to get you a credit card."

"I'm sorry?" Fiona's brow puckered as we pulled into Reaper Village.

"You have a ton of siblings that you pretty much raised right? That's your story?"

"Pretty much. But I'm not sure what that has to do with needing a credit card."

"It's pretty damn clear that I don't know what the hell I'm doing, or what she'll need. And there will be times I'll be on the road—" I sucked in a breath, reality slapping me in the face, "—and you'll be here with her because I can't travel with a baby."

"No," she agreed as we turned into the driveway. "You can't travel with a baby."

"Right. Which means if you need something, and I'm not here, you need access to money, so you need to be on my credit card. I'll take care of it this afternoon." That was at least one task I could manage.

"If that makes you feel better—"

"It does." I nodded, putting the car in park inside the garage. The car fell silent when I killed the ignition. "She's sleeping."

“She likes movement,” Fiona agreed, her eyes meeting mine with sparkle that locked every muscle in my body. “Wonder who she gets that from?”

Damn, she really was gorgeous. And smart. And kind. And good with Skye.

I made some sound of agreement and got the fuck out of the car before I did something stupid like flirt with the only woman who could keep my world under some measure of control.

Don't fuck with the nanny.

I carried Skye into the house and Fiona grabbed the bag from the back of the car. It would be an easy partnership as long as I didn't go and do something stupid like crossing professional lines. Nope, those suckers had to stay as firm as cement barriers.

We came around the corner and into the kitchen, where I found half my team and their wives, girlfriends, and sisters.

“Surprise!” they shouted!

I cringed and immediately checked to see if Skye was still sleeping.

“Sorry!” London whispered. “She's sleeping, guys!”

“Surprise!” Mia stage-whispered, throwing up jazz hands while Maxim rolled his eyes next to her.

“Thanks,” I managed to say, figuring it was the appropriate response. “Everyone, this is Fiona—” I motioned toward her as she set the duffel bag on the counter. “Fiona, this is... mostly everyone.”

“Hi,” she whispered, giving everyone a shy smile and wave.

“We're just so happy for you!” Persephone, Cannon's petite, blonde wife untangled herself from her tatted-up husband and came forward, rising up on her toes to put a kiss on my cheek. “Congrats, Daddy. She's gorgeous!” She stared adoringly at Skye.

“Nope, that shit’s contagious,” Cannon muttered, scooping his wife into his arms and heading for the front door. “We left you a present upstairs, Brogan.”

Persephone waved over her husband’s back, and the others started to follow them. Sterling and London, Axel, Langley and Colin, Bristol and Briggs—they all shuffled toward the door, whispering their congratulations.

“We may have done some shopping,” Mia whispered, excitement shining in her eyes. “Bristol and I took care of the clothes, the guys handled the furniture, and Evie—” She glanced at her best friend, who was doing her best to fade into the woodwork.

“Evie gave the kid a damn library,” Maxim muttered, but a smile tugged at his lips. “Go on upstairs. I’ll see you at practice tomorrow.”

They cleared out and I carried Skye up the stairs, Fiona following close behind.

I walked into Skye’s room and simply stared. Then stared some more.

“Wow,” Fiona remarked, her hand flying to her chest.

Wow was the right word. The entire room had been transformed into a nursery, complete with a changing table and gliding chair—a *hockey* themed nursery. My jaw dropped. The wall behind the crib had been done with boards at the bottom, as though the whole room was a rink. Purple and blue bedding made the crib colorful, and a delicate mobile perched on the railing. A hockey stick served as a coat rack along one wall, and above the crib, her name was spelled out in giant purple letters.

I opened the closet and found it stocked with more clothing than any one baby could ever possibly go through. Diapers. Wipes. Blankets. A tactical-looking diaper bag. They’d thought of *everything*.

Bookshelves ran along the boards next to the gliding chair, stocked full with what looked to be the entire children’s section of the local bookstore.

“This is amazing,” Fiona said exactly what I was thinking. “Is that yours?” She pointed to the giant jersey that hung on the opposite wall, GRANT spelled out on its back.

I nodded, but that wasn’t what clogged my throat up—it was the tiny, baby-sized jersey that hung next to it with the same last name. My name.

“Your friends did this for you?”

“We’re more like family,” I replied, staring at that tiny jersey.

“What’s wrong?” Fiona asked.

It took a few breaths before I could work my throat to answer her.

“I don’t even know if she has my last name.”

FIONA

“*I*’m shocked you texted,” Daisy teased as I took a seat next to her at the bar. “You’ve been a ghost for days.” She hugged me as I sat down.

“Totally,” Maddie agreed, pushing a vodka soda in front of me. “I haven’t seen or heard from you since Skye’s appointment.”

I took a quick sip of the drink, savoring the bubbly taste as my tense muscles relaxed. It had been a hot minute since I’d taken care of a three-month-old, and Skye didn’t pull any punches. She never wanted to sleep, and after the last few days, I was beyond in need of a little break. Luckily, Brogan understood that and had practically forced me out the door earlier.

“I still can’t believe you kept making all those faces behind his back,” I said.

“What faces?” Daisy asked, and Maddie laughed.

“She kept waggling her eyebrows or making obscene gestures whenever Brogan turned around,” I explained. “Not very doctor-like behavior if you ask me,” I teased.

Maddie rolled her eyes. “Excuse me, but when my best friend walks into my office, toting an adorable little bundle like Skye *and* a straight-up sex-god-looking man behind her? How could I resist?”

Daisy laughed. “I told you he was insanely hot.”

I rolled my eyes. “He’s. My. Boss.”

“Which. Makes. It. Hotter.” Maddie mimicked my serious tone. She glanced at Daisy. “My nurse thought Fiona was the mother.”

“She did?” Daisy asked before taking a sip of her Cosmo.

“Yep,” Maddie answered. “She does have blue eyes—”

“Skye looks a hell of a lot like her daddy,” I said, then cringed when the girls gaped at my use of the word *daddy*. “Like Brogan. She looks a ton like Brogan.”

“*Daddy*,” Maddie drew out the word. “I’ll bet he’s one hell of a daddy.”

“If he’s anything like he is on the ice,” Daisy said. “I’m sure he’s fantastic.”

I took a few more drinks, letting the teasing banter of my best friends wash over me. I was beyond sleep-deprived, but I’d survived that more than once. It was all about adjusting, and it would be a few more weeks before my body shifted into survival mode where we slept when we slept and ate when we ate.

Brogan wasn’t so lucky. He had a job to go to, a physically demanding one. I kept reminding him that I was there for that reason—to help him get the sleep he needed so he could survive practices and such, but he was splitting himself in two. Once he’d found out Skye was definitely his, he dove headfirst into fatherhood, which surprised me since he’d told me one night during a formula heat-up that he’d never even liked kids before this.

“He’s committed,” I said. “There is something magical about watching a father become a dad,” I admitted. “And as hard as an adjustment as this is for him, he keeps surprising me.”

“I bet,” Maddie said. “How exactly is he surprising you? In the shower, I hope.”

I gaped at her, batting away her nudging elbow.

“Oh, the shower,” Daisy said dreamily, and I rolled my eyes.

“You two are the worst,” I teased. “What if I made jokes about your bosses?”

“I write novels. I’m my own boss,” Daisy said. “So, joke about *me* all you want.”

“And my boss is technically a board of people, so go for it. I was into group things, once.”

I nearly spit out my drink, I laughed so hard, and a warmth settled deep in my chest. “I love you both,” I said, sighing. “Even if you are wholly inappropriate.”

Maddie clucked her tongue at me. “You know we’re just teasing you, Fiona,” she said. “When we’re together—outside of our professional workspaces—we’re just three friends chatting honestly. And you *honestly* can’t tell me that you haven’t thought about that man in a non-professional capacity.”

I hadn’t, really. Was he attractive? Yes. Did I fantasize about him in the shower or any other place? No. Definitely not. “It’s kind of hard to have a sex drive when you’re sleeping less than two hours consecutively a night,” I admitted. “Besides, the minute I agreed to be his nanny, I flipped the switch in my head.”

Daisy furrowed her brow at me. “What switch?”

“You know,” I said, playing with my half-empty glass on the bar. Chatter echoed behind me as the bar filled up, creating this soft sort of lull that begged me to sleep. Fuck, I needed a bed quick. “The forbidden switch,” I explained. “The off-limits, never-can-I-ever-think-about-this-person-sexually switch.”

“That’s a thing?” Maddie asked, and I laughed.

“No,” Daisy said. “That’s totally not a thing.”

“Well, it is for me,” I chided. “It has to be. I’m taking care of the man’s child,” I said. “I live in his house. If I was attracted to him? It would bring on a whole set of complications neither of us needs. So, hence, switch flipped.” I finished off my drink, then ordered a water. I was too exhausted to have another and had already resigned myself to calling it a night early and catching up on a few hours’ sleep at my apartment. Brogan had told me not to come back till morning, but I still

worried about him. Not that he wasn't capable, but that everything was still so new for him.

"Well," Maddie said, shrugging. "I'm just saying it wouldn't hurt you to partake. You haven't had any fun since Greg. And I personally wouldn't be able to ignore it if someone who looked like him worked with me day in and day out." She tilted her head. "But I like my men a little more...cheerful," she said, and I laughed.

Brogan definitely was a broody male. Scowling was his signature look, but he made it look effortless. Still, when he looked at Skye? He couldn't help but smile, even if it was laced with exhaustion and worry.

"That's why I'm a nanny, and you're not," I teased.

"You're not a nanny," Maddie argued. "You have a doctorate in children's psychology. This is just a job."

There was nothing malicious in her words at all. Nothing but support and love and pride at all I'd accomplished in college. But for some reason I couldn't name, her words stung. As if I didn't like her calling Skye *just a job*, even though that's not at all what she meant.

I sucked in a deep breath, pushing away from the bar. If I was getting emotional over a job, it definitely was time to get some sleep. Any time I was overtired, I leaned toward the overly sensitive side.

"I need sleep," I declared, and my friends hopped up to hug me. They didn't argue or try to get me to stay, just told me to get the rest I needed, which was another reason why I loved them, even if they were insufferable when it came to pointing out my boss's...*assets*.

* * *

I bounced around the kitchen, Brogan's in-house speakers spilling out the pop-piano playlist I selected earlier. Skye was a sucker for some good piano, and I'd made a fine

mess a couple of hours ago while prepping a week's worth of lunches and dinners for the days ahead.

Skye was tucked nicely into the wrap around my chest, but the little toot still wouldn't shut her eyes. Her belly was full, but her eyes were wide open—content, but fully awake as I shuffled to and from the kitchen island, the fridge, and the sink. Doing my best to return the kitchen to the spotless kind of clean Brogan usually liked.

The front door to the house opened and shut, and I turned down the music from my phone as Brogan rounded the corner —

Shirtless.

Holy. Fucking. Muscles.

Sweat beaded over his broad chest, gliding down the dips and curves of his muscles, which were chiseled to absolute perfection. Damn, it was like he'd been carved out of wood and inked by an artist. His tattoos covered the length of his arms and scattered over his chest. I had the absolute ridiculous desire to trace my fingers along the whorls of ink.

“Fiona?” Brogan said my name like a question as if he'd said it a few times.

I blinked out of my oh-so-awkward stare fest and cleared my throat. “Yeah?” I asked, returning to my bouncing steps while I wiped down the kitchen island with more attention than it required.

“Haven't I told you that you don't have to clean?” he asked, heading toward the fridge and grabbing a water. His eyes scanned the prepped meals, and I swear the corner of his mouth ticked up just a fraction. He closed the fridge door, and the scowl was back. “Or cook?”

I tossed the dishrag in the sink, washed and dried my hands, then started patting Skye's butt when she wiggled in the wrap on my chest. “And haven't I told you that part of my job description is doing just that?”

He huffed, taking a long pull from the water bottle.

He'd told me he was going for a run, but holy hell, did running really require tight athletic pants that hugged his massive thighs and no freaking shirt?

"Fine," he said. "Thank you," he added. "For the meals."

I nodded, glancing down at Skye, who gazed up at me with the prettiest blue eyes. I smiled down at her, wishing she'd nap but happy that she wasn't a crying mess. If I took her out of this wrap? We'd go nuclear in seconds.

"How's my girl doing?" he asked after grabbing one of his workout towels and drying off his chest, and damn it, a little zap of heat raced down my spine at the shift in his tone. He'd gone from his normally broody and gruff voice to his reserved-only-for-Skye voice, and it *did* things to my body. Things my body had *no* business feeling.

It's just because he's shirtless. And carved out of muscle. And so damn tall. And looking down at his baby girl like she's the most important thing in the world even though he had no idea about her until a week ago...

I closed my eyes, locking down my traitorous thoughts and focusing on his question. "No nap yet today," I said, glancing down at her as he stepped closer to smooth his hand over her tiny back. And since she was wrapped to my chest, that put him close enough that I could feel the heat coming off his body. And damn him to hell, how did he smell good after a run? He should *stink*, not smell like the ocean and salt and all man. "But," I forced myself to continue, "she's been in a good mood today, so I'll take it."

He stepped closer still, shifting so he could catch her eyes. She wiggled and cooed as he came into her view, and he did that thing where he smiled for her and only her. It lit up his hazel eyes, despite the exhaustion underneath them.

"Hey there, little demon," he said, his voice soft.

She wiggled again, and I shifted back a step, reaching into the wrap to gently pull her free. Brogan automatically held out his hands, the move effortless even after only a week of having

her. He carefully took her from me, cradling her head and butt in his hands so he could look down at her.

I lingered for a minute next to them, admiring their silent way of staring at each other, the bond shining between them. Then I remembered the whole thing about personal and professional space and hurried out of the kitchen and into the living room. Skye and I had spent the better part of the morning in here playing with the fabric books and blocks and stuffed hockey pucks she had. Well, I played. She kind of just drooled on all of it.

Picking up the toys, I hurried to clean up the space, tossing everything into her designated basket before tucking it near the glider Brogan had hauled in here a few days ago. The thing was a godsend for soothing Skye when she was in a spiral.

“You’re cleaning again,” he said, his tone grumbly since he was speaking to anyone other than Skye.

I turned around to face him and almost ran into a whole lot of chest and baby. He sank into the glider, cradling Skye gently against his chest as he started to rock back and forth. I opened and shut my mouth a few times, hating how damn good he looked doing that. How content and natural and all the things I shouldn’t notice or care about.

He’s your boss. He’s your boss. He’s your boss.

“You’re going to have to get over that,” I finally managed to say, and he looked up at me, cocking an eyebrow at me that suggested people didn’t normally talk to him like that. I shrugged. “I won’t always be able to clean,” I said. “Or cook. There will be times Skye takes every drop of energy I have and *then* some. There will be days you’ll probably want to throttle me because everything is out of place and Skye and me are a mess, and I’ll order junk food you would never eat. But, on the good days—on the days that I *can* clean and cook—I will.”

Brogan studied me for a minute, those eyes raking down my body and back to my eyes in a look that I felt along every inch of my skin. “Fair enough,” he said, but that cocky look stayed firmly in place. “But on those days where you’re struggling,

Fiona?” he said, and a warm shiver ran down my spine at the rough way he said my name. “I’m expecting you to let me know. If I can’t already tell, that is. I’m the first to admit I’m new to this,” he said, glancing down at Skye who gazed up at him with her cheek pressed against his bare chest. “I don’t do relationships,” he said, and I arched a brow at him. “Not that we’re in a relationship, but…” He shrugged. “The longest-running relationship I’ve had is hockey. Nothing has ever compared to the feeling I get when I’m on the ice or the family I have with my team. So, I decided a long time ago that I’d never commit to anyone unless that person made me feel like I was on the ice.” I nodded as he continued. “That might sound insane to you but—”

“It doesn’t,” I cut him off. “It makes sense.”

He blew out a breath. “Good,” he said. “So, what I’m trying to say is I’m not the most perceptive. If you’re drowning, I don’t see it. Tell me.”

“Okay,” I said, my heart warming just a fraction.

He glanced down at Skye again, continuing his rocking motion. “I’m…grateful that you’re here. I don’t know what I would’ve done if Langley hadn’t called you.”

I swallowed hard. “You would’ve figured it out,” I said, but I felt his appreciation in my bones. “Plus, it’s not like I’m a hero,” I teased. “You are paying me.”

He chuckled, keeping focus on Skye. “Not enough. The pointers you’ve given me have made me feel like I won’t break her.”

I laughed. “Everyone worries about that,” I said. “You’re doing great, Brogan.” Silence descended between us, and I hated the tension coiling in my body as I stood there, suddenly unsure of myself. “Do you want to shower?” I blurted out the question and felt heat swarm to my cheeks at the mental images that flared to life behind my eyes.

“In a little bit?” he asked, totally oblivious to my near-meltdown of awkwardness. “I want to hold her a little bit longer.”

Oh, damn you, Brogan Grant, saying all the right things.

“Of course,” I choked out and hurried out of the room. Busying myself with something, anything to put distance between us. I grabbed a load of dirty clothes and headed to the laundry room, spending way more time in there than I needed to.

We’d lived in a constant sort of limbo-exhausted-chaos the past week, and now we were breaking ground and heading straight toward bonding. Which, yes, that was good since I lived with him and took care of his daughter full time, but now that my body was reacting to him too? Fucking hell, I was in *trouble*.

BROGAN

*M*y body collapsed—that was the only word for it—after practice, and I sat on the bench as the guys around me took off their gear, willing myself to move.

“You looked good today,” Sterling said from across the room.

I grunted, knowing he was full of shit. I was slow, unsteady, and half asleep. Fuck, I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d honestly slept. The days were all kind of a blur, and the only thing that differentiated night from day was whether or not I had practice.

I ate whenever Skye let me.

I showered whenever Fiona told me to.

I slept whenever Skye slept...which was pretty much *never*.

How the fuck did people survive parenting one child, let alone sign up to have two or more?

“Stop lying to him.” Maxim snorted, slapping me on the back.

“You know you’re skating like shit. We know you’re skating like shit. Doesn’t mean we don’t love you, but there’s no need to coddle your ass.” He shrugged.

“True.” Piece by piece, I took off my gear, throwing it into the locker behind me.

“You getting any sleep?” Axel asked, concern etching his features.

“Some here and there,” I answered.

“You have to let the nanny do her job,” Coach lectured from his office doorway, pinning me with a stare. The guy had two kids of his own, so it wasn’t like he didn’t know what he was talking about.

“Look, she went three months without knowing she even had a father,” I explained, stripping down so I could head to the shower. “I’m not about to hand her over to Fiona when I’m perfectly capable of handling some late nights.”

Fiona. Sleep deprivation must have been getting to me, because that strictly professional line I’d talked myself into creating two weeks ago was blurring. Fast. Hell, I spent more time with her than I did my friends.

And those tiny little shorts she insisted on sleeping in? They were driving me fucking crazy. She had some seriously incredible legs, and at one a.m., my brain had no problem reminding me that hitting on an employee was criminal. But my body? I was one glance away from a sexual harassment lawsuit.

“Right. You can handle it,” Sterling drawled slowly, a smirk settling on his features as his gaze dropped to my feet.

“What?” I snapped.

“That’s why you’re wearing two different socks. Because you’re *handling it*.”

I took the socks off and threw them at his face.

“Brogan, be quick,” Coach ordered. “Silas wants a word with you before you head home.”

I nodded and took my ass to the showers. Hot water blasted into my aching muscles and I almost groaned at the decadent feel of having five fucking minutes to myself. Not that I didn’t savor every single second I had with Skye—oddly enough, I really did. She’d only been here two weeks and already I couldn’t imagine what my life had been like before her. But the moments like this? Yeah, I could still remember unhurried showers.

And unfortunately, this wasn’t one of them. If Silas wanted to talk to me, it was either good news or bad. Guy didn’t call up

players to beat around the bush. Like me, he wasn't into wasting time.

"I'll go with you," Coach offered once I was dressed and ready to head up.

I gave him a nod and we took the elevator to Silas's floor.

"I wasn't kidding. You have to sleep," Coach lectured. Gage McPherson had been the best of the best in his day, which was one of the reasons we all respected him as our coach now. He wasn't some guy who had worked his way up through the ranks after college—he was a player, and took care of us like he still was one.

"How did you do it?" I asked as the elevator rose.

He winced. "The first couple of years were tough. Scarlett's biological mom..." He shook his head. "Let's just say that my best friend moving in with me was the best thing that could have happened to Scarlett...and to me. Bailey was the only one I trusted Scarlett with. You trust your nanny?"

I nodded. "Langley did all the background work, and she's..." Was there any way to describe Fiona? Beautiful. Compassionate. Thoughtful. Organized. Loving. Kind. She was everything Skye needed when I wasn't available. "She's Fiona."

"Then you need to hand the baby over at night—" he started.

I opened my mouth to object.

"—at least on the nights before games. I can't have you half asleep out there."

I grunted, which was the only agreement he was going to get out of me, and the doors opened.

Silas motioned us in as he got off his phone call. "What she says goes." He shook his head. "She's the head of the lab, so if that's what she wants, then she gets it." He hung up and rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You think people would learn that my sister runs the development lab already. Come on in, guys." He motioned to the chairs in front of his desk.

Coach McPherson sat.

I perched my ass at the edge of the conference table.

“Or not,” Silas muttered.

“If you’re going to lecture me about my speed, then save it. I’m well aware.” I folded my arms across my chest.

“Always so personable.” Silas grinned. “Relax, I’m not trading you just because you’re skating like a kindergartener at learn-to-skate lessons. I figured you’d want an update.”

“You heard back from the guy?” I leaned forward. When Silas heard I was hiring a private investigator to find Skye’s mother, he’d hopped in and not only paid for the whole thing, but put his own guys on the case, saying she was a liability for Reaper PR. Personally, I thought he just liked to help where he could when it came to his players.

“Kind of.” He leaned back in his chair. “There’s no record of Skye Grant being born in Florida, which means either she wasn’t born there, or her last name isn’t Grant on her birth certificate. My team is going county by county, but so far there’s no birth certificates showing up with you as the father.”

“So we’re nowhere.” Fucking awesome.

“It’s a needle in a haystack, Grant, and we’re sorting a shit ton of fucking hay.” He loosened his tie. “You sure she was from Miami?”

“No.” I shook my head. “I’m not sure of anything.”

Silas nodded. “Then it’s going to take us some time. Skye is a pretty common name, and all we have to work off is that letter saying she’s three months old.”

“She’ll turn up,” Coach McPherson said softly. “She’ll either regret what she did and show up to get Skye back, or...”

“Or she’ll want money,” I guessed.

“For the sake of your daughter, let’s go with the more hopeful *regretting* reason,” Silas suggested. “In the meantime, do you have all the support you need?”

“I have Fiona.”

“That’s all?” Silas asked.

My brow puckered. “That’s all I need.”

“You don’t want me to fly your family in or something?” He tilted his head.

“I would rather lose my contract than involve anyone whose genetics happen to match with mine.” I thought about it for a second. “Well, except Skye. She stays.”

“If you change your mind, let me know,” Silas ordered. “And do your teammates a solid favor and get some fucking sleep. You look like a zombie.”

I felt like one.

* * *

“**Y**ou have to sleep, little demon,” I whispered against Skye’s hair as I paced the length of the hallway. Moonlight poured in through the window at the end of the hall. We’d been at it for hours, and my eyes had long-since adjusted to the dark. Pretty sure I was going to be full-on bat by morning at this rate.

I patted her back and flipped my wrist, checking the time.

It was two a.m., and I was due on the ice at seven for morning skate. Our first game was days away, and though my body was adjusting to living without rest, my mind was still foggy half the time.

She let another piercing cry before shoving her fist into her mouth.

“You’re going to chew yourself to death,” I muttered, offering her the icy teething ring again, which she rejected, again. My right ear was going to be permanently deaf by morning.

I concentrated on slowing down my own breathing and heart rate. The girl was like a barometer for moods. The slightest hint of frustration or anxiety and she blew the roof off with those little lungs of hers.

“Still won’t sleep?” Fiona asked, coming out of her room and leaning against the doorframe.

Moonlight outlined every curve on her body, from the form-fitting tank-top she wore to sleep, to the scrap of cotton she called shorts. How fucking long could a woman's legs possibly be?

Long enough to wrap around your hips.

Fuck, those thoughts were going to send me straight to hell.

"We didn't mean to wake you," I said softly between Skye's outbursts.

"You didn't," Fiona promised, tying her hair up into a bun. "I had my earplugs in."

"Then why are you awake?"

"Thirsty." She shrugged. "I'll be right back."

She disappeared down the hallway, toward the back steps that led to the kitchen, and I continued pacing with my very angry little girl.

"You know, I've never been considered the most patient of people," I told her as I turned back to start another lap. "If you knew my reputation, you'd probably keep silent as a church mouse." I brushed a kiss over her temple. "But you never have to worry about my temper. You're probably the only person in the world who can say that."

"Here we go," Fiona said, coming back up the stairs with a bottle of water. She unscrewed the lid and kept pace with me, holding the bottle to my lips. "Hydrate. Isn't that the first rule of athletics?"

"Thought that was yours."

"Already downed one of your electrolyte drinks," she said with a shameless grin. "Now open up."

"Thanks." I snorted a laugh, but did as she asked, gulping down water as she held it for me. It was strangely...intimate, but things with Fiona just...were. It was hard to live with someone day after day and not become intimate—in the non-physical sense of the term. And she was almost always here. Even on her days off, she found reasons to stop by and check

on us. I drained the water, and Fiona chucked the bottle into the hall wastebasket.

“Now give her to me.” She held out her arms and wiggled her fingers.

“Go back to bed,” I countered.

Fiona rolled those beautiful blue eyes, though they looked much paler in the moonlight. “You need to sleep.”

“So do you.”

She sighed and leaned back against the wall, watching us pass by once, then twice. “Did you try the wrap?”

“Yep.” I nodded, patting Skye’s back in a heartbeat rhythm. “I took her for a drive around ten, but that didn’t help, either. We’ve rocked, swung, swayed, and paced.”

Fiona sighed. “Her teeth hurt.”

“That’s my guess, but she doesn’t want this thing, either.” I waved the teething toy at her as we walked by.

“Give her up and get some sleep,” she said to my back.

“Why don’t you get some sleep so at least one of us is conscious with her tomorrow?” Walk. Pat. Walk. Pat. Walk. Pat. The motions had become so routine that I almost wondered if I could develop the ability to sleepwalk and get the best of both worlds.

“Because I’m not the one with the million-dollar contract.” She hefted an eyebrow up.

“Multi-million,” I corrected her with a smirk before kissing Skye’s head again. “And you can have every little cent if you’ll just let addy sleep, Skye. Imagine all the ponies you could buy.”

That didn’t work either. Her cries had dwindled from full-lunged yells to pitiful, heart-rending whimpers.

“You haven’t slept in weeks,” Fiona argued. “And honestly... you kind of smell.” She wrinkled her nose.

I stopped right in front of her. “I do not.”

“You went for a run earlier.” She shrugged.

“And I showered after.” I drew up short. I did not *smell*.

“Fine, maybe you already showered, but I bet another one would feel *great*,” she urged, wiggling her fingers in between Skye’s body and my chest.

“Fiona,” I said, my voice lowered in warning. It wasn’t that I was against her taking Skye, but damn it, the woman needed sleep, too. She cooked and cleaned, and took care of my little demon all day.

“Brogan,” she mimicked with a totally overexaggerated scowl.

I scoffed.

She stole Skye right out of my hands. “You can have her back after you shower,” she promised, tossing me a wink and heading down the hall, keeping my pacing path. “We’ll still be here, wearing holes into the hardwood floor.”

“You stole her.”

“Fair and square,” she called out over her shoulder. “Now go. Shower. Unwind.”

Recognizing defeat, I left Skye with Fiona and did as I was told.

The best thing about showering? It was the only place I could truly feel my muscles unwind because I couldn’t hear Skye fussing, which meant I only got to do it when Fiona was on demon-duty. It was like doing a hard reset on my laptop—I came back more relaxed and ready to handle whatever Skye could throw at me.

Turns out that three-and-a-half-month-olds can throw a lot.

Steam filled the walk-in shower and I breathed in deep, letting the water work the tension from my shoulders and back.

I was so fucking tired.

It was one thing to proclaim to the rest of humanity that I was fine, that I was keeping up the way all new parents had to, but another to just let myself admit it—I was exhausted. Today, I’d

fallen asleep standing at the kitchen counter, and earned one shattered coffee mug in the process.

How much longer could she go on sleep-strike? I was ready to meet whatever her demands were.

I stayed a minute longer than it took to actually scrub myself clean with some peppermint soap that was supposed to keep me awake and refreshed, and got out of the shower, killing the fan in the bathroom as I towel-dried my hair.

It was so blissfully fucking *quiet*.

I knotted the towel at my waist and it hit me.

It was *too* quiet. Something was wrong. It had to be. Skye was never silent this time of night.

Barely keeping my feet from slipping on the tile floor, I lunged for the door and flew through my bedroom, dodging the piles of clothes I'd dropped there fifteen minutes earlier and burst into the hallway.

There was no sign of Fiona or Skye.

Panic seized my heartbeat as I skidded to a halt in the hallway, the soles of my feet slick on the hardwood.

The door to Skye's room opened and Fiona backed out, her arms empty.

"Fiona—"

She spun, whipping her finger over her mouth in silent demand for quiet.

My jaw hit the ground. Had to admit, in a world where almost no one talked back to me, it would have been a fucking turn-on to have her standing up to me if I wasn't paralyzed with fear that something had happened to Skye.

"Where is she?" I asked the second she got the door closed. My feet carried me forward without conscious thought.

Fiona fell back against the wall opposite the door, letting her head rest against the drywall. "She's asleep."

I stopped right in front of Fiona, my head nearly going all *Exorcist* between Fiona's face and Skye's closed door. "I'm sorry?"

Fiona's bright blue eyes opened, locking with mine and she smiled softly. "I said she's finally, totally, completely, knocked-out asleep. You must have worn her out."

My mouth opened, then shut. "She's...asleep."

Fiona flat-out grinned as she nodded. "She's asleep."

Relief. Amazement. Wonder. It all hit me at the same time. She was *asleep*.

"You are fucking magical. Thank you!" Before I thought about what I was doing, my hands were on her face and I kissed her hard and fast in thanks. It was over in a second—maybe less. *Holy shit, what the fuck did you just do?*

Fiona stared up at me, her features mimicking the shock I felt.

"Fuck. Fiona..." I shook my head and put my hands up, taking an immediate step back.

Her gaze fell to my lips, then down my bare chest, her eyes widening by the second as her breath hitched.

"I'm so sorry. So, so sorry," I blurted. Was I seriously out here in a towel?

"Don't be." Then her hands were on *my* face, her lips pressed against mine.

Soft. So *fucking* soft. She gently sucked at my lower lip, and I groaned, moving forward until I had her caged against the wall, my palms braced on either side of her head.

Bad idea. This is a massively bad idea.

But then she sighed against my mouth, her fingers slid into my hair, and all logical thought disappeared.

Fuck it.

I licked into her mouth, then laid siege to it, stroking every line and curve with my tongue, breathing in her gasp like it was the very oxygen I needed to survive. Her grip tightened in

my hair, and I tilted my head, kissing her deeper, harder, taking everything she offered.

I sucked her tongue into my mouth, and she moaned.

Damn, she tasted like sweetened summer strawberries, heady and intoxicating from the first sip.

Need shot down my spine, knotting at the base and demanding I take more, touch more, feel *everything*. She'd taken me from zero to fuck-her-against-the-wall-now in less than a moment, all with nothing more than this kiss. Talk about chemistry. This was explosive.

“Brogan,” she whispered against my lips, and I fell into her again, our tongues twining as we kissed, and kissed, and kissed.

Kissing Fiona was like nothing I'd ever felt before. I could do this all night. Every night.

My hands flexed on the wall, my palms itching to fill themselves with the curves of her body, to stroke and claim. I wanted to hear her screaming my name as she came. I wanted to feel her body pulse around mine as she got there again and again. I wanted—

What the fuck are you doing?

Logic reared its ugly head and I froze.

This was *Fiona*. Skye's nanny. My employee, and I had her against the wall like I was ready to unknot the towel around my waist and bury myself inside her.

“Brogan?”

I shoved away from the wall like it was on fire and backed across the hallway. “Fucking hell,” I muttered, shoving my hands through my wet hair. “Fiona, I'm—”

Even in the moonlight, I could see her cheeks flush. “Don't you dare say you're sorry. There were two of us in that.”

“Right. I just...” I shook my head. “It won't happen again. I promise. It's got to be the sleep deprivation, because I'm losing my fucking mind.”

A flicker of something—shit, was that disappointment—streaked through her eyes and she nodded quickly. “Right. Of course. Just a momentary lapse in judgment.”

“Yeah. That’s it.” I pivoted and started backing toward my own room as she did the same. “I’ll. Uh. See you in the morning.”

“Yep! See you in the morning. Well, I mean it *is* morning, but you know, whenever she wakes up.” She motioned toward Skye’s door.

“Right.” I gripped my doorhandle like it was the key to salvation.

“Night!” Flustered, she fumbled with her own doorhandle before disappearing into her room.

Stunned, and more than a little turned on, I stared down the empty hallway, my eyes locked on Fiona’s door, both hoping she kept the thing fucking deadbolted, and praying she might come back for seconds.

“You’re such a fucking idiot,” I muttered to myself, then escaped into my room.

Idiot? Absolutely.

In trouble? Fuck, yes.

FIONA

“*R*un that by me again,” Maddie said as we stood in line outside Reaper Arena.

Today was the first pre-season game, and I’d gone all out for Skye. She had her own Brogan Grant onesie, and the Tula I wore had been customized to look like the back of his jersey. I didn’t know how many games we’d be attending, but I was nothing if not prepared.

“Definitely,” Daisy added. “But tell the story slower. I want to savor it.”

I laughed as we moved up in line. “This one had kept us both up for two weeks straight,” I said, pointing to a perfectly content Skye. I swear the girl was only happy when I was wearing her or Brogan was.

“Uh-huh,” Daisy said as we continued to move forward.

“And he had early ice,” I continued, heat flaring up my spine at the memory. “I got Skye to sleep, miraculously. He came out of the shower and kissed me.”

“Too fast,” Daisy said.

“And not enough details,” Maddie added, taking the baby bag I was switching hands with and hefting it over her shoulder.

I shrugged, but I was sure they could see the heat in my cheeks. It had been two weeks since the kiss in the hallway, and I was only now telling them about it. To be fair, I hadn’t seen much of them, Skye rightfully taking up the majority of my time.

But even though it'd been two weeks, I couldn't stop thinking about that kiss. It haunted me in the middle of the night, in those precious hours where Skye slept, and I was left undisturbed in my bedroom across the hall from Brogan's, his scent snaking through the door and taunting me.

"I don't know what it meant," I admitted as we made it up to will call. Brogan had left us insanely awesome tickets, and we made our way to the family box easily enough. Daisy practically bounced on the balls of her feet the whole time, a permanent smile on her face. Her brown curls hung at her shoulders, which were draped in a McKittrick jersey.

Madeline and I didn't match the crowd of fans in Reaper jerseys, instead wearing soft cotton T's and jeans, but Skye was definitely winning the best little Reaper fan award.

"Was it like a peck?" Maddie asked after we got seated.

I waved to Langley, who sat with some of her girlfriends, little Colin strapped into his own custom carrier too. So, maybe Skye and Colin were winning cutest little Reaper fan awards.

"Not exactly," I said. "But he did say he was just trying to thank me afterward." I cringed at the awkwardness that had hung in the hallway in the seconds after the kiss. "He even apologized."

"Aww," Daisy cooed, and I snorted, shaking my head. "That's very gentlemanly of him."

"And for what it's worth," Maddie said. "That's a compliment. Especially since he looks like he could go full caveman on you in two seconds flat at any given time."

I swallowed hard, absently patting Skye's butt. It was pretty much a habit now, almost an extension movement of my body. The girl hated it when things went still on her.

"So, it was a thank-you peck on the lips then?" Daisy asked.

"Um..." I blew out a breath, my mind racing back to that night, to the memory I hadn't been able to turn off. To the memory I had shamelessly taken much, much farther in my mind. I couldn't help it. I could still feel the effects of that kiss

ringing through my body even *now*, two weeks later. And he had barely touched me. “It was longer than a peck.”

“Oh?” Maddie asked, turning her body in the seat to face me, giving me her total attention. Daisy did too, and if I wasn’t so damn tangled up about what had happened and what it meant, I might’ve laughed at their investment in this story.

“Yeah,” I said, wetting my lips as if I could still taste him. And fuck, he’d tasted good. All warmth and mint, and he’d smelled like a dream night at the beach under the moonlight.

Great, now I’m spouting poetry.

“It’s a good thing you leave the romance stories to this one,” Maddie said, pointing to Daisy. “Because you *suck* at details.”

I laughed again, the tension uncoiling from my chest. God, it was just a little kiss! Why was I getting so hung up on it?

“Seriously,” Daisy agreed, keeping her voice low since we were in the family box with Langley and several other Reaper family members while waiting for them to take the ice. “Did he push you up against the wall? Was he wearing a shirt? Did you moan? How did the beard feel? Give us the deets, girl!”

“Ohmigod, kill me now,” I said, slightly flustered. “No hands were involved, we stayed standing, and he was wearing a towel.” I swallowed hard, remembering how badly I’d wanted to see what was beneath that towel because I’d been so wholly consumed by the brief kiss.

“Wait,” Maddie said, eyeing me. “You’re telling me he didn’t even touch you?”

I shook my head. “It was like, less than ninety seconds,” I said, not that I was counting.

Maddie tilted her head, then a wide grin shaped her lips. “You *like* him.”

Daisy clapped.

“I do not,” I said. “I mean, yes, he’s way nicer than his scary exterior suggests. But I do not *like* him *like* him.”

“That’s such a lie, it’s almost cute,” Maddie said. “There is no way in *hell* you don’t like him. Especially if a quick kiss has got you all in knots.”

“I am not in knots!” I said, then cringed at how *Dr. Seuss* I sounded. I inhaled deeply, trying to get my head on straight.

“Hey,” Daisy said softly. “It’s okay if you do. We’re totally not judging you. You know we’re just messing with you, right?”

I relaxed my shoulders a bit and nodded. “Of course,” I said. I knew that. I knew they were teasing me, and I would do the exact same thing to them if the situations were reversed. But I couldn’t help it...thinking about Brogan the way I had been for the last two weeks *did* have me spinning.

“I can’t like him anyway,” I said, and Maddie and Daisy groaned.

“Because of your major commitment issues?” Daisy asked with all sincerity.

“It’s not my fault the sanctity of marriage has been lost on me,” I said. “My mother did everything she could to destroy that fairytale years ago.”

Watching her go through husband after husband had me totally against the notion. Did I believe in monogamy? Sure. I just didn’t think I needed to sign away my future to any given person just because we could stand each other’s company for more than a month at a time. And that mindset had cost me several boyfriends in the past, not to mention one disgruntled recent ex who had proposed. Clearly, he hadn’t really known me at all.

“But,” I continued. “More importantly, he’s my *boss*.”

My very sexy, very broody, sometimes downright endearing boss.

“For now,” Maddie said, and I nodded.

I knew this wasn’t going to be my career. I couldn’t take care of Skye forever, no matter how much I adored her. The biological mother *would* come back into the picture at some point. Whether it be by her own reasoning, for the NHL

money, or because Brogan finally tracked her down. Whatever the case, when she came back? I'd be out of there. Because I had no right or claim to this family.

I *worked* for them.

"So, since it's not permanent," Maddie continued. "You could technically partake in some totally consensual, simple pleasures with him." She grinned at me, and Daisy nodded her encouragement.

"You could call it the *Demon* clause," Daisy said, and we all laughed.

"As fun as that sounds—"

"Ah-ha!" Maddie cut me off, grinning triumphantly. "You admit, it would be fun."

"Well, yeah," I admitted. There was no use denying it anymore, especially after that damn kiss. "Of course, it would be fun. If one quick kiss has me all flustered weeks later, then I can't imagine what more would do to me."

Daisy squealed again, but it was because the Reapers were now taking the ice, thank God. At least now the focus would be on the game and not my ridiculous dilemma.

"So, why not have fun?" Maddie asked into my ear since the crowd was going nuts—including Daisy—as the game started. I couldn't tear my eyes off the ice, my breath catching as I watched Brogan shred the ice with a graceful, predatory technique that had my toes curling in my shoes.

"That's a line I don't want to cross," I answered, and it was the truth. Mostly. Sex would most certainly complicate things. I *lived* with the man. How did that play out? We fucked and then...okay, bye? Heading to my room across the hall now? No thanks.

"That's fair," she said.

"And besides," I continued. "It's not like he's tried to kiss me again." Maddie grinned at me while I rambled. "And he said it was due to the sleep deprivation anyway. It didn't mean

anything. It especially didn't mean he thinks of me in that way. I was just...there."

"It sounds like you're trying to convince yourself," Maddie said, and maybe I was.

I shrugged. "I'm not saying anything untrue."

"Okay," she said. "I'll drop it. But I support you no matter what. And you know I'm always the one who votes for you to have fun. Just saying."

I flashed her a grateful smile, standing carefully as Brogan got the puck. I made sure Skye's noise-canceling headphones were okay as I shifted on my feet, holding my breath as he handled the puck like the star he was.

The man was like lightning on the ice, dodging in and out of the opposing team at a rapid pace. He flew toward the goal, moving the puck with the precision of a sharpshooter—

And scored!

I clapped, swallowing my own cheering scream so I didn't startle the baby on my chest.

Brogan Grant's baby.

The sweet little girl who I adored a little more than I liked to admit. Because I *couldn't* fall for this baby. She wasn't mine. Her biological mother would come back, and then I'd never see Skye again. Never hear her sweet little coos, never feel her relax against my chest after an hour-long cry fest. Never watch her take her first steps.

My heart sank a little at those certainties, and I scolded myself for clearly getting attached when I knew better. Even with so many of my brothers and sisters, their fathers would take them after the divorce, folding them into new families far away. Sure, we kept in touch, but it was never the same.

And Skye...damn, why did it *hurt* so much to think about leaving her even when I knew it couldn't end any other way?

* * *

omehow, I'd managed to shove all my warring emotions down into a tightly locked box and allowed myself to thoroughly enjoy the rest of the game.

S

Which we won.

Madeline and Daisy had left soon after, while Skye and I had headed toward the Reapers' locker room hallway, where some of the other girlfriends or wives—and vying puck bunnies—waited for the team to come out.

Not that I was any of those things. I was just the nanny. But I knew Brogan would want to see Skye before going out with the team to celebrate their win.

And sure, maybe I wanted to see him too. To congratulate him, that's all.

Skye was a wiggly mess by the time the players started filing out of the locker room, some of which I recognized as Brogan's close friends, others I had no clue. I mentally chided myself and made a note to ask Daisy for a full download on my next night off.

I pulled Skye out of the carrier, shifting her in my arms so her back was against my chest and she could see all the excitement. Her legs really started kicking, and I knew she'd spotted Brogan coming down the hall at the same moment I did.

He looked damn good—freshly showered, dark hair still damp, and dressed in a Reaper T-shirt and a pair of black athletic pants. He shifted his gear bag over his shoulder, that natural scowl etched on his forehead as he walked down the hall. And damn it, memories of our kiss blazed in my mind, causing all sorts of fantasies to rise up and flare all over my skin. How could *anyone* look that good after playing a brutal game on the ice for as long as he just did?

“Brogan,” I said when he seemed content to keep his head down, ignoring the calls of *Demon!* from the fans who crowded the other side of the hallway.

His head whirled toward my voice, and from the utter shock there, I had to wonder if anyone on the planet dared to call him

Brogan instead of Demon.

I gave an awkward little wave, making sure I had a good hold of the wiggly bundle in my arms.

Brogan's eyes shifted in the span of a blink, a smile shaping his lips that literally stole my breath as he hurried over to us. "You're still here," he said when he reached us, grinning down at his daughter. "Hey, little demon," he cooed, and my knees might've melted just a little. Not only was this man a walking temptation with a side of sin, but he had the ability to turn me into a puddle just by being sweet.

How could sinister and sweet work so perfectly together? And why the hell did I like it so much?

"I figured you'd want to see her before you go out to celebrate," I said, willing confidence into my voice instead of the sudden shakiness I felt. "Great game, by the way."

He smoothed his hand over Skye's cheek before setting down his bag and reaching for her. She kicked her legs again, and I shifted her into his arms as we stepped toward the wall to be out of the way of the foot traffic.

"I was coming home to you," he said to Skye, grinning at her while he nuzzled his nose against hers.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said. "I thought you'd want to go out with the team. I should've headed home—to your house—instead of holding you up here."

And I was rambling again. Brilliant.

He turned his head toward me, those hazel eyes studying me for a few moments. "No," he said. "This is perfect." He sounded a little surprised by that fact as if he didn't realize he'd feel that way. I couldn't blame him. It wasn't like he had any experience of *family* waiting outside for him after a win.

"Is it okay if I ride with you two?" he asked, and the question took me aback for a second.

"You want to leave your car here?" I asked, utterly confused.

His shoulders dropped a little. "I can just have Maxim swing by to grab me for morning ice." When I still stared up at him

in wonder, he glanced from me to Skye and back again.

And then it dawned on me.

He wanted that extra twenty minutes with her on the ride home.

“Oh,” I said, chiding myself for being so ridiculous as to not seeing it at first. “Of course,” I continued, reaching for his gear bag.

“You don’t have to carry my bag,” he said quickly.

I hauled the heavy-ass thing over my shoulder, only slightly feeling the strain. I’d been lugging baby bags and car seats around for longer than I could remember, so this wasn’t a task. “Sure I do,” I said, smiling at Skye. “You’ve got that cute little bundle to handle. She’s way more trouble than a gear bag,” I teased, and he grunted a laugh, and the sound was so unexpected that it sent a warm shiver down my spine. I cleared my throat, trying to readjust my body to the proper *off-limits* setting. I motioned toward the exit. “I’ll drive so you can sit next to her in the back.”

I looked over my shoulder when I realized he wasn’t following me and was stopped dead by the smile on his face.

I’d never seen that smile before. It was different than the one he reserved for Skye and wholly different than the scowl/smirk he reserved for the cameras.

This was different. A genuine surprise and delight shaped his lips as he looked at...

Me.

He was looking at *me*. Looking at me like I’d answered a question he’d been asking for a very long time.

But that was ridiculous and totally not true. He was just happy because of winning the game and seeing his daughter afterward. Nothing more.

“Am I going the wrong way?” I asked when he made no motion to move.

He blinked a few times, then shook his head. The smile dropped, but it wasn't replaced with anything other than a sort of calm contentment as he moved toward me. "You're going the right way," he said, then walked by my side as we headed toward my car.

There were paparazzi lined outside as we snuck through the players' lot and into general admission parking, but luckily they were totally enamored by Brogan's friend Maxim and paid no attention to us at all.

Brogan secured Skye into her car seat and then settled into the seat next to her, keeping a hand on her little chest as I drove us toward home.

"Thank you," he whispered after a few minutes, and he was so quiet about it that I couldn't tell if he was talking to Skye or me or the universe. But when I looked up in my rearview mirror?

I saw a hint of that smile again, and his eyes were on me.

I quickly returned my attention to the road, my heart racing the entire way home.

Great, not only was I totally falling for his daughter, I also couldn't deny that somehow, somehow, Brogan freaking Grant had earned a spot in my heart too.

BROGAN

“*I* still can’t believe you’re a farmer’s market kind of guy,” Fiona said as we wandered between the booths, two canvas bags full of produce already hanging from Skye’s stroller. I was just glad it was early enough in the fall that the market was still open on a Friday morning. I’d be in Buffalo in less than twelve hours.

“Fresher produce,” I said with a shrug. “And I’m pretty careful with what I put in my body.” I paused at a booth, picking up a zucchini. My body was the only thing that kept me on the ice, and I knew it wouldn’t last forever. I had to take care of it, and not just for myself anymore, but for Skye, too.

“I’ve noticed,” Fiona remarked, glancing down the length of my body, her cheeks flushing the prettiest shade of pink. “I mean, it’s only natural, seeing as you’re a professional athlete.”

I bit back a smile and purchased three zucchinis from the stand owners. “And there’s something to be said for supporting local farmers,” I continued, pushing Skye’s stroller down the gravel path.

“Totally agree.” Fiona looked anywhere but at me, which was pretty much how things had been since I’d crossed the line and kissed her almost three weeks ago.

The worst part? I couldn’t bring myself to regret it, no matter how much tension there might be between us now. I looked at her way too often, taking in the soft bow of her smile, the long line of her legs, and the sumptuous curve of her ass. That kiss

was branded into my fucking memory. Did it make our current status...charged? Absolutely. But there were zero regrets in that department, because now I knew exactly how she tasted.

“So, has there been any luck in finding Tiffany?” Fiona asked, breaking my chain of thought.

I shook my head, my stomach sinking. “Without having her last name, and with hospital records being private, there’s only so much we can do.” What kind of woman would dump Skye on my doorstep without the assurance that I’d even find her?

Shit, was my judgment that bad when it came to women I slept with?

It is when you’re that drunk.

Never again. There would be zero alcohol in my life.

“This thing does really well on the gravel,” Fiona remarked, changing the topic and making light conversation just like she had the past few weeks.

“It’s pretty much the Lamborghini of strollers.” I gave Skye a grin and she happily babbled back, chewing on what had become her favorite blanket. “At least that’s what Langley told me.”

“She would definitely know.” She glanced over a stand with some apples. “We have a ton of those at home,” she muttered. “Is there anything you need to take on the road with you?”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to worry about me.”

“That’s kind of my job,” she said with a laugh.

“Skye’s your job.” I tucked my ball cap down a little lower when someone stared a little too long. I wasn’t against being recognized—it kind of came with the territory—but I didn’t want Skye exposed to the madness that sometimes erupted when overzealous fans got involved.

“What does that make you?” she teased, smiling up at me. “A perk?”

Perk? Fuck yes, I wanted to be a perk. I’d be her perk in my bed, on the couch, against the wall, anywhere she wanted me

to be.

Fucking professional.

Right, except that. Fiona was still Skye's nanny, and the only stable person my daughter really had in her life. Even I wasn't as dependable as I wanted to be during the season, and any thoughts of taking our...relationship...to that level was not only a super skeezy move on my part as her employer, but reckless as Skye's father.

There were days responsibility fucking sucked.

As if Fiona could read my mind, she looked away and her smile instantly fell, the color draining from her face like someone had pulled the stopper in a bathtub. "Oh, no."

"What's wrong?" My gaze jumped to follow hers, but all I saw was a crowd of farmers market shoppers up ahead of us. Scratch that. There was a crowd of shoppers and one Jake-Gyllenhaal-looking douche who was staring at Fiona. "Do you know him?" I asked, dropping my voice.

"That would be my ex." Her eyes popped wide and she glanced left, then right, like she was about to dart away. "Shit, shit, *shit*."

My eyes narrowed on the hipster headed our way. Was that the kind of guy Fiona was usually attracted to? And exactly how many scarves did the dude need? It was fucking seventy degrees out here. I was still in athletic pants and a t-shirt and this guy looked like he was about to indulge in a pumpkin spice latte and hashtag bless his Instagram account. "Bad breakup?"

"He's a stage-five clinger," she whispered. "I guess it would be pretty obvious if I just turned around and ran, right?"

"Considering he's waving at you, I'd say it would be a bit obvious," I agreed, my grip adjusting on Skye's stroller. "How long has it been since you broke up?"

"A little over a year," she muttered as he came our way, cutting in front of a lady with an armful of fresh flowers in his pursuit of Fiona.

If I'd had hackles, they would have risen.

“Stalker?”

“More annoying and insistent than intrusive,” she whispered, sidestepping closer to me. “He calls every couple of weeks, and I always turn him down. He’s only left me alone when—” Her face whipped toward mine. “I will seriously give you anything you want if you pretend to be my boyfriend.”

“Your *boyfriend*?” My eyebrows jumped.

She nodded. He was almost to us. The plea in those blue eyes nearly took me out at the fucking knees.

“Fine,” I whispered. Not like it was going to be hard, or anything. I snaked my hand around her waist and tugged her closer.

“Fiona?” The excitement in the guy’s eyes was palpable as he stopped just to the side of Skye’s stroller.

I automatically watched his hands and pulled Skye farther away.

“Hi, Carl.” Fiona offered him a forced smile.

“I’m just so happy to see you. You haven’t answered my calls in what?” His light brown brows furrowed. “A few months?”

“Yeah.” She tucked her hair behind her ear. “Sorry about that.”

I blinked. She wasn’t sorry and she didn’t have to be. He was the inappropriate one here, constantly pressing for contact she obviously didn’t want.

“I was just hoping—” he started.

“Have you met my boyfriend, Brogan?” she interrupted, snuggling in closer.

Damn, the woman felt good against me. She fit perfectly, tucked in just under my arm, right where she was supposed to.

“Brogan, huh?” Carl’s eyes flew wide as he glanced between us for a moment, but then a small smile lifted his lips. “You guys make it past the three-month mark, yet?”

Fiona tensed.

“I’m sorry?” I asked, my voice low.

“Oh, Fifi here is famous for never making it past the three-month mark in any relationship.” The fucker smirked. “She cuts and runs as soon as it gets close.”

“That is *not* true,” she snapped.

His smirk slipped. “I guess I just always thought I’d be the one to break the streak, to be honest.” The way he looked at her, with such open, desperate longing, made me both pity him and want to shake some damned sense into him.

“Carl, it’s been over a year—”

“But I guess you two must have figured something out,” he pointedly looked from Skye’s stroller to Fiona, and neither of us corrected his assumption. “Or maybe it was just me. Huh, Fifi?”

“One, it was *obviously* you,” I said, low and slow. “Because when a woman doesn’t answer your calls for months, that generally means she’s not interested, and continuing to call her is just fucking creepy.”

Carl drew back like I’d slapped him.

“Two, what the hell do you call her?” My fingers splayed wide, reaching over the side of her hip.

“Fifi—”

“Like a fucking *dog*?” My muscles went rigid.

“Brogan—” Fiona whispered.

“What do you call her?” Carl challenged.

“Mine,” I growled, leaning his direction.

Carl went pale and backed up a couple of steps.

Good.

“That means, don’t call her.” I stared him down, which wasn’t hard considering he was a good five inches shorter than me. “Don’t email her. Don’t text. Don’t DM. Don’t send a fucking fax. Leave her alone.”

We stared at each other in uncomfortable silence until he got the message. Then he nodded once to me and once to her before scampering off into the crowd.

I relaxed my shoulders and found Fiona staring up at me, her lips slightly parted. “Was that too much?”

She shook her head. “You are a *god*.”

* * *

“**S**eriously, then Carl ran away like dog with his tail tucked between his legs!” Fiona said into her phone as I came into the kitchen about an hour later.

Skye was down for her afternoon nap, and I had exactly two hours before I needed to head out for the airport. It was a little bittersweet putting her down, knowing that I probably wouldn’t be here when she opened her eyes again, but Fiona and I had gotten really good at Facetiming with her.

“I think he might actually leave me alone this time,” Fiona continued, pausing when she locked eyes with me. “Oh, I told him he’s a god.”

“Hardly,” I scoffed.

“He seriously is,” she continued, a smile spreading across her beautiful face. “Daisy, I’m going to have to call you back later, okay?” Another second, and she ended the call, putting her phone on the counter.

“I’m not a god for telling a guy to leave you alone, and you shouldn’t have to feel sorry about not picking up his calls, either.” I leaned back against the counter and crossed my ankles.

Her smile widened, and *fuck me*, she was stunning. Hair up in a ponytail, yoga pants and a T-shirt, and I’d never seen a more beautiful woman. She was effortless, honest, and so naturally sexy that my pulse skyrocketed just looking at her.

“Well, thank you,” she said, striding across the kitchen floor, her arms open, and her smile beaming. “Thank you, thank you, *thank you!*” She threw her arms around my neck and hugged me tight.

I laughed at how happy she sounded over something so easily accomplished. Most women I knew wanted expensive dinners, lavish gifts, and tagged Instagram posts. Fiona just wanted me to scare off a clingy ex. She was entirely too easy to please.

“It was no big deal—”

“It was!” She pulled back slightly, her arms still looped around my neck. “Thank you!” She kissed me, hard and fast, just like I’d done to her in the hallway all those weeks ago. It was nothing, just a hard peck of her lips, and yet my entire body went stiff. “Thank you...” Her voice dropped off as her eyes widened, and she stepped away quickly.

Somehow we’d found ourselves in the exact damned situation.

Because you’re attracted to each other.

“Fiona—”

“I’m so sorry,” she muttered, shaking her head slowly. “That was entirely unprofessional of me, and I just...” She squeezed her eyes shut, scrunching her nose. “I’m sorry.”

But what if she hadn’t been? What if I wasn’t? Where the hell was the line between feeling a connection to someone and denying it because of the lines we drew?

“Brogan?” she asked, slowly opening one eye.

“Are you?” I asked, my voice coming out like I’d just run it through the garbage disposal.

“Am I what?” She questioned, blinking.

“Sorry?” I gripped the counter. “Because I’m not, and I’m trying to tell myself to keep my feet planted right here. That I can’t kiss you like I want to because that would be fucked up given our power dynamic—”

She took two steps and then kissed me again, twining her arms around my neck. It was soft, sweet, and not nearly enough.

“Kiss me, Brogan.” Her words teased my lips.

“Fiona—”

“I’m the one crossing the line,” she whispered. “Kiss me.”

I broke.

My mouth slanted over hers, my tongue sliding past her teeth and sinking into her. *Damn*, she tasted like the cherries we’d picked up at the market and that sweet, unidentifiable flavor that was all Fiona.

Fuck, yes.

I kissed her until we both struggled to catch our breath, and then I kissed her until we forgot about breathing. Lifting her by those sweet hips, I pivoted, putting her down on the kitchen counter so we were almost the same height, and then I kissed her some more.

“Brogan.” Her hands tunneled through my hair, and when she split her knees, I spread her thighs and stepped between them.

I fucking loved the way she said my name, how I was never *Demon* or *Grant* to her. I wasn’t just a name on a jersey or a guy on the roster for the Reapers. She saw me. Good and bad. Tired and rested. Patient and shook. Fiona saw *me*.

“You taste so damn good,” I said, sliding into her mouth again. Need fueled my blood—the need to taste her, to get closer to her, to hear what her cries sounded like when she came. That need blasted past every warning system my brain possessed and roared through me with an urgency I’d never experienced before.

She kissed me back with soft sighs, light nips of her teeth, and a silken tongue that was slowly driving all sanity from me. Her hips rocked, and I grabbed the globes of her ass and tugged, bringing her flush against me.

She gasped, her grip tightening in my hair as she glanced between us.

“Yeah, I’m hard for you,” I growled against her mouth, her jaw, her throat. “I’m always hard for you. You walk down the hall, and I’m hard. You come downstairs out of the shower,

with your hair wet and smelling like sunshine, and I'm fucking hard. You smile, and I'm hard." I ground against her so she could feel exactly what I was talking about.

"I didn't know—"

"That I think about you all the damn time?" I kissed down her throat, worshipping every inch of skin I could before reaching the neckline of her V-neck tee. "Because I do, and if you even *think* of saying 'I'm sorry,' then this stops right here."

She tugged on my hair and I brought my face to hers. "I'm not sorry," she whispered.

"Thank fuck." I speared my fingers through her hair, loosening her ponytail, and kissed her deep. Her hair felt like strands of satin, as soft and strong as she was.

When she rocked her hips against mine again, I angled us so the next time she did it—

"Brogan," she moaned as her clit rubbed against my cock through the layers of fabric that separated us.

I sent my hand up her shirt and she broke our kiss long enough to rip her own shirt off over her head, leaving her in a front-zip sports bra.

"If I'd known we'd be doing this, I would have chosen something a little sexier," she laughed.

"It's sexy as hell." I gripped the zipper between my thumb and forefinger, then met her eyes as I drew it down, watching for any hesitation.

She flat-out grinned at me as it opened, revealing the two prettiest breasts I'd ever seen. They were more than enough to fill my hands and tipped with hard nipples that begged for my mouth.

Or maybe my mouth begged for them. Either way, I sucked one tip between my lips and flicked the peak with my tongue.

"Holy shit," she whispered, her nails scoring the back of my neck as I continued the delicate torture, sipping on one breast and then the other.

“Perfect.” I dragged my teeth over one nipple and she moaned.
“So fucking perfect.”

Her hips rolled with mine, and it was all I could do not to rip away the rest of the fabric between us and drive into her. My cock throbbed, beating in time with my heart, and the pleasure of dry-humping her like a teenager in the backseat of a car was already spinning, knotting at the base of my spine.

I was going to come like a fucking sophomore if I didn’t get ahold of myself.

Then she slid her hand down my lower back, slipping past the waistband of my athletic pants and my boxer briefs, gripping my ass, and I fucking lost all semblance of control.

“I want to hear you come,” I growled against her ear, my teeth raking along the delicate shell as my fingers trailed down her stomach, stopping at the barrier of her yoga pants.

She whimpered and rolled her hips against mine in response, squeezing my ass for good measure.

“You have to say it, Fiona.” There would be zero confusion here, no lines that we weren’t crossing together.

“Yes, Brogan,” she whispered, turning her face to mine and kissing me.

“What if I want to touch you?” I breached the barrier of her pants and kept going down. I wanted the fucking things on the ground, but if that happened, I’d be inside her in a heartbeat. That might make for a hard, satisfying ride, but I wanted more, wanted to feel her come on my fingers, to feel that delicate shudder of her muscles so she knew exactly what I was capable of doing to her before we took it there.

“Touch whatever you want.” She arched, giving me better access, and I took it, sending my hand past the delicate band of her—yeah, that was a thong—and grazing my fingers along the seam of her pussy.

“Fuck, you’re wet, sweetheart.” My words came out a little strangled.

She whimpered in response.

“What if I want to touch you here?” I ran my fingers from her opening to her clit, barely skimming the swollen flesh.

“Yes.” She nodded and sucked my lower lip lightly before kissing me.

I groaned at the slick feel of her on my fingers, at the taste of her tongue in my mouth, at the way she arched into my touch. So damned good.

“What if I want to feel you around my fingers?” I slid the tip of one finger just inside her and barely bit back a groan. Hot, wet, velvet.

“Yes, Brogan,” She abandoned my ass and took my face in her hands. “You can do whatever you want to me.”

“You are so damned beautiful.” Our eyes locked and our breathing ragged, I stroked inside her with one finger, trembling slightly when she squeezed me tight.

“*God,*” she moaned, throwing her head back.

I thrust in another finger and then pumped into her, finding a rhythm that made her breath hitch and her grip tighten on my shoulders. Her hips rolled, riding my hand. It was the hottest thing I’d ever seen, and I couldn’t even *see* it.

Next time I’d spread her out on my bed and take my time with her.

“Your fingers are... so. Damn. Good.”

I swirled my thumb over her clit, then strummed it lightly as I kissed her jaw, her cheek, her ear. “Just wait until it’s my tongue, Fiona. You think this is good? I’ll have you screaming my name when it’s my mouth on you.”

She cried out as I rubbed my thumb against her clit, giving her the friction she craved as she fucked my fingers. Her thighs shivered around my hips, the tremors coming on stronger by the second, and her breaths came in uneven gasps.

“You’re so close,” I whispered. “Come on, sweetheart, let me feel you touch the stars.”

I curled my fingers inside her and stroked her G-spot, and she came like a fucking firecracker, her cries echoing off the walls and ceiling as her body convulsed over and over, her pussy fluttering around my fingers.

My cock pulsed in demand, and I leaned against the counter to silence the fucker as she rode out the aftershocks I worked from her with my fingers and thumb.

She was a work of art, and I was going to devour her inch by fucking inch.

Her eyes fluttered open, the blue even more crystalline than usual, and an awestruck smile swept across her face. “Holy shit, Brogan. That was...insane.”

“My pleasure.” I grinned, kissing her softly as I slipped my hand out of her pants, savoring the tiny shudder she gave as I brushed her clit on my way out.

“No, *mine*,” she said with a breathless laugh. “I mean, thank you.” She shook her head. “That was definitely worthy of some thanks.”

Thanks.

Thank. You.

Because that’s how this had all started, with her thanking me for driving off her clingy ex, and here I was with my hands all over her, and zero desire to stop.

That’s what a good man would do, right? Stop. Back the fuck away.

But I wanted to throw her over my shoulder and take her to the bedroom. I wanted to spend my last hours here fucking her senseless, hearing her moan and scream my name. I wanted to fuck her until we were both too tired to move, let alone make good decisions...and good guys didn’t do that.

Damn, all it would take was a simple tug of fabric—

I jumped away and tried to suck in a lungful of air that didn’t carry her sweet scent, but it was everywhere—all over her, the kitchen...and me.

“Brogan?” She reached for me, and I booked it the hell out of there.

“You know, I think I’ll just change into my suit at the airport,” I called over my shoulder. The airport was safe. There was no fucking Fiona at the airport, or on the plane.

I told myself to swallow the bitter taste of disappointment and deal.

“You’re leaving right now?” She hopped off the counter.

“Yep. My stuff is already in the car!” I called over my shoulder, grabbing my bag of dry-cleaning from the closet as I headed out the door. “Kiss Skye for me!”

I barely remembered my keys as I climbed behind the wheel and backed out of the driveway. Fiona stood in the garage, her mouth agape, her shirt on backwards, as I pulled away from the house with a tight wave of one hand.

I had to get the fuck out of here or I was going to be all over her.

But she was all I thought about as I drove away.

FIONA

Skye whined a little in her carrier as I walked into Madeline's offices, and I smoothed my fingers over her tiny arm. After a short wait, we were ushered back by one of Maddie's nurses, and within ten minutes, my friend was strolling through the door.

"Okay, little one, what's going on?" she asked Skye instead of me, fully in doctor mode.

"She barely has a fever," I explained—just as I had over text an hour earlier. "But I didn't want to risk anything. Thanks for seeing us so quickly."

Maddie smiled at me as I shifted Skye out of the carrier on my chest and laid her gently on the little cushioned table so she could check her out. "Anything for my favorite patient," Maddie cooed to Skye, and I breathed out a sigh of relief.

I'd dealt with plenty of my siblings having fevers before, but usually, my mom carried most of that worry when I was a kid. Now that Skye was solely in my care—especially with Brogan off at an away game? I wasn't taking any chances.

Maddie looked Skye over with her doctor's eye and then handed her back to me. "She taking her formula fine?" she asked, and I nodded. "And her diapers? They're normal?" I nodded again, and she smiled at me. "Then I think she's going to be just fine," she said, and I sighed again.

"That's good to hear," I said.

"Good job bringing her in, though. Babies this young, you never know. It should break in the night, but if it doesn't, you

can always call me.”

“I knew it was a low-grade fever, but I can’t lie, I was freaking out.”

Maddie chuckled. “Totally normal. And you’re doing all the right things, Fiona. Extra formula if she wants, light layer of clothes, not wrapping her up too tight. You’re a good—” She stopped herself short, and I raised my eyebrows at her. She laughed, shaking her head. “Holy shit, I almost said *mom*.”

I snort-laughed with her while getting Skye all tucked back into her carrier.

Once we reeled it in, Maddie looked at her watch. “Hey, I have a few minutes before my next patient. Walk with me? There’s someone I want you to meet.”

“Okay,” I said, totally at ease now that I knew I was doing everything to keep Skye comfortable. I followed her through her offices and up the stairs to another department of the children’s hospital where she worked.

“Doctor Ross!” a man called out in greeting as we approached him. He leaned against a receptionist desk in a room with colorful carpet and plenty of playful chairs and stations for awaiting children.

“Hi, Doctor Trellis,” Maddie said. “This is my friend I was telling you about, Fiona Andrews?”

I eyed her curiously, then shook the doctor’s hand.

“Ah, yes,” he said, releasing my hand. “The one who has a doctorate in children’s psychology?” Maddie nodded, and he beamed. “One of our on-staff psychologists is transferring to another hospital in North Dakota,” he explained. “Her husband is in the military. Anyway, that means in a month or so, we’ll have a position opening up. Would you be interested?” he asked, and my eyes widened.

“You’re offering me a job?” I asked, bouncing when Skye started to whine a little.

“Well, I’d have to take a look at your resume, of course, but with the glowing recommendation Doctor Ross has given you,

I would be honored to have you as part of our team.”

Wow. That was one hell of an offer. Working for a children’s hospital would probably be a dream position, but everything inside me screamed *no*.

“I appreciate the offer,” I said, glancing down at Skye. “But I have my hands full at the moment. Thank you for considering me, though. Truly, I appreciate it.”

He looked at Madeline curiously for a moment, then smiled and shook my hand again. “Well, if you change your mind, don’t hesitate to reach out. It was nice meeting you.” He released my hand and headed through a set of double doors, no doubt to treat more patients as the day carried on.

“Well, that was surprising,” Madeline said as we headed back down toward her offices.

“I’m sorry,” I said, hating that I felt like I’d messed up. But I couldn’t deny my instincts, and they were all saying I was right where I needed to be.

With Skye. And I couldn’t imagine leaving her right now. Especially with no leads on her mother, and then there was Brogan...

Ohmigod, I didn’t want to leave Brogan either.

But...we weren’t a couple. We weren’t anything. Sure, we’d had some amazing make-out sessions that may have led me to one of the best orgasms I’d ever had, but that didn’t mean we were a *thing*.

Panic crept up my spine, terror shooting through my veins like ice.

“Hey,” Maddie said, resting her hand gently on my shoulder. “You don’t have anything to be sorry about,” she said as we stopped near her exit door. “I didn’t mean to spring that on you. I honestly just wanted you to meet him. I had no idea he’d offer you the job right there on the spot.”

I breathed out slowly, trying to hide the fear that must be frosting over in my eyes. Not about saying no to a job, but about *why*. I knew better than to get attached. I’d been telling

myself for weeks *not* to get attached, but my dumb heart obviously didn't listen.

"No," I said. "I am sorry. That was super nice of you. And it's an incredible contact to have. I just..." Fuck. How could I explain why I'd said no when I couldn't even totally understand it myself?

I knew Skye wasn't my forever, but why the hell did that sting so badly?

"You just have other priorities right now," Maddie finished for me. "No biggie. You want to grab lunch sometime soon?"

"Yes, please," I said, suddenly realizing I desperately needed a day off. Not because of anything to do with Skye, but everything to do with me. I needed to remember that I had a life outside of her and Brogan, because once her biological mother came back into the picture? Or once Brogan felt he had a better handle on juggling single dad life?

I would be history.

She probably wouldn't even remember me.

And as I buckled her into her car seat, driving us toward home, I couldn't stop the fissure in my chest from cracking wide open.

A few minutes before we turned on our street, Brogan called my cell. I picked up through the car's speakers, knowing Skye loved to hear his voice.

"Fiona?" he asked when I answered.

"Who else," I teased, some of the tension leaving my chest.

"I got your text. Is Skye okay? Do I need to hop on a plane—"

"She's fine," I cut him off as we pulled into the driveway.

"Are you sure, because I don't know what to do here. We take ice in thirty, and I just saw your text."

"You get on the ice and play your ass off," I said. "I just got back from Madeline's. She checked her over, and she's a perfectly healthy little demon," I said, and I almost felt his sigh in my bones.

“Okay,” he said, almost as if he was trying to soothe himself.
“She’s fine.”

“Yes. I promise. I was just keeping you informed. I didn’t want to worry you.”

“I don’t think that’s an option anymore,” he said.

I chuckled softly. “She can hear you,” I said. “We’re in the car. We just pulled in.”

“Hey, little demon. I’ll be home soon,” he said in the voice that was just for her. And my heart did that straining thing it did any time he used that tone. Add that squeeze to the pile of emotions already brewing in my chest, and I was already planning to bake pity-party brownies once I got inside. “I’m going to score all my goals for you tonight,” he continued, and I grinned as if he could see me.

“You’ll do great,” I said.

“See you soon, Fiona,” he said. “Bye, little demon.”

The line went dead, but my heart?

It was in all kinds of an uproar over a man I most certainly couldn’t be attached to, let alone a little girl who would never truly be mine.

* * *

Four a.m., several brownies, and no sleep later, I wasn’t feeling much of anything beyond exhaustion. So, that counted for something. I’d tried singing to Skye, tried playing her favorite piano playlist, tried walking around the house with her in the wrap, all of it to no avail. She was just downright unhappy. Her fever had broken a few hours ago, and that was at least something to be happy about.

“I’d really love it if you’d tell me what you need, baby,” I said in a sing-song voice as I cradled a crying Skye to my chest. I paced the living room, turning on the fan to see if the noise would help soothe her. “You’re full, changed, bathed, and

cozy. I've danced with you, cried with you, and read you as many stories as I can find. What do you need?"

She wailed in response, and I shushed in a repetitive motion, trying every trick in the book I knew to get her to relax.

"You need sleep, little demon," I said, eyeing her. "That's why you're so grumpy. If you'd just sleep. I'll even hold you the whole time, please?"

Great, now I was negotiating with a four-month-old. I'd definitely gone past sleep deprivation and into looney tunes territory.

"Whoa, what's all the commotion about?" Brogan's voice filled the room, and I whirled around, shocked I hadn't heard him come in through the door.

"You're here?" I half-asked, half-sobbed. I was that fucking tired.

"I caught an early flight," he said, dropping his bags and hurrying over to me.

"Is she still sick?" he asked, and I shook my head while I kept bouncing his crying baby.

"No, she's fine now. She's just stubborn. And tired. If she would sleep, she'd feel better, but she's not listening to me."

Brogan eyed me, then Skye, then the mess I'd left in both the living room and on the kitchen island, which he could see from where we stood.

"I'll clean that up, I promise," I said, tears welling in my eyes. "I meant to have it cleaned up before you came home, but I didn't expect you till nine a.m. And this one hasn't slept all night, so I haven't had a chance—"

"It's all right, Fiona," he said, his usual gruff tone switching to soothing just for me. He reached for Skye, gently taking her from my arms.

She settled against his chest, nuzzling against his shirt as she quieted down, then fell silent altogether.

I laughed a slightly disoriented laugh.

“She missed you,” I said.

Brogan visibly swallowed, carefully stepping around me and heading toward the glider. “I missed you both,” he said, and I blinked a few times as the words caught up in my sleep-deprived brain.

We hadn’t spoken about what had happened between us that night after the farmer’s market. And he certainly hadn’t tried for anything again. I understood why. The whole unprofessional line and all, but I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t desperate for more.

More of *him*. His claiming touch, his searing kiss.

Need flared in me like a warning sign, and I backed up a few steps.

“I’ll just go clean—”

“You’ll go to bed,” Brogan cut me off, and I arched a brow at his tone.

“Don’t give me that look,” he said, and now my lips parted at the demand in his voice. “You need sleep.”

“And you need to give me Skye back,” I said, my mind suddenly realizing the mistake we were making. “She may have broken her fever, but whatever caused it could still be contagious. You can’t afford to get sick.” I reached for her, and he planted me with a serious look.

“I’m fine,” he said. “Strong immune system for one, and for two, I don’t care. I had an away game. I missed my baby. I’m holding her.”

I opened my lips to argue, but then I shut my mouth. Because he was right. He was a grown man and could make his own decisions.

Just like I could.

“Okay, then,” I said and headed toward the kitchen.

“Fiona,” Brogan said, stopping me before I set one foot in the kitchen. “If you clean right now, I swear on everything—”

“You’ll what?” I asked, turning around to face him again, a smile on my lips.

“I’ll be forced to put Skye in her crib, toss you over my shoulder, and put you to bed myself.”

The breath stalled in my lungs as fire licked down the center of me. I held his gaze, and those hazel eyes showed me nothing but sincerity. He’d do it. He’d make good on his promise, and then some.

And I hated that a part of me wanted to push that boundary and see just how far he’d take it if I refused to obey him.

But the little bundle against his chest quashed those notions. She was finally content and half asleep already, and I would absolutely not ruin that.

So, instead, I huffed a laugh. “Fine,” I said. “Just come get me if you need a break.”

“Get some sleep,” he said, and another warm shiver danced over my skin at the demand in his tone. Fuck, I liked it way too much. Just like I enjoyed it when he was endearing. Or when he was laughing. Or when he was tearing up the ice like a damned warrior.

And as I made it to the safety of my bedroom, shutting the door behind me, I realized I liked way too much about Brogan Grant. And now there wasn’t a damn thing I could do to stop it.

BROGAN

The first game of the real season was always tense. There was a driving need to win, to come out and draw first blood. Was it superstitious or foolish to believe the first game set the tone for the rest of the season? Absolutely. Did we all still think that way? Yep. Two of the rookies had even yacked up their dinners before we'd taken the ice.

There were two minutes left in the third, and we were tied with Tampa. A tie was decent. Respectful, even. But it sure as hell wasn't a win.

The roar of the crowd dimmed to nothing, the sound eclipsed in my ears by the thunderous beat of my own heart as I flew off the bench for my shift. My skates ate up the ice as I charged forward, following Axel as he took the puck across the blue line and into Tampa Bay's zone.

Two defenders pushed Axel toward the boards, and he sent the puck my direction. Their center rushed to catch me as I caught the puck with my stick. I kicked on my afterburners and flew. I was many things on the ice, but speed had always been my number one asset unless the situation called for glove-dropping.

My world narrowed to the burn in my thighs and the grip of my skates on the ice as I bolted toward the goal on the breakaway. The goalie drew back into the crease, mirroring my movements.

Glove or stick?

GLOVE OR STICK?

I deked, and the goalie dove right, leaving the net wide open above his shoulder. I took the shot without hesitation, raising my hands in triumph as it hit the back of the net. The lamps lit and the noise of the crowd rushed back in, flooding my head as the fans came to their feet.

“Fuck yes!” Axel swamped me in a hug, slapping my back.

I was swarmed by other Reapers on the ice for a few seconds as celebratory music blasted through Reaper Arena’s sound system. Once free of the melee, I turned toward our family section and grinned, pointing up at my girls, Skye and Fiona.

“That one’s for you!” I shouted, knowing damn-well there was no way they could hear me, not above the roaring fans. The noise was so loud it vibrated the glass. Not to mention, Skye was wearing noise-canceling headphones as she snuggled into Fiona’s chest.

My girls. Skye was, without a doubt. But Fiona? When had I started thinking of her as mine?

When you stroked her to an orgasm on your kitchen counters.

I shut that line of thinking down and celebrated with my teammates as the game came to an end.

Game one was a win. Our season was off to a fucking fantastic start!

The mood in the locker room was raucous, and even Cannon had brought out the rare smile as we got out of our gear.

Then there was Maxim, whose face was set in such austere lines that he looked like we’d lost.

“And the problem is?” I asked, knowing full well he had one.

“That second Tampa goal was my fault,” he muttered, ripping off his shoulder pads like they’d done something to insult him.

“I was too fucking slow, and he got away from me.”

“Dude,” Sterling groaned, rubbing the bridge of his nose, all too familiar with his brother’s unique ability to suck the joy

out of any victory with his post-game analysis where he always found himself lacking.

“And?” I just raised my eyebrows and continued stripping out of my gear. “What else you got over there?” It was best for Maxim if he got it all out at once, rather than letting him stew in his hypercritical shit all night.

“And I was slow off the bench in the second period. I could have probably made a play if I hadn’t taken those extra seconds.” His jaw flexed as he tore at his laces.

“So how many laps are you going to punish yourself with?” I asked quietly, tucking my gear away in the locker behind me. “Just fifty this time?”

The guy had a small rink put into his basement—just a little bigger than Cannon’s, and I was one of the only people who knew he used it to punish himself. Well, Caspian had known, and had even managed to temper his best friend’s misplaced guilt, but he was up in Minnesota now, so I guess that only left me...and Sterling.

Not that Maxim was ever going to listen to his brother.

“Shut up.” Maxim rolled his eyes and forced a smile. “I mean, it turned out okay, right? We won.”

“Right.” I nodded. “So, why don’t you take a night off and just enjoy it?”

“But you’re still going to find a way to tell yourself the score should have been higher if you’d just...insert flaw here.” Sterling held out his hand and pointed to his empty palm. “Aren’t you?”

“Why don’t we talk about what bar we’re going to tonight instead?” Briggs interrupted, glancing between the brothers.

“Scythe!” everyone answered in unison.

The popular, local bar was owned by Sawyer’s wife, Echo, and usually I’d be down for a little celebration, but not tonight. I was finding more and more of my happiness at home, in the calm—and fine, equally chaotic—atmosphere that came with having a five month-old baby.

“Let me guess,” Maxim tilted his head at me. “You’re headed home.”

“Yep.” I grabbed my towel. For the first time in my life, what I had waiting at home for me was better than anything I could find by going out.

* * *

I placed Skye on her back, in the middle of her crib, and backed away slowly as I held my breath. Her noise machine was going, but fuck, even my heartbeat felt too loud. It had only taken a half hour to get to her to sleep, but there was zero part of me that wanted to go through the rocking and pacing routine we’d developed again.

Creeping out of her door, I twisted the doorhandle to avoid the *click* that always came with shutting the door, then slowly released the knob to close it silently.

I exhaled deeply, my shoulders dipping slightly in a moment of sheer relief. It was only ten, which meant I had every chance of getting a solid eight hours or so before morning skate. If Skye slept all night—which had been about fifty-fifty the past week or so—I’d be ready to kick some ass for the second game of the series tomorrow night.

After listening for Skye for a minute or two in the hallway, I headed downstairs to the kitchen and found Fiona shutting the dishwasher and pressing the start button.

“I told you that you don’t have to do that,” I lectured, going around the kitchen island to the refrigerator. I’d managed to keep my hands to myself for the past two and a half weeks by maintaining at least five feet between Fiona and I at all times...or at least whenever possible. At home we were in pretty close confines, and there wasn’t much we could do about it.

That kiss. Fuck me, that kiss had been on replay in my head every time I’d jerked off for the last couple of weeks.

Not just a kiss.

I swore I could still taste her tongue, feel how slick she was against my fingers—

“And I told you that I don’t mind,” Fiona countered, saving me from falling down the rabbit hole of fantasy.

“We have a housekeeper.” I lifted my brows at her and grabbed two bottles of some pink drinks that had electrolytes. “Remember?” Shit, had I really said *we*? Yep. Truth was, this house felt like it belonged to both of us. Fiona only spent one night a week at her own place, even on the nights when I didn’t have ice in the morning.

She was fucking fabulous and I wouldn’t have been able to survive this long without her.

“Who only comes once a week, remember?” She grinned and took the offered drink. “Thanks.” She rolled her shoulders and winced.

“What hurts?” I drained the bottle and threw it into the recycling.

“My back is a little twingy.” She shrugged. “Nothing to worry about.”

My eyes narrowed on her lithe frame, as if her body would tell me more than her mouth.

“It’s fine.” She brushed me off with a wave of her hand. “Skye is growing like a weed, and keeping her strapped on for hours at the game—well, she can get a little heavy.”

“Little heavy?” I winced. “That girl has already hopped up to the seventy-fifth percentile as of last week.”

Fiona grinned, and my chest went tight. “Guess she gets that from her daddy.”

I huffed a laugh and turned to the nearest cabinet, breaking eye contact. Shit, that woman had no clue what she did to me...or maybe she just didn’t want me to do it to her again. That was fine, of course. Hell, I’d crossed so many lines that I was pretty much a walking lawsuit after our little romp in the kitchen. I opened the cabinet and stared at bottles of massage oil I kept on hand for nights I’d been too tough on my legs.

Don't offer. Do not do it. DO NOT OFFER. What I needed to do was take my sexually frustrated ass upstairs and get some sleep while there was sleep to get.

But shit, she hurt because she'd been carrying my kid all evening, and maybe I was a dick, but I wasn't a big enough dick not to help her out when I was fully capable.

"Want me to rub your shoulders down?" I asked, trying to keep my voice neutral. *Say no. Save us both and just say no.*

"You'd do that?"

Fuck. "Absolutely." I pulled one of my favorite bottles out—the one that smelled like citrus, and flashed her a tense-as-shit smile.

She swallowed hard.

"I mean, as porny as it sounds to ask if you need a backrub, I'm really just offering—"

"A back rub," she finished with a nod.

"Exactly." Holy shit, when had I gotten so fucking awkward? It was a straight up middle school dance in here.

She nibbled on her lower lip, clearly thinking over her answer, and I clenched the bottle of oil so tight I half-expected it to burst open like some rom-com metaphor for how badly I wanted this woman.

Yeah, that was one of the reasons I wasn't out at *Scythe* right now, working off my post-game buzz with a willing puck bunny. I only wanted Fiona, and that realization was fucking *terrifying*.

"Let's do it," she said with a decisive nod.

My dick jumped.

I cleared my throat. "Okay. Living room?"

Five minutes later I sat on my leather couch with my knees spread as Fiona dropped down in front of me, sitting crisscross. Her shoulders were bare with the exception of two very thin tank top straps and the strips of bright red satin that I refused to think about being connected to her bra.

Nor was I thinking about the sight of those perfect breasts. Nope. Instead, I was pouring a small amount of massage oil into my palm and praying on every deity ever worshipped to help keep me from embarrassing myself.

“Tell me if I go too deep,” I managed to say, rubbing the oil between my hands.

“Oh, trust me, it’s never too deep,” she teased, flashing me a smile over her shoulder.

And now I was hard. Awesome. I needed to find a way to cut the tension, and *fast*.

“Now, Ms. Andrews, we here at Demon Massage want to make sure our customers are always comfortable and fully satisfied,” I teased.

“Then by all means, proceed.” Another smile. Another reason for my dick to make its needs known.

I started on her neck, working my thumbs into the tense muscles.

She hummed a little in appreciation.

Once the muscles in her neck were relaxed, I continued down her trapezius.

A moan fell from her lips.

I paused for the length of a heartbeat, sucking in a breath. That was the same exact sound she’d made while I’d had her up on the kitchen counter.

“Sorry, it just feels so good.” She let her head fall forward slightly.

“Like I said, we aim to please.” My voice was about as smooth as a gravel pit.

I kept my touch professional, working the muscles I’d spent hours studying in undergrad until her knots loosened. But damn, those little moans and sighs? They were innocent, but my mind turned them positively indecent.

“Here, will this help?” She tugged her straps down her shoulders.

“Sure.” All that creamy skin made my mouth water.

“You are so damn good at this.” She leaned into my touch.

“My bachelors is in sports medicine.” I found another knot and it melted under my fingers.

Quiet moments passed while I rubbed the tension from her shoulders and arms, never letting my hands sink farther south than her bra-strap.

“I think that’s about all I can help with,” I said, my voice strangled. More like it was all I could handle before my touches turned to caresses.

She rolled her shoulders and sighed, coming up on her knees before turning toward me.

Fuck me, she was level with my dick. I shifted my hips and hoped like hell that she wasn’t checking out what was going on beneath my athletic shorts.

“I’d say thank you, but we always end up...” She flushed. “Well, you know.”

“Yeah.” We did seem to have a thing for getting overzealous with the thanks.

“How about I do you?” she offered.

I clenched my jaw, biting back my instant agreement to her suggestion.

She reached for my side, her breasts brushing my knee, and grabbed the oil. “I’m definitely not as good as you with my hands, but I’m a fast learner.”

Massage. *Right.* She meant a massage.

“I’m good.” There was no way in hell I could let her put those beautiful, capable hands on me and not react. For fuck’s sake, I was barely holding myself in check here. A few more minutes and I’d have her spread out on the couch, her thighs open, her pussy slick, her mouth begging me for—

Her brow puckered and hurt flashed through her eyes.

“Shit,” I muttered as she scrambled to her feet. “Fiona it’s not that I don’t think you could give a hell of a massage—”

That hurt turned to fire in her eyes. “It’s just that you don’t want me to touch you. Fine. I get it.” She shook her head.

“No, you *don’t* get it.” I ground out every word.

She set the bottle on the end table. “Oh, then please do explain it to me.”

My teeth ground.

“I wasn’t saying we had to—” A brighter pink stole over her cheeks. “And even if that *was* what I was offering, are you telling me that I’m that bad?”

“For fuck’s sake, Fiona. I’m trying to be the good guy here, which if you haven’t noticed, isn’t exactly my M.O.” I gripped both of my knees so hard that the veins in my hands bulged.

“Brogan—”

“If you put your hands on me, I’m afraid that I won’t be able to stop.” There, I said it. “I’ll have you on your back on this couch, or on your knees in front of me. Hell, maybe I’ll even bend you over that arm. The positions may vary, but the result will be the same—I’ll be inside you.”

Her lips parted and she slowly dragged her tongue over the lower one.

“Say something.” Fuck. I’d just fucked it all up. We’d been fine—tense, but fine—until I’d had to open my mouth and put words to what had been going on inside this house since I’d kissed her against the wall upstairs.

“Okay.” Her lips tilted upward.

I blinked and clasped my hands behind my neck. “I’m sorry?”

“I said, okay.” She moved forward, bracing her knees on either side of me so she straddled me, and *holy fuck*, she rocked her hips right against my cock.

“Fiona—”

She cradled my face in her delicate hands and leaned forward slowly, like she was giving me time to pull away. “I. Said. Okay,” she whispered just above my lips.

“You don’t know what you’re asking for,” I growled as her hands sank into my hair.

“You were pretty graphic in the details. I’d say I know what I’m asking for.” She brushed her lips over mine. “You. Inside. Me.” Each word was punctuated by the softest kiss.

“I don’t want to take advantage of you.” My pulse hit the ceiling, and *damn it*, my hands swept down the sides of her body until I had ahold of her luscious hips.

“Is that what you think this is?” She laughed, and it was the sexiest thing I’d ever heard in my life. “Fine, then how about I take advantage of *you*?” She nipped my lower lip.

“And you won’t regret it in the morning?” I could handle a lot of things, but being on her list of regrets wasn’t one of them.

“I could never regret you,” she whispered, rolling her hips over mine.

I groaned.

“Now stop thinking, stop worrying, and just be here with me.” She kissed me, and I snapped.

My mouth slanted under hers and my tongue demanded entrance. She parted those sweet lips and I sank inside with a sound that came out like a growl, sweeping my tongue past her teeth to relearn every line of her mouth, to reclaim it.

This woman was *mine*. She might not know it. Hell, I might not even realize what that meant, but I knew I’d never wanted anyone the way I wanted—needed her.

She tasted so fucking sweet, and the way her tongue twined with mine had me going back for seconds, then thirds, until our mouths were swollen and my blood molten. “I fucking love kissing you.”

“Then we’re on the same page,” she said with a smile so bright my chest constricted. “Because I love kissing you.”

We let our kisses do the rest of the talking.

Kissing Fiona was on a whole other level from anything I'd ever experienced. I'd taken too many women to bed to keep count, and kissing had never been my favorite part of fucking, but if I did nothing but keep my mouth on Fiona's all night long, I would have been more than happy. The woman had a mouth that demanded worship.

Hands pulled and tugged. Her shirt came off, then mine. I unclasped her bra and immediately brought her nipples to my mouth, sucking and licking the way I remembered she liked.

"Brogan," she moaned, writhing in my lap.

"Fucking love these, too," I muttered against her skin, continuing my assault until she whimpered mindlessly and rocked against my hips in rhythm, seeking friction.

My cock throbbed in time with my pulse, hard and heavy.

Then she was gone, off my lap and standing before me with a mischievous gleam in her eyes.

"Fiona?" Damn it, had I rushed her? Taken her too far?

"It's hard to take advantage of you with these on." She shed her cotton shorts and underwear in one motion, leaving her gloriously, deliciously bare.

I damn-near swallowed my tongue.

Fiona was curved in all the right places, her body athletic but soft everywhere I liked. It was as if she'd been made to my specifications, torture and pleasure designed as a woman.

"You are so damned beautiful." I took my time and memorized every inch of her, from the rosy tips of her swollen breasts to the tiny strip of dark hair at the top of her pussy, and down her sleek thighs. Even her feet were gorgeous.

"You should take a look in the mirror some time," she muttered, averting her gaze as she straddled me again, only my athletic shorts separating us.

I tipped her chin with my thumb and forefinger, waiting for her to meet my gaze. A few breaths later, she did. "You are

beautiful, Fiona Andrews. I've never wanted anyone the way I want you."

She smiled and kissed me, stopping my words.

Her hard nipples raked against my chest, and the skin-on-skin contact had me reeling. No one had ever felt this good against me.

"Want to really take advantage of me?" I whispered, my mouth already watering.

"Hmmm?"

I gripped her hips and moved, lying back on the couch. "I need to kiss you."

She gave me a coy grin and leaned down, brushing her lips over mine. "I'm already kissing you."

"That's not what I had in mind, sweetheart." Her weight was slight as I lifted her, dragging her hips over my chest.

"Brogan..." Her eyes flared wide.

"Hey, you said take advantage," I reminded her, a grin shaping my lips. "So take advantage." One more lift and her knees were on either side of my head. "Sit."

She braced her hand on the back of the couch and looked down at me with equal parts shock and need. "I'll crush you."

I would have laughed if I wasn't so painfully hard, and already distracted by the prettiest pussy I'd ever seen hovering above my face. "Do you want this?"

"Yes, but I weigh—"

"Sit," I ordered, this time banding my arms around her thighs and tugging her into my mouth.

She cried out.

I groaned against her slick flesh, my tongue licking her from her entrance to above and around her clit. Over and over, I stroked, edging toward the sensitive bud of her clit without giving her what she wanted.

I needed this woman so badly I was ready to beg, and I wanted her on that same edge.

“Brogan,” she moaned, her hips rocking lightly, riding my face.

Damn, she tasted like salt and honey, and I couldn't get enough. I ate her with single-minded focus, paying attention to the hitches in her breath, the tensing of her thighs, her hand in my hair.

It was fucking *heaven*.

“Brogan, please!” Her cries grew sharper, higher.

I gave her what she wanted, flicking my tongue over her clit.

She gasped.

I sucked the little bud, flicked and licked until her motions grew tense, the undulations of her hips tighter and faster.

Then I slid my tongue inside her, thrusting hard and fast, using my strength to help her ride me.

“Ohmygod,” her words slurred and her thighs turned to steel bands around my head.

I worked my finger over her clit, rubbing her hard and fast.

She came in a shout and I licked her through it, savoring her taste, her scent, her cries in my ears. As soon as she'd come down from her peak, I moved, flipping her back and climbing over her body.

She had a light sheen of perspiration on her skin that made her glow. “So. Very. Beautiful.” I kissed a path up her the valley between her breasts. “You took advantage of me like a champ.”

“Oh yeah?” She huffed a laugh, her beautiful blue eyes hazy with pleasure. Then she tugged off my shorts, springing my cock free. Her eyes widened and she ran her tongue over her lower lip. “Damn.”

“Still want to take advantage?” I asked, every muscle in my body tense. If she said no, I'd walk straight to the iciest shower and stand there the rest of the night. I'd never pressure

or guilt her into anything, but I *really* hoped she hadn't changed her mind.

"Absolutely. Condom?" Her fingers tunneled through my hair, and I kicked off my shorts.

"Wallet." I reached over her head and grabbed a foil packet from my wallet.

One rip, a roll, and it was on.

"Hey, Brogan?" She wrapped her legs around my hips, and my cock settled against her entrance like a fucking magnet.

"Fiona?" Sweat beaded on my brow. This was it. I finally had this woman under me.

"Don't hold back." Pure challenge lit her eyes.

"Not in my nature." I thrust forward and we both groaned as I sank inside her.

Tight.

Hot.

Slick.

If I died in this moment, it would have been okay. I'd never felt anything like the tight grip of her walls as I rolled my hips again, and again, easing myself into her, stretching her so she could take me comfortably.

Her breath hitched and our mouths met in a searing kiss when I was finally all the way in, buried so deep that I had the asinine feeling of her and I being the same person.

"Ready?" I asked, searching her eyes for any sign of pain or discomfort.

"God, yes." She wound her arms around my neck.

I slid out, and we both moaned on the return. Good. It was too good.

I set a deep, pounding rhythm, taking her with hard strokes.

She braced her hands on the arm of the couch and pushed back, meeting me with every thrust as we climbed higher and higher.

“You feel like heaven.” It was all I could say, and definitely the most poetic I’d ever gotten with any woman. But the memories of every woman that came before were erased with every thrust, every roll of my hips. There was only Fiona.

Her neck arched, and I felt her body quicken beneath mine even as the pleasure coiled tight at the base of my spine, threatening to overtake me.

Not. Yet. I needed to feel her come around my cock first.

“Don’t. Stop.” She strained against me, our hips coming together harder. Faster.

I worked one hand between us and strummed her clit as I felt her start to tremble, and when she came again, harder and longer than the first time, I fell right over that edge with her, losing myself in blinding pleasure.

It took us a few minutes to catch our breath, and finally I remembered to roll before I crushed the shit out of her.

“That was...” She shook her head, looking for a word.

“Intense?” I offered, pushing a few strands of hair from her face. It was the best sex I’d ever had in my life, and—I cringed.

“What?” Her brow furrowed. “Was it...bad for you?”

My eyebrows rose. “No, sweetheart, it was fucking perfect. I was just thinking that I should have taken you to bed, not fucked you on the couch because I was too impatient to get inside you.”

She laughed, and I felt my cock hardening again.

My need for this woman hadn’t been slaked, it had barely been fed.

“So, take me to bed,” she ordered with a kiss.

Fuck, yes.

I did.

FIONA

“*B*rogan,” I moaned, arching my back off the bed to give his mouth better access.

The man was insatiable.

We’d barely slept, which was saying something since Skye had elected to sleep through the night.

He hummed against my slick, swollen flesh, and I swore I saw stars. I gripped his hair, meeting the thrusts of his tongue with the movement of my hips as he devoured me. His beard rubbed against my thighs, the sensation unhinging me. He teased me, circling around my clit until I was a writhing mess beneath him.

“Please,” I begged, my mind whirling. I’d been claimed thoroughly tonight I’d lost count how many times the man had thrown me over the edge. And *fuck* did he know how to get me there. It was like we’d always been doing this, like he’d had years to study my body, my desires, and teach me new ones I never knew I had. “Brogan, I can’t...” I panted, my body tightening as he tortured me.

He backed up enough to look up at me from between my thighs, and ohmigod seeing him there, this massive, growly man who wholly had me at his mercy? It was enough to have me gasping.

He smirked up at me, teasing me with his fingers as he sat up enough for me to get a good look at him. “You think you can’t handle anymore, Fiona?” he asked, his tone coated in lust and

pure, primal dominance. And *damn*, did I like submitting to him.

I let out a shaky breath, arching off the bed as he slipped two fingers inside me, winding me up even more after his tongue.

“Look at me,” he demanded, and I snapped my eyes to his. “How much more can you handle?” he asked, pumping those fingers inside me until my thighs clenched around him. Everything inside me coiled and narrowed to the feel of him there, to the absolute knowledge that a few more flicks of those expert fingers and I’d shatter into a million pieces, he owned me that much in this moment.

“How much?” he urged when I didn’t answer, and he stilled his fingers inside me.

“Everything,” I breathed the answer, arching into his touch. “Everything, Brogan. I can handle whatever you dish out.”

That smirk turned wolfish as he grinned down at me. “That’s right,” he said, returning to his torture. “*Never* doubt that,” he said, shifting to lean down over me. “How strong you are. How beautiful you are. Or how fucking delicious,” he growled, right before he sucked my clit into his mouth at the same time he thrust his fingers home.

I clenched around him, my entire body unraveling at his touch, at the flicks of his tongue as I shattered around him. I’d barely caught my breath before he’d slipped his fingers out, rising up on his knees and pressing mine farther apart, baring myself to him completely.

My heart stuttered in anticipation, and there was a small part of my mind that wondered how he could possibly keep going, how *I* could keep going, but it wasn’t strong enough to stop me. I never wanted to stop. I wanted to live in this moment of pure, carnal bliss until it consumed me entirely.

He rolled a condom onto his cock, and I whimpered at the sight of him rising above me. God, he was glorious to look at. All inked skin over tons of corded muscle, his body slightly glistening with sweat from all we’d done before. I don’t know

how I had feeling left in my limbs, let alone the desperate need for more.

But it was there all the same. A pulsing beacon of desire, a slice of undiluted need that had his name tattooed all over it.

Brogan lined up with my aching center, my flesh overly sensitive after he'd made me come so many times already. His eyes left mine, dragging along my body, over his massive hands that he had poised on my knees, spreading my thighs as far as they'd go. I should've felt self-conscious, should've felt exposed...but I didn't. I felt like a fucking goddess with his eyes on me, hungry and consuming as he watched where he lined our bodies up.

Then he looked to me as he thrust inside me with one sharp plunge.

I arched off the bed, sighing as he filled me. He held me there, letting me adjust to the sheer size of him before pulling all the way out and slamming home again. And with how sensitive I already was? God, it was like he had a direct line to every nerve ending I possessed, and with each thrust he lit me up like a damn Christmas tree. I sparked all over for him, crackling like the flames licking up my spine.

"Fuck," he growled, pumping inside me faster before releasing my thighs and shifting to hover over my chest, never breaking his rhythm. He sucked one of my nipples into his mouth, and I moaned at the sensation while he thrust inside me again and again. He used his teeth, nipping at me before soothing the hurt with his tongue, and I clenched around him, already close to that sweet edge.

Brogan leaned up enough to look down at me, a satisfied grin on his mouth. "Already?" he asked, breathless as he sank to the hilt over and over again.

I wrapped my legs around his hips, locking my thighs enough to hold him on his exit. His eyes flared with delight at me taking control, and I arched a brow at him. "Are you not there, Brogan?" I teased, digging my nails into his strong back. He arched, growling at the hint of pain and pleasure.

“I’m fucking there,” he groaned, and it was my turn to smirk up at him.

“You sure?” I asked, tightening my thighs around him when he tried to thrust inside me again. He growled again, and I swear it vibrated all along my bones in the most delicious way. If he wanted to take me, he could. He was so much stronger than me. But right now? He let me own him, and it was such a turn on, I could barely stand the game I’d started.

“Fiona,” he said, sliding a hand into my hair and gripping it just the right way. He tilted my head back, exposing my neck before teasing me with a playful bite. “You’re going to ruin me,” he said, flicking his tongue over the bite.

I sighed, damn near shaking with the strength it took to keep him poised just at the center of me. And when I looked up at him, finding that carnal lust had been replaced by something I couldn’t quite place? I released my hold on him, and he slammed home with a growl that shook us both.

Again.

And again.

He hit that spot so deep inside me, I shattered around him, my entire body splintering as I came. Brogan kissed me like he could drink my moans, sending me into freaking orbit as he found his own release inside me.

Our breaths matched in ragged huffs as he held himself above me, never once letting up on the kiss that threatened to steal my breath entirely. Damn, this man. He kissed like he fucked, hard and intense, consuming and tender. And I was totally, wholly *hooked*.

Brogan broke the kiss, loosening his grip on my hair as he smoothed it back. He looked me over, making no move to leave. And I didn’t want him to, but when he looked at me like that, it looked like he wanted answers.

Answers to questions I didn’t have.

Answers that involved definitions and labels. Things I was incredibly, thoroughly bad at.

“Fiona,” he said, my name a whisper between us. “I—”

A loud wail broke the bubble we’d been suspended in all night, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

He gently moved off of me, hopping out of the bed and hurrying into his bathroom. He grabbed a towel, shocking the hell out of me as he cleaned me up, and then slipped into a pair of sweats.

“I’ve got her,” he said, lingering in the doorway for just a second, his eyes scanning the length of my naked body as if he was taking a mental picture. Then he spun out of his room, hurrying toward his daughter.

I lay there, slightly in shock at what had just happened.

What we’d done.

Forget crossing a line, we’d taken that thing and burned it to ash.

And now I didn’t have a *clue* where that left me.

* * *

I flipped through the pile of mail I’d tossed on the kitchen island. Skye was happily napping in her bouncer in the living room, and I sat on a barstool that gave me a clear view of her. Brogan was at practice, and the house was eerily quiet. I’d been avoiding my mail for a while now, so what better time to sort junk from important?

Twelve flyers for local businesses later, I gripped a thick cardstock envelope with delicate gold script across the center. My chest tightened as I saw who it was from—my mother. I rolled my eyes, sighing as I slipped my finger beneath the flap and tore the thing open. I’d seen half a dozen of these things since I’d moved out on my own, but the shock never wore off when I pulled the announcement out.

We’re Engaged!

Please join us as we celebrate the engagement of

Ruth and Paul

November 15th @ 7pm

I shook my head, tossing the invitation in the junk pile. Because that's what it was—junk. Did I love my mother? Yes. Did I have massive issues with the way she lived her life? Also, yes. But I wasn't a little girl anymore. I wasn't responsible for her or my siblings anymore. She could get engaged and married as many times as she wanted, and now that she was even older? There wasn't a risk of pregnancy, so at least, that was a saving grace. I couldn't imagine my fifty-plus mother trying to take care of a newborn, and my caregiving skills were already well accounted for.

I glanced at Skye while I gathered up the junk and tossed it in the garbage. She was still sleeping soundly, a freaking miracle, and pulled up the Reapers' schedule on my cell. Elation rippled through me as I saw an away game date, and then I quickly dialed my mother's number. I had the perfect excuse this time to skip out on the engagement party. I'd been to my fair share, and it always was a cringe-fest. Not because my mother didn't deserve to be happy, but because I could see through the façade like I had special X-ray glasses. She and whatever husband of the month she'd landed may have looked happy during parties and events, but once all that faded? There was nothing left. No real connection, nothing to bond them together for the rest of forever. And when I could see all that? I didn't really see the point in committing to getting to know someone who wouldn't be around for the long haul.

"Fiona!" My mother answered on the third ring. "Did you get the invitation?"

"I did," I said, trying to keep my voice as happy and light as possible. She was her own person, and she didn't need me passing judgment on her. She never had in the past, so why start now?

"Isn't the material divine? We had it custom made."

"Beautiful," I said.

"You'll be there, won't you? Paul is dying to meet you."

I bit back a laugh. I highly doubted he was dying to meet me. I hadn't met the last husband either. "That's why I called, Mom," I said. "I'm sorry, but the Reapers have an away game that week, so I'll be with the team and Skye."

"Oh, fiddlesticks," she said, using her best pout voice. "Well, I understand," she said, perking up. "You can make it to all the other events, I'm sure. You can even bring your employer and his daughter if you'd like."

I hated that I wondered if there even would be any more events. Sometimes Mom's relationships ended well before the wedding actually happened. "Thanks, Mom," I said. "I'll keep that in mind."

"How is the little doll?" she asked, referring to Skye. I'd told her about my new job the day after I'd landed it. Just because we didn't see eye-to-eye on relationships didn't mean I cut her out of my life entirely.

"She's almost getting the hang of sleeping," I said, my heart warming as I looked at her in her bouncer. "But you know that usually means she's about to regress, and I'll go back to sleepless nights again."

Mom chuckled. "Oh, yes," she said. "I remember those days."

I shook my head. She may remember them, but at least I'd been there to help her time and time again.

"Paul has children of his own, too," she said. "Three. All grown like you. This will be his third marriage."

"And for you?" I asked, then immediately regretted it.

"I've lost count," she admitted with a sigh, not at all phased by my question. "But love is a hard journey. It takes pain to find your forever."

"Do you think Paul is your forever?" I asked, but highly doubted it. She'd been searching for that forever kind of love since I was born. And she never found it. Instead, she'd gone through more marriages than she could even count, and the divorces were always exhausting for her. I could never understand why she'd keep searching when she'd wasted half her life looking for something that didn't exist.

“I always think they are,” she said honestly. “Until they’re not.”

I nodded. At least she could be open about her life choices. “Well, I just hope you’re happy.”

“I am, sweetie. But that’s enough about me, what about you? How are you enjoying your new position?”

Something warm and bubbly spread throughout my chest, chasing away all the negative thoughts about my mother’s past—and present—away. The fear she instilled in me about committing to one person, only to find out the love disappears the second you do, was no match for the feelings Skye gave me.

“Skye is an incredible baby,” I said.

“I thought you mentioned she was a fussy baby?” Mom asked.

“Well, yeah, she is,” I amended. “But she has her moments. They usually happen any time her daddy is in the room.”

“Her daddy?” Mom asked, intrigued. “Do you mean Brogan Grant?”

I chided myself for using the term *daddy*. It was hard to turn off. When I spoke to Skye, I wanted to use terms she would eventually pick up, and calling Brogan by his name any time Skye was looking at him seemed like a step backward.

“Yes,” I said. “Brogan.”

“Is he a good boss? Treating you right?”

Heat flared over every inch of my skin. He treated me more than all right, and I didn’t have a clue what that meant. I could never get enough of that man, and that was even when we weren’t in the bedroom. I liked his no-bullshit attitude, his unflinching confidence in everything except parenthood, and his ability to be both a terrifying hulk of a man right alongside a gentle, compassionate father.

“Yes,” I managed to answer. “He’s great.”

“And the pay is good?”

“Definitely.”

“Good,” she said. “You’ll be able to pay off those student loans faster and then buy yourself a nicer place. An actual house maybe, or at least an apartment with a view. Have you thought about what you might want once you get rid of those?”

“I’d want something in a nice neighborhood with a big backyard,” I said automatically. “Somewhere near the city but not inside it. A place with a big kitchen and plenty of rooms...”

A bolt of lightning hit me, stopping my words.

I was describing *Brogan’s* house.

“Well, those are great goals to have. I’m so proud of you, sweetie. I have to run, though. Let’s do lunch sometime soon since you can’t make it to the party!”

“Okay,” I said before we hung up. I stood there, still in shock at my realization.

This place felt like home. *This* is where I felt safe. Where I saw myself in the future if I ever looked ahead.

It’s where I slept and cooked and played with Skye. It’s where I rocked her to sleep or sang her songs. It’s where I paced and bounced and cried with Skye when she couldn’t sleep. It’s where I’d fallen in love with her. It’s where Brogan and I...

I set down my cell on the kitchen island, sinking back into the barstool because my legs just couldn’t hold me upright anymore.

I was in love with Skye. The thought of leaving her was like a physical pain in my chest, and I knew it would come. I knew it would hurt like hell.

I also knew she was worth every inch of pain I’d have to take when her mother showed up, and I was forced to leave.

But...

It wasn’t just Skye I was falling for. No, I could feel it in my bones, in the very depths of my soul. When I looked ahead, I saw myself with Skye but also with Brogan. And that scared the shit out of me.

Because if I'd learned anything from my mother's past, I knew the minute I let myself love Brogan, let myself commit to him...

Whatever was between us would vanish.

And I'd be crushed twice over.

So, *who* in their right mind would willingly sign up for that?

BROGAN

“*I*t’s not a date,” I assured her for the four-billionth time as we stood in the kitchen, dressed and ready for the Reaper Halloween party. We’d decided to play off my nickname, going as a devil and an angel. Costumes were never my thing, so I’d gone with more of the *Lucifer* vibe, pulling my Brioni tux from the closet and pairing it with a red shirt and an atrocious set of glittering horns Fiona had insisted on.

She, however, looked like a fucking *dream*. There was no skimpy, out-of-a-bag costume for my woman. Nope. She wore a diaphanous, off-the-shoulder, white gown that fell to the ground in flowing layers, but also had a slit up the thigh, revealing miles of creamy skin with every step she took. Her hair was piled on her head with loose curls, topped with a glittery halo and an impressive set of wings that was going to be hell getting into my car.

She really was an angel.

Fiona was already my opposite in every way—kind, considerate to everyone around her, compassionate, and so fucking patient. I was hot-tempered, selfish, and honestly didn’t give a fuck about anyone but Skye...and Fiona. For them, I’d be anything they wanted.

My heart went all soft, which had become a familiar state in the past few weeks.

“It sure seems like a date.” She pressed her lips in a firm line as worry filled those gorgeous eyes.

“But it’s just a party,” I answered with a shrug, shifting Skye in my arms. She’d made it exactly three houses in her stroller before letting us know that trick-or-treating was not her jam.

“That we’re going to.” Fiona’s eyebrows arched. “Together.”

The doorbell rang.

“Still not a date.” I flashed her a grin and headed to answer the door. Of course, it was a date, but it turned out that while most women might jump at the chance to date an NHL star, Fiona wasn’t one of them. She was so against labeling whatever it was that we were doing, that I’d pitched tonight as a team event instead of a date. Sure, it actually was a team event, but considering that we were going together, and coming home together—where I’d peel that fucking dress off with my teeth...yeah, it was pretty much a date.

I opened the door and found Evie—Mia’s best friend, standing on my porch, shifting her weight back and forth a little nervously.

“Hey, Evie. Come on in.” I kept my voice soft, knowing that the young woman was more than a little nervous around me.

“Hi,” she answered with a tepid smile that grew into a bright grin when she spotted Skye. “Hiya, Skye!” She held out her hands for my daughter, and I hesitated only a second before forking her over.

Tonight would be the first time I’d left her with anyone but Fiona since she’d been dropped on my doorstep almost two and a half months ago. But Evie was Mia’s best friend, and had been through all the background checks and classes required by the part-time babysitting job that had seen her through college and now the first semester of her masters.

“Aren’t you just the cutest little...” Her eyebrows scrunched. “Is she a devil?”

“Apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” Fiona answered, fluffing the sparkly red tutu that encased my daughter’s waist. The thing made it impossible to crawl in, and since that was Skye’s favorite new activity, she wasn’t quite as enchanted with the mass of tulle.

“How cute!” Evie twirled and Skye laughed, the sound echoing off the vaulted ceiling of the entry and filling my heart like nothing else could. “You’re the cutest baby demon *ever!*” Evie carried her toward the living room, bypassing both Fiona and I without another look. “You two can get out of here, you know.”

I blinked. The Evie I knew was the shy bookworm who preferred to see life through her camera lens rather than actively participate in it. It was usually Mia who brought her out of her shell. “Maybe she’s just uncomfortable around adults,” I muttered softly.

“Maybe she’s just uncomfortable around Maxim,” Fiona whispered, patting my arm.

My brows furrowed. “What the hell is there to be nervous about around Maxim? I’m the one with the surly temper. Or hell, be afraid of Cannon. But Maxim? He’s a dick, but never to her. She’s his little sister’s best friend for fuck’s—”

Fiona arched an eyebrow at me.

My mouth hung open for a second. “No way.” I shook my head. “She barely even speaks to him when we’re all together. She’s always tucked away in some corner with Mia.”

Fiona tilted her head and shot me a look that said I was the stupidest man on the planet.

“You really think...” I shot a look toward the living room, where Evie was already tugging the tutu off Skye so she could crawl around and wreak havoc.

“That she has a massive crush on your closest friend?” Fiona whispered. “Yes, I really think. I swear, men can be so obtuse.” She shook her head at me and headed into the living room.

Evie had a thing for *Maxim*?

Just because he was nice to her didn’t mean he was best for her. Maxim would chew her up and spit her out like he did every other woman on the planet, especially one as sweet and quiet as she was.

Mind your own fucking business.

“Formula is on the counter, and I wrote out her schedule,” Fiona was saying as I walked in, watching Skye for any sign that she was displeased with our choice of sitter.

“I know,” Evie answered, glancing my direction. “Brogan texted me earlier with her schedule, her preferred feeding position, lack of allergies, contact numbers for her pediatrician and poison control, and of course her favorite songs.”

Wait, was Evie actually smothering a laugh in my direction.

Fiona gawked at me. “Her favorite *songs*?”

I shrugged. “She likes 90’s hip-hop.”

Fiona barely concealed her smile. “Right.”

“Are you comfortable?” I asked Evie. A heavy weight settled in my stomach as I glanced at Skye, who was happy as a fucking lark as she rocked back and forth on her hands and knees, gearing up to bolt for her toys.

“I’m fine. You two should get going,” Evie urged, keeping up with Skye as she lunged forward. “You know, she’s a super early crawler. You sure she’s only five and a half months?”

My stomach soured. No, I wasn’t sure. I had no fucking clue or certainty beyond the note that had been left in her car seat and the paternity test that convinced me she’d been conceived that weekend in Miami.

“Good athletic genes,” Fiona rushed, glancing my direction. “Tell me, Evie, if you were me, would you assume tonight was a date?” *Smooth change of subject.*

“It’s not a date,” I grumbled.

Evie looked between Fiona and me, then sat back on her heels and focused on Skye. “I’m not getting in the middle of *that* debate. Now seriously, stop hovering and leave. Skye and I are going to do just fine without you. Go.” She leveled a look on me that said she meant business.

Maybe she *could* hold her own with Maxim. Huh.

“You’re sure you have everything you need?” Fiona asked, fidgeting with her little white clutch.

“Seriously,” Evie sighed. “I have your numbers in case she even hiccups. Now get out of here and enjoy the party.”

Fiona and I shared a look of mutual...discomfort.

“All parents are nervous the first time they leave their babies,” Evie assured us. “We’ll be fine.”

Fiona’s eyes widened.

I nodded, took Fiona’s hand and strode for the door. If we didn’t leave now, we’d spend the whole night debating if leaving was even the right thing.

Fiona was quiet as we drove into Charleston, the GPS guiding us to the new club downtown where the party was being held. Echo had offered *Scythe* for the celebration, but Sawyer turned her down, saying she needed a night off, too, and she was always *on* when we were at her bar.

“What’s on your mind?” I asked when we were about five minutes out. I was used to Fiona going quiet when she needed to think something through in her mind, but if she was having second thoughts about going with me, I needed to know before we walked in.

“She said *parents*,” she whispered. “Evie. At the house. When we were leaving.” She picked at the material of her dress.

“Okay?” I risked a glance at her, taking in the worried line of her mouth before focusing back on the road. Having Skye had turned me into the most defensive driver imaginable. After all, if something happened to me, what would happen to her?

“I mean, obviously you’re her dad, but I’m not...” She shook her head. “I’m not her parent.”

I scoffed, and turned right, pulling into the parking lot that was full of million-dollar sports cars. Most Reapers liked shiny toys on four wheels, and I really wasn’t an exception in that department. I’d left the new Skye-safe SUV at home and driven my Bentley tonight.

“I’m being serious.” Fiona’s tone changed, growing harder.

I pulled the car into the slot next to Briggs and put it in park. “Fiona, you’re the closest thing to a second parent that Skye has.”

“I’m just her nanny.”

And this wasn’t a date. I was sensing a pattern here, and the odds weren’t stacking up in my favor.

“*Just a nanny* is the last thing I would ever call you,” I said softly, turning so I could take her chin between my thumb and forefinger. She had these tiny crystals lining her eyes that only made them seem even more ethereal.

She gave me a tight smile that didn’t quite reach her eyes and motioned toward the door. “We should get in there.”

“Kiss me.” I leaned in. There was zero chance I was letting this negative energy build.

She met me halfway and offered up her mouth. I took it gently, soft, sweet, and as neatly as I could manage given the gloss that colored her lips pale pink. “That’s better.”

She grinned. “You can’t kiss me out of every somber mood, you know.”

“Try me.” I brushed my lips over hers again, then hurried out of the car, helping her with her door and dislodging her wings when they got stuck.

There was going to be glitter lodged in my leather seats and I couldn’t even bring myself to care.

“Not a date,” Fiona whispered in my ear as security ushered us inside.

“Whatever you say,” I answered, my hand resting at the small of her back. I had feelings for this woman—warm, intense, life-altering feelings, and as much as that realization had taken me out at the knees for the last week, I wasn’t backing down or running away. This was a fucking date.

The club was lit up for Halloween, complete with a spinning disco ball and black lights. The DJ had half the team on the floor with their dates, and there was a good-sized waitstaff handing out alcohol by the trayful.

“Are those jello shots?” Fiona whispered.

“Fucking rookies,” I muttered. They’d pay for it in the morning.

“There you are!” Sterling raised a beer from a corner booth, dressed up like Superman. London sat next to him in a brunette wig, clearly the Lois Lane to his Clark.

Maxim sat beside London, generally glaring at the dance floor like it had personally wronged him. Naturally, he’d forgone a costume.

“Sit!” London ordered, tapping the table.

We slid into the booth and gave our orders to a very quick waiter. I’d gone with sweet tea, the house wine of the south, and Fiona had ordered a soda. Guess we were both too nervous about leaving Skye at home to drink.

“You look amazing!” London said across the table to Fiona.

“Thanks! You too!”

The music definitely wasn’t conducive to conversation.

Making sure we were out of sight, I slid my hand onto Fiona’s thigh and rubbed my thumb in small circles.

She glanced my way quickly, but showed no other sign that I was touching her.

“A devil and an angel!” London exclaimed, smacking Sterling with the back of her hand. “Why didn’t we think of something like that! She has wings! I have a pencil skirt!”

“I think you’re hot as hell,” he stated before kissing the shit out of her.

Maxim rolled his eyes.

I slid my hand higher on Fiona’s thigh.

London had a bemused look on her face, shaking her head slightly after the kiss. “I mean, it’s just a great couple’s costume,” she said to Fiona.

“Oh, this isn’t a date.” Fiona shook her head. “We’re not a couple.”

Every head swung my direction, and I took a long sip of my tea. “Whatever she says.” I took that hand higher, grazing the juncture of her thighs.

Her lips parted and she swallowed. Hard.

Gotcha.

“Oh, look! There’s Mia!” London waved Maxim’s sister over.

She was dressed as Cher from *Clueless*, and Maxim glared at her hemline as she approached. “Hey, guys! I’d stay and chat, but my date is over at the bar.” She bit her lip and gave the girls a conspiratorial grin. “He’s on the Hurricanes and so fucking hot!”

“God save me from baseball players,” Maxim snarked. “Don’t do anything that’s going to make me beat his ass, okay?”

She rolled her eyes at her older brother.

Maxim glanced behind her and then to both sides, his brow wrinkling. “Where’s Evie?”

Mia raised her dark brows and looked pointedly at Fiona and me. “How do you think these two got out of the house tonight?” She blew Maxim a sarcastic kiss and took off for the bar.

“Evie’s at your house?” Maxim asked.

I nodded. “She’s babysitting.”

His shoulders relaxed a little. “Good. Then at least I only have to watch one asshole’s hands tonight.” He tilted his head and glared toward the bar. “Did he really just put his hand on my sister’s ass?”

“Looked more like her lower back to me,” Fiona interrupted.

“What has you in such a foul mood?” I asked, sipping at my tea and nodding as a couple of our teammates walked by with their wives. “The night is young, you’re an NHL star, there’s a bevy of beautiful women just hoping you might actually call them back, and our record is so fucking solid that ESPN is saying—”

“NO!”

“Stop!”

Both Sterling and Maxim’s eyes flew wide.

“Don’t hex us,” Sterling muttered.

“Our record is going to turn to shit if those guys can’t take it seriously. We have to fly out tomorrow and they’re over there drinking like it’s a fucking frat party.” He motioned towards the rookies.

“Oh, to be young and not suffer horrid hangovers,” London joked.

“We’ll be fine. Stop stressing about shit you have no control over.” I pressed in on Fiona’s gown slightly and scraped my nail along the seam of her pussy.

She gasped.

Everyone looked.

“I was just thinking we should dance,” she suggested in a rush. “I love this song.”

I grinned in agreement and followed her to the dance floor, where a rapper was telling the object of his desire to call him when he wanted.

“You can’t do that,” Fiona whispered in my ear as I pulled her close and started to dance.

“Touch you? Funny, but I didn’t hear you saying anything like that this morning.” I gripped her hips and moved her with me for a beat or two before she caught on, rolling her eyes at me as pink stained her cheeks.

“This isn’t—”

I spun her quickly, pulling her ass to my pelvis and putting my mouth to her ear. “I know, I know. But I can’t see you in this dress and not touch you. You’re killing me.”

“I’m completely covered,” she murmured, a smile lifting her lips.

“You look like a fucking goddess, and I can’t wait to peel this dress off you.” I nipped her earlobe and she moved to the

music, sliding down my body in a way that had me hard in less time than it took her to work her way back up.

This woman was driving me to madness. I wanted her. I needed her. And I didn't mean just sexually. I adored everything about her, and it wasn't just because of Skye. Fiona intrigued me, questioned me, supported me, and honestly...she was too damned good for me. She was a fucking doctor. She should be holding down a therapist job instead of helping me out, and yet she stayed.

Everyone in my life walked out at their earliest convenience, and yet...she stayed.

"Fiona," I growled as she ground against me, her wings the only barrier that kept me from tilting her head and kissing her senseless. "I can't think when I'm around you."

She turned, and I barely avoided getting smacked with said wings. Her arms twined around my neck and her soft breasts pressed against my chest. "Feeling is mutual. I say we stop thinking."

She brushed her lips over mine.

A groan rumbled in my chest.

Fuck the prying eyes. Fuck the rumors of us dating. Fuck...everything. I wanted her.

Pinning her hips to mine with one hand and cradling the back of her neck with my other, I pulled her into a kiss that devoured us both.

It was teeth and tongue, heat and need as we lost ourselves in the driving beat and each other's taste. Her tongue twined with mine and I didn't even give a shit if I was coming out of this with pink lip gloss all over my mouth. It would mark me as hers as surely as this moment was marking her as mine in the eyes of my entire team.

The song changed, and still we kept going, our mouths fused as our bodies moved to the beat, moving against each other with all the intensity of a good fucking with all of our clothes intact.

My hand slid from her hip to the slit in her dress, and I caressed the bare skin of her upper thigh.

She moaned.

“I need you,” I groaned.

“Take me home,” she ordered.

I obeyed.

FIONA

Steam billowed around us in the shower, the water hot and slick against our bodies. Brogan gripped my chin, tilting it so I was forced to look up at him.

His eyes were hard, hungry, and saw right down to the center of me. I was speared by the intensity of his gaze, wholly consumed by that look alone. He raked his gaze down my body, holding me captive with just his hands. He wet his lips, his eyes trailing the beads of water that ran down my breasts, over my peaked nipples, and lower.

“It’s a shame,” he said, his voice low and rough as he looked down at me.

“What is?” I breathed, my entire body coiled like a tight spring. I wanted his kiss, wanted to feel the sting of his fingers all over me.

“That a demon like me is going to ruin an angel like you.”

I trembled at his words. “What if I want to be ruined?”

Something flickered in his gaze, and then he hauled me closer with that hand at my jaw. “Beg for it.”

A lick of flame snaked down the center of me at the demand in his tone. Every inch of me responded to the dominance in it.

“Ruin me,” I breathed.

A low growl rumbled from his chest, but he kept that grip on my chin, using his free hand to trace the trails of water running down my body. The touch was too light for my sensitive flesh, and it was nowhere near where I needed him to be. I’d wanted

him all night, each kiss only winding up my need that much more. And he *knew* it. He owned it and delighted in torturing me.

He traced a circle around my peaked nipple before pinching it lightly. I gasped, arching into the touch, needing more, more, *more*. Brogan drew back, then spun me around with a simple move of his hand, lining my spine up against his massive chest. I could feel the hard length of him pressed against my backside and whimpered as I ground against it.

“Keep begging,” he demanded, moving his hand from my chin to my neck as he kissed and nipped at my shoulders.

“Please,” I said, and moving my hips again in a desperate attempt to get him where I was aching for him. “Ruin me, Brogan,” I begged.

Another satisfied growl vibrated through him, and he ran his free hand down my chest, over my breasts, and slowly over my stomach. I held my breath as he poised his fingers over the apex of my thighs.

“Good,” he said into my ear, and warm shivers danced along my skin. Everywhere he touched was fire, every cascade of water slicking between our bodies was liquid heat.

He slid those fingers down, straight through the heat of me, and plunged them inside me. I gasped, my hands flying up and behind me to grab his neck, needing to hold on to him while he pumped his fingers in and out. I rocked against them, chasing that release that had been coiling inside me since he started this game.

“Brogan,” I groaned as he playfully bit my neck, then licked and kissed it, working his way up to that spot behind my ear that drove me wild. “Oh, God—”

“Demon,” he cut me off, pressing the heel of his hand against my clit as he pushed deeper inside me.

And I came completely apart, clenching around his fingers as he pushed me over the edge I’d been dancing on all night. Relief barreled through me, but I’d barely caught my breath

before he slipped his fingers from me and replaced them with his cock.

“Brogan!” I gasped, taking him into the hilt from behind.

He shifted us, one hand still on my neck, the other on my hip until I was almost pressed against the warm shower wall. Water sprayed us, making me so slick and sensitive every thrust felt that much hotter.

“Fuck,” he growled, slamming into me from behind. “Fiona,” he groaned, pulling all the way out only to thrust all the way in again. “You’re amazing,” he said, slowing his pace, torturing me with each long stroke.

My palms smacked against the wall as I arched backward, taking him in harder, faster.

The grip on my throat tightened, sending a flare of carnal heat down my spine. “You want harder, angel?” he asked at my ear, taking it between his teeth.

“Yes,” I begged. I wanted him to devour me, consume me until there wasn’t a coherent thought left in my head.

The hand on my hip slid upward, palming one breast, then the other, before trailing back down to stroke my clit while he pumped inside me.

“How hard?” he teased, pulling all the way out again.

I groaned, frustration curling up inside me. But no one had ever matched Brogan’s intensity before. No one had ever understood me or played to my desires as he had before, so I would take every ounce of beautiful torture he dished out. Because he was so beyond worth it.

“As hard as you’ve got, *Demon*,” I teased right back, and he went still behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder, letting him see the unflinching want and desire in my eyes. We may be dancing around what exactly was happening between us, but this? Right here? I couldn’t hide from him, and I sure as hell didn’t want to. I’d never let anyone see me the way Brogan did, and I was beyond caring what that meant. All I knew was I wanted him on every

level a person could want someone else, and he deserved to see that, to *feel* it.

He read something in my eyes, then smirked and slid his free hand down to my ass. He smacked it hard enough to sting, and I moaned as I arched back against him. He smoothed the hurt, then pressed his chest flush against my spine.

“Remember that you begged for it, angel,” he growled in my ear, and I swear my entire body reacted to the promise in his words.

He leaned back, gripping my hip and my neck at the same time before...

He *unleashed* himself on me.

Filled me with sure strokes that had my body unraveling with every thrust. His hands were like fire against my skin, his cock hitting that spot deep inside me that only he could touch. He claimed me, owned me, and signed my pleasure with his fucking name across it. Everything inside me narrowed to the dominance in his pumps, his touches. Everything coiled and tightened around his expert moves, each touch, each thrust, each place our bodies connected designed to send me into fucking orbit.

“*Brogan*,” I moaned, unable to do anything but press against the slick wall as he used my body for both his pleasure and mine. My breasts pressed against the wall, the sensation only adding to the pulsing ache building inside me.

“Fuck,” he groaned, slamming into me again and again. “I can feel you’re there again.”

“Come with me,” I begged, my voice laced with the breathless determination of a woman starved. It didn’t matter that he’d just gotten me there. I wanted him with me this time, *needed* him with me.

I reached around and gripped his hip, digging my nails in and urging him harder, faster.

“*Goddamn*, Fiona,” he groaned and pistoned his hips just as he pressed his fingers over my clit.

I flew apart with a gasp, my body trembling as the throes of my orgasm shook me. Brogan released a growl, his own release following seconds later as mine still hit me in waves that turned me liquid.

He leaned his forehead between my shoulder blades as we caught our breath, the water still cascading over us.

“Some angel,” he teased, kissing along the length of my spine as he gently slid out of me.

I grinned, then spun to wrap my arms around his neck. “You’re definitely a demon,” I teased right back before capturing his mouth with mine. He hauled me against him, lifting me off my feet with one arm wrapped around my waist. He shut the water off, then backed us out of the shower. The cold air raised chills on my skin as he set me on my feet and grabbed a towel.

“We’re just getting started,” he said, dropping to his knees as he dried me off.

I shivered at the sight of him there and then lost my mind completely when he set his mouth on me.

* * *

I couldn’t stop smiling the next morning. Every time I walked, I felt Brogan, and I *relished* it, wore that delicious soreness like a brand.

Even Skye was having a happy morning, seeming utterly content as I rocked her in the glider, bottle poised and ready. She took it without a fuss, her blue eyes wide and wondrous as she looked up at me as if she was trying to figure out what I was so happy about too.

There were too many reasons to list why I was happy. With Brogan—it was more than just the sex. Even at the party... everything had been pure *fun*. He made even hard things—like leaving Skye for the first time—easy. Effortless.

“How’s my girl this morning?” Brogan asked as he rounded the corner, gear bag in hand.

“Wonderful,” I said, unable to keep the happiness from my tone. Not that I needed to, but from the way he paused to look down at me, hazel eyes wide and searching, I knew I sounded a little bit like a love-struck princess. “She’s taking her bottle without complaint,” I added in a more normal tone.

He grinned down at me, then Skye, and my heart melted all over again. Damn him and that smile he saved just for her, for *us*.

“I’ll see you tonight?” He asked.

“I’ll be here,” I said, returning my focus to Skye.

Brogan stepped closer, leaning down to kiss Skye on the forehead, and I stopped rocking so he could.

And then...

Then he kissed *me*.

Not a carnal kiss.

Not a claiming kiss.

A tender, sweet, goodbye kiss.

And it stole my breath as he winked at me and then hurried out the door.

Leaving me there rocking his baby—a baby I was wholly in love with—and staring after him, wondering when he’d stolen my heart too.

BROGAN

*T*hanksgiving had always been a weird holiday to me. Hours—days, even—of prep work, all devoured within the span of minutes, or in the case of the Reapers, about forty-five minutes. Three giant tables ran from my dining room to the kitchen, seating the sixteen of us that had gathered. There was a shit ton of food. But given that it was one of the rare times we'd managed to score a home game, and *won*, this afternoon, tonight's dinner was all the more sweet.

Or maybe it was watching Fiona smile across the table at something Langley had said. Fiona made everything a little sweeter. How had she only been in my life a little over three months? It was hard to remember a time when I didn't have Skye and Fiona to come home to. My life was completely, totally different than anything I'd imagined this time last year...but there wasn't a single thing I would change about it.

"I still can't believe you dropped gloves on that one," Axel muttered, pulling my head out of the clouds.

"What was I supposed to do? The guy was pretty much trying to take Sawyer's head off." I shrugged.

"I for one, am with Brogan on this one," Sawyer raised a glass of water from down the table, his daughter on his lap.

"You're not helping," Axel argued, a grin tugging at the corners of his lips.

"What's the use of having someone with Brogan's boxing skills if we aren't putting them to use?" Briggs questioned

between forkfuls of mashed potatoes. “And who made these? Because they’re fucking scrumptious.”

“Hey! Kids!” Sawyer argued, throwing hands over his daughter’s ears.

Maxim rolled his eyes. “Like she hasn’t heard worse out of the two of you.”

“He has a point,” Echo agreed, leaning over to kiss her daughter’s cheek.

“And it’s not like Skye and Collin are over there picking up on the language, either.” Maxim nodded back toward the living room where two baby swings rocked our very sleepy kiddos.

“I think it was sick,” McKittrick, one of the rookies, said from the far end of the table. “You dropped him in like two punches.”

“Shut up or we’ll put you at the kiddie table,” Cannon responded.

“Be nice.” Persephone, his wife, elbowed him in the ribs.

“I’m only nice to you,” he mumbled.

“I’m surprised you didn’t want to spend Thanksgiving with your mom,” Langley said to Fiona.

Immediately, my ears perked up. I knew next to nothing about Fiona’s family, and it wasn’t for lack of asking. She had a unique way of diverting me from the topic. I knew her mother got married...a lot, and that she had a ton of siblings, but that’s about where the info stopped.

Not that I could blame her. I wasn’t exactly over here pouring out my emotions about having been raised like an unwanted stray by my aunt and uncle. The past was the past. It made us who we were but didn’t define what our futures could be. At least mine didn’t, and I could only assume she felt the same way since she didn’t talk about her family much.

“Oh.” Fiona’s fork paused mid-air, and she looked lost for a second before shaking her head. “She’s having Thanksgiving with her fiancé’s family.”

“You weren’t invited?” Langley gawked for a second before snapping her mouth shut.

My blood simmered to a boil at the possibility of Fiona being excluded.

“Oh, no!” Fiona shook her head, putting her fork down. “She absolutely invited me, but I knew the guys had the matinee game, and it just seemed so...weird to meet a whole other family today when we have all this.” She glanced over the table at me.

My rage subsided and I nodded. Something in my chest lit up like a fucking Christmas tree that she’d chosen me, chosen *us* today.

“That makes sense. Besides, it’s kind of like we have our own family here, anyway,” Langley remarked with a loving look down the table.

“Even if we do have to include McKittrick and Greene,” Axel muttered, his eyes narrowing at the rookies at the end of the table who had opened their second bottle of wine.

“Leave the toddlers alone,” Langley whispered with a grin.

Axel grunted.

“This...” Fiona sighed with a little smile. “This family really is amazing. I didn’t realize you guys were all so tight-knit until I moved in with Brogan.” The look she sent my way heated my blood in a whole other way.

Okay, I was ready for everyone to leave. Now.

“We’re just glad he didn’t scare you off,” Bristol added, leaning into her boyfriend, Briggs.

“It would take a whole lot more than Brogan’s moods to scare me away,” Fiona answered.

“You are one brave woman.” Maxim lifted his glass in salute.

“I’m not that bad.” Fuck, these sweet potatoes were heavenly.

“You are,” Maxim argued.

Fiona laughed.

We finished up dinner and I stood, shaking my head at Fiona when she moved to do the same. “Okay, boys. Since these lovely ladies of ours were kind enough to cook up all this food while we were playing today, we’re doing dishes. Off your asses.” I sent a pointed look to the rookies.

“And what are we supposed to do?” Langley asked.

“Relax while Colin is napping,” Axel urged his wife, kissing her forehead.

I walked around the end of the table and took Fiona’s plate from in front of her. “Same goes to you,” I whispered.

She tilted her head to protest, and I silenced her with a quick, soft kiss.

She gasped.

I pulled away before she could argue about the workload and headed into the kitchen, where Axel already had the guys setting up an assembly line for washing and drying the dishes.

I took my spot drying and stacking, since I was the only one who knew where the majority of the stuff got put away at my house. Fiona had moved a thing here or there, but for the most part, she’d left my over-organized stuff exactly where I liked it, fitting her things in along the way, exactly how she’d fit into my life.

It kind of felt like I was a giant, immovable boulder, and she was a stream, rushing down the mountain to change the landscape, flowing all around me without knocking me down the hill. She changed everything, touched every part of me, made my entire life better, with so much peace and ease that I hadn’t had to do anything but go along with the change.

“Any news on Skye’s mother?” Axel asked as he finished rinsing one of the platters. “Fucking stop it,” he snapped at McKittrick, who was trying to spray Greene with the faucet hose. “I swear, either they’re getting younger or we’re getting older.”

“Both,” I answered. “And actually, yeah.” I dried the platter. “We sent Skye’s DNA into one of those ancestry places so we’re just waiting for the results to see if it pings with a lead.

I'd settle for a distant cousin at this point if it led us in the right direction."

Truth was, the longer Skye was in my arms, the more I only wanted to find her mother so she'd sign over her rights. I was past wanting an explanation—though Skye deserved one—and way past wanting to work out some kind of amicable custody arrangement. Fuck that. I wasn't giving that woman a single chance to abandon Skye again. My daughter would *never* be put in a position to trust that woman again.

"That's brilliant!" Maxim exclaimed.

"It was actually Fiona's idea," I admitted. "She said something about wondering if one day some unknown sibling would find her with that since she doesn't keep in touch with her dad, and it sparked the idea."

"You'd better hold onto that one," Axel noted, handing me another plate. "And you know I'm not talking about the dishes." He nodded back toward the dining table.

"Oh come on, don't you know, they're not actually...dating," Maxim muttered, drying a glass.

"I'm sorry?" I snapped.

His eyebrows rose. "Evie asked her about you two the last time she babysat...what was it, a couple of weeks ago?"

I nodded. I'd taken Fiona skating one night, after Silas had assured me the arena would be empty. It was, of course—Silas never did any of us dirty, and it had been a good...*date*. At least that's what I'd thought.

"She said you guys weren't labeling what you were." Maxim's brow furrowed. "Is that right?"

I opened my mouth and shut it, then repeated the action.

"Speechless isn't a good thing," Maxim whispered.

"No, I mean..." I shook my head and dried another plate on auto-pilot. "I knew she didn't want to label us, but that was *months* ago. We've pretty much been together since the beginning of October." Weren't we? We spent every waking moment together when I was home. She hadn't gone back to

her place to sleep in over a month, and she slept in my bed every night that I was home.

“You’d better lock it down,” Axel muttered, sending another glance in the direction of the women. “Because you’re not going to find someone like her ever again. And I mean it.”

“Lock it down?” I blinked. “How the fuck would you suggest I do that?” If she still thought we weren’t even labeled... *He has to be working off old information.*

“Women like rings.” Axel shrugged.

“This from the guy who conned his wife into marrying him with his Reaper contract,” Cannon scoffed.

“Says the guy who woke up married in Vegas.” Maxim rolled his eyes.

“I’m sorry?” Cannon leaned left and right, as if he was looking for something behind Maxim. “Do I see a woman within fifty yards who can tolerate your shit for longer than a night?”

“Damn!” Sterling laughed. “He’s got you there.”

“Fuck off.” Maxim set the next glass down with a little more force than required.

“Break the stemware and you can deal with the wrath of Fiona,” I warned him. “She picked it all out herself last week.”

Maxim was remarkably gentle with the next one. “My point is that you can’t just unload a ring on a woman you’ve known for a few months.”

“Sure you can,” Sawyer argued in the same hushed tone we were all using. “I mean, once you find the one, you just... know. What’s the point of wasting time?”

“You in love with her?” Axel asked, passing me another plate.

I wiped it down and did a little self-assessment, just like I did every time I’d taken a hard hit on the ice. My brain told me it was too soon to fall in love with anyone. My heart countered that I’d fallen in love with Skye in a matter of *hours*.

That’s not the same.

Of course it wasn't. Fiona...she made my days brighter, made my house a home I wanted to come back to. She was my first smile in the morning and my last kiss at night. Hearing her voice settled me in a way I'd never experienced, and her touch set me on fucking fire. I thought about her every waking minute when I was gone at away games, and that pressure in my chest only eased when I was holding her.

Shit. That pressure. That sweet, burning, longing that had taken up residence in my ribcage and only seemed to grow. That was it, wasn't it? That was the shit poets wrote about.

"Brogan?" Maxim nudged me, concern lining his face.

Fuck me.

"Yeah. I love her."

* * *

“**D**o you have everything you need?” Fiona asked as I finished packing up my carry-on.

“Yep. The equipment managers already have the gear at the airport, and I just found my lucky socks.” We were on a winning streak, and there were some superstitions you just didn't fuck with.

As my little oddities went, a pair of lucky socks was nothing. Maxim had forsaken sex two months ago when our winning streak took off, and even when the streak ended once about six weeks ago, he hadn't partaken. The guy seriously thought our ability to win was tied to the lack of activity with his cock and I wasn't *even* going there with that guy. If he wanted to starve himself sexually all season, that was between him and his right hand.

I swept Fiona against me and savored the little gasp she let out as her body melted in my hold. “Now if only I could pack you in this little bag.”

She smiled up at me and twined her arms around my neck. “If Skye was a little older, I'd be on the next plane, but—”

“There’s zero chance we’re putting her on a plane in RSV season.” I shook my head. “I don’t care if it’s private. At Reaper arena, we can limit the contact you guys have with other people and what she’s exposed to, but we don’t have any of those guarantees in LA.” And until I knew her family history, I wasn’t taking any risks with my daughter.

Was I paranoid? Sure, maybe a little.

Did I give a fuck? Absolutely not.

“I know,” Fiona whispered, pressing a kiss to my throat. “It’s only three days.”

“And two games,” I muttered. Damn, I just hated being separated from either of them. It was our second away series since Thanksgiving, and the conclusion I’d come to that day only seemed to grow in my chest, until I knew I was going to have to tell her.

Did it matter if she loved me back? No. She still deserved to know exactly where I was in this relationship, and it was all the fuck in. She was it. The *one*.

She was the only woman I could ever imagine myself being with. The only person besides Skye that I *needed*. I couldn’t see a future for myself, or my daughter, without Fiona’s smile, her warmth, her dedication to her family. Hell, she was still ticked at her mom for getting engaged...again...and she still managed to show up and support her when she needed her. I didn’t just love her, I admired her, I trusted her. She shook me to the core with her unwavering loyalty and steadfast heart. And the way she loved Skye?

I went all mushy every time I saw them together. Fiona loved Skye just as much as I did, and I couldn’t even fathom a better mother for her.

“What are you thinking?” Fiona whispered, leaning up on her toes and kissing up my jawline to my earlobe.

Shivers of pleasure ran down my spine. Hell, I’d had her under me just this morning, her back arching as she let out a muffled cry against my shoulder, and yet I wanted her again. I always fucking wanted her.

Hard. Fast. Soft. Slow. She took me in every possible way, ready with her own demands and needs that I was always ready to fulfill.

“That I can’t imagine my world without you in it.” I grabbed her ass and lifted. She wrapped her legs around my waist in a move so familiar it was like we’d been together for years, not months.

“I can’t either,” she admitted softly, resting her forehead against mine.

Labels or no labels, we were on the same page and it felt fucking *great*. This was angels-singing, miracles-happening, rom-com level madness amazing, and I was all about it.

“You going to see your family while you’re in LA?”

I shook my head. “I never do. And besides, if they need something from me, they’ll let me know.” It was usually money, and I usually caved. After all, they’d raised me instead of shoving my ass in foster care, so in a way, I felt I owed them. But I did have one little trip planned in LA—to my safety deposit box that I’d never bothered moving. “Besides, I have my family right here.” I gave her a squeeze.

She inhaled sharply and bit her lower lip, war raging in her eyes for the briefest second before she kissed me.

I knew it was a distraction technique, and I still didn’t care. I kissed her breathless, claiming her mouth with deft strokes of my tongue and little nips of her lower lip that had her keening in minutes. My cock stirred as the heat rose between us, just like it did every time that I kissed her.

Outside, a car honked.

Maxim was here and ready to leave for the airport.

“You’d better go,” Fiona whispered against my lips.

“Yeah, I know.” I kissed her again, keeping it short and sweet. “I just don’t want to.” This was a first for me. Hockey had always been my priority, and yet here I was lamenting leaving my girls for just a few days.

But I guess that was love for you, right? It was a slice of insanity, a life-altering epiphany that restructured everything you thought was important to the realities of what actually was. Skye and Fiona came first, now, and I was somehow remarkably at peace with it.

Because it's right.

Maxim honked again. Impatient bastard.

My chest went tight as I looked into Fiona's gorgeous blue eyes. "Sometimes I can't help but think that everything happens for a reason."

"Okay?" She smiled, titling her head at me.

"Like you deciding to take a nanny job right when Skye appeared." Talk about fortune smiling on me.

"Right?" She brushed my hair back over my forehead.

"I mean, you could be anywhere—should be anywhere—else, using that PhD you just worked your ass off for, and yet fate threw us together." Fine, I was getting poetic. My girl deserved the soft words, even if I felt like an idiot saying them.

"You think it was fate?" she teased. "I always figured it was Langley."

"You know what I mean." Maxim honked again and I groaned, loosening my hold so Fiona could slide down my body and find her feet. I turned and finished zipping up my bag, then lifted it off the bed.

"I know what you mean," Fiona whispered, straightening my tie.

"Here's the thing." I cupped the back of her neck and she brought her gaze to mine. "We haven't labeled this thing between us—"

"Brogan—" she started, her eyes flaring wide.

"And we still don't have to," I assured her. "I've never needed labels to know where something belongs in my life—where *someone* belongs, and I know you belong with me. You belong

with us.” I kissed her hard and quick. “I’m in love with you, Fiona Andrews.”

She inhaled sharp and sweet, blinking quickly.

“Don’t say a thing,” I whispered, stealing another kiss. “I’ve never been the guy to play for applause, and I don’t need your assurances to make me feel better about how I feel. I just wanted you to know that.” One more kiss, but this time, she rose up and kissed me back—hard.

“Brogan if you don’t get your ass down these steps, I’m fucking leaving you!” Maxim shouted from what sounded like the entry.

“Gotta go,” I whispered. “Kiss my baby for me when she wakes up from her nap. I love you, Fiona.” Fine, I took one more kiss, because how couldn’t I with her eyes shining like that?

Then I took my suitcase and left, glaring at Maxim as I made my way down the front steps. “You couldn’t give me another couple minutes.”

“We’re already going to be five minutes late.” His eyes narrowed. “I hate being late.”

“Relax,” I told him as I tossed my suitcase in the back of his trunk next to his. “They’re not going to leave without us.”

“Did you bring your socks?” he asked, already backing down the driveway before I even had my seatbelt fastened.

“Are you still living like a monk?” I challenged.

“Fuck off,” he muttered. “LA is ranked high in the Western Conference. We’d better win. My concentration is locked on target. Where’s yours?”

I settled into his passenger seat, belt fastened, and looked over my shoulder at my house as we drove away. My focus was on that little safe deposit box and the only pieces of my inheritance that my aunt and uncle hadn’t taken in the name of “raising” me—Mom’s jewelry.

Fiona was the one. Maybe right now wasn’t the time, but when it came, I wanted to be prepared, and we weren’t scheduled to

be back in LA for the rest of the year. When that perfect moment made itself known, I wanted to give Fiona the one thing money couldn't buy—my mom's ring. It wasn't as big or as flashy as some of the other wives had, especially with the amount of money flooding this neighborhood, but it was a piece of *me*. Life was short, Sawyer was right, so what was the point of wasting time when I knew Fiona was it for me?

Maxim's jaw flexed, already wearing his game face because the guy didn't know how to fucking relax. Didn't know how to live off the ice.

I guess I hadn't either, not until Skye and Fiona.

"Yeah," I muttered as we turned out of the neighborhood. "My focus is right where it needs to be."

FIONA

We walked toward the players' lot, Brogan leading the way so he could hold the door open for me while I cradled Skye in my arms. She'd had enough of the carrier by mid-game, and had taken a quick nap even at the end when they won, and the arena had erupted in a fit of cheers. Thank goodness for noise-canceling headphones.

She was fully awake as I stepped through the door Brogan held open for us, and the look in his eyes made my heart stutter. When he smiled like that, it turned me into a moony-eyed princess, and with him just coming off of a win, he was extra cheery, which suited him as much as the doom-and-gloom demon he was known for.

"I love it when you wear my jersey," he said as I paused in the doorway to grin up at him.

"I love—" The words clogged in my throat, and I quickly pushed out, "wearing your name on my back."

He didn't miss a beat, just grinned down at me and let the door close behind us when we'd fully stepped through.

I cringed, internally scolding myself. It had been weeks since he'd told me he loved me, and I'd been too much of a coward to say it back. He didn't seem to mind, though, never once pressing the issue. The man was confident enough not to let something like my hesitance shake him, and I adored that about him.

And it's not like I didn't *want* to say it back. I did. I'd almost said it a dozen times, like when we'd been decorating the Christmas tree or turning the rest of his house into a winter wonderland or the countless times we'd been in bed together. But the icy fear in my veins always stopped me.

What if I said the words, and the magic popped like a soap bubble? What if the second I gave him my heart, the spell broke, and the passion disappeared? Isn't that what always happened to my mother? Isn't that why I'd never wanted to commit to anyone in the past?

But, to be fair, I'd never felt this way with anyone before—

“Demon! Can we have a word! Please!” Shouts came from a crowd of reporters who had somehow made it onto the players' lot. Several were crowded around other players, but the one who was shouting came from a man beelining it for us.

Brogan's features shifted the instant the reporter reached us, and he stepped a little in front of me as if he could shield me from it.

“I'm not in the mood to chat,” he said, his tone icy and rough.

“Just one question,” the reporter persisted, and I swallowed hard. He looked like a weasel in a two-sizes too-big suit and greased back hair, and he clearly wasn't catching Brogan's no-reporter vibe right now. The reporter looked to me, then Skye. “You've been awfully quiet regarding your daughter,” he said. “The fans want to know more about her—”

“She's not up for discussion,” Brogan cut him off. He'd given little details to the people Langley approved of, but on his own terms. And from the tension in his shoulders? I could tell he most certainly didn't want to be ambushed like this. “Go talk to Maxim,” Brogan waved his arm toward his friend, who was graciously, if not bored looking, answering questions.

“He's not a newly single father,” the guy pressed, and I sighed. Why couldn't he take a hint? Seeing that he wasn't going to stop, I moved behind Brogan, ready to get Skye to the safety of the car.

The reporter noted my movements and stepped directly into my path, stopping me short. He held out his phone, poising the camera directly in Skye's face. I turned away, trying to shield her from him. "What the hell?" I snapped, and Skye cried—

A thunk sounded over her cries.

One second the reporter had been standing trying to get the picture of Skye, and the next he was on the ground, gripping his nose between his fingers.

Brogan towered over him, his fists curled and shaking. Fuck, his entire body was shaking as he stood over the reporter.

"Stay the fuck away from them!" he growled, and then Maxim was racing across the lot, stepping in front of him.

"Demon," he said, forcing him to look at him. "Take a breath, man. He's down." Maxim shot me a reassuring look as if to say *I've got him*, and I nodded, hurrying to the car. I heard Maxim call for security just as I got Skye safely in her car seat.

I wanted to go back to Brogan, but I couldn't leave Skye alone. Luckily, it only took about five minutes for security to clear the scene and Brogan to sink into the passenger seat.

I silently fell behind the wheel, noting his choice to sit up front instead of in the back. A good choice, it seemed, since he was still shaking with adrenaline. I opened and shut my mouth about six times on the way home, wanting to talk to him, but from the hard set of his jaw, he didn't really look like he wanted to talk to anyone, let alone me.

By the time I got Skye settled in her crib, soundly sleeping after her big game day, Brogan was on the phone in the living room.

"I know," he said, his tone more even now than it had been before. "He shoved a phone in my baby girl's face, Langley. I'm not sorry I hit him." Langley said something, and he nodded, then blew out a breath. "Yeah," he said and then hung up the call. He tossed his phone onto the end table and then sank down on the couch. He raked his palms over his face, then cut them through his hair.

“That guy was an asshole,” I finally broke the silence while I walked toward him.

He jerked his head up, his eyes meeting mine and looking harder than they ever had before. “I shouldn’t have lost it like that,” he said.

I furrowed my brow. “If you hadn’t hit him, *I* would’ve.”

He glanced up at me, tilting his head. “Wait, what?”

I shrugged, standing before him. “You said Skye was off limits, and he didn’t respect that. I have a thing about boundaries. So, if you hadn’t hit him, I would’ve. Or I would’ve at least smacked his hand away. Kind of hard to throw a punch while holding a baby,” I said, trying to smile down at him, but he wasn’t cracking any more grins.

From the look of him? He was punishing himself.

“I can’t mess up like that anymore,” he snapped, but I could tell that anger wasn’t directed at me. “I’m a father now. It’s not like before when no one depended on me. I could do whatever the fuck I wanted. But now if I fuck up, Skye will pay the price.”

“You didn’t fuck up,” I argued. “You’re a dad, Brogan. You can’t be held accountable for your dad instincts.”

“I should be able to control my temper. Especially around Skye. Around *you*,” he fired back, jumping off the couch so fast that I had to step back. Something crushing flickered in his eyes, and I narrowed my gaze at him.

He thought I was *afraid* of him.

“Hey,” I snapped, forcing him to look at me. I had to crane my neck to meet his gaze he was so tall, but I stepped right into his space. “Are you listening to me? You didn’t do anything wrong. You got pissed about a guy who crossed a line. Totally within your rights.” He just looked at me, anger and defeat simmering in his eyes. “Now,” I continued, “if you’d gone all hulk on a grocery store clerk for giving you plastic instead of paper, *then* we could have the anger issues talk.” The smallest, barest hint of a grin cracked his lips.

I reached for him, smoothing my hand over the muscles in his chest, relishing the way the tension melted each second I touched him. He broke after a minute, finally uncurling those fists and sliding them around my hips.

“I don’t know how you put up with me,” he said, and I laughed.

“It’s easy,” I said. “Because I love you.”

The words were out before I could stop them, and we both froze in their wake.

His eyes widened, the smile deepening while I stood there in a total panic.

Fuck, fuck, fuck. I just killed any shot we had by saying the dreaded three words!

I scrambled in my own mind, trying to think of a way to fix what I’d just done. To somehow keep the bond between us without ruining it with promises and commitments and declarations.

Brogan parted his lips, but I flung my hand up, covering his mouth as I completely switched tactics. He cocked a brow at me as I pushed my other hand against his chest, forcing him backward until he sank onto the couch again.

And then I dropped to my knees, undoing his pants with shaking fingers. Because adrenaline rushed through my veins, and my heart was flying toward the fucking moon with what I’d just admitted out loud, and the absolute last thing I wanted to do was talk about it. Because talking about it usually led to nothing but heartache in my experience, so I’d just have to show him.

“Fiona,” he said as I tugged off his pants and boxer briefs. “You’re—”

“Shush,” I cut him off, looking up at him from where I kneeled before him. “Just let me...touch you.” I’d almost said love again.

He leaned back against the couch, a purely confident grin on his face as he watched me wrap my hand around his already

hard cock. And everything inside me shifted when I lowered my head, keeping my eyes on him while I took his massive length into my mouth.

The panic evaporated, replaced by the passion between us neither one of us could deny. And when he growled as I swirled my tongue down the length of his shaft only to draw back and suck on the head of his cock? Something else flooded me right alongside desire—love. I couldn't deny it, and I didn't want to. But I certainly couldn't help being terrified of something so big, so life-altering.

I bobbed up and down, taking him in as much as I possibly could before pulling out and teasing him with my tongue again. Over and over, I sucked him, teased him, stroked him until we were both wound up so tight I didn't know who would break first.

He tangled his fingers in my hair, drawing me back enough that he slipped from my mouth with a popping sound.

“Come here,” he said, his voice so damn tender it made my heart skip. I stood up as he urged, and he slid my yoga pants down to my ankles. I stepped out of them, and he tugged on my hips until I straddled him on the couch.

I cupped his face in my hands, slowly inching my lips down to his as I settled on top of him. A moan escaped my lips as I took him into the hilt in one slow, sweet motion.

He captured my mouth, sliding his tongue between my lips, grazing along the edges of my teeth as I rocked over him.

I trembled when he wrapped his arms around me, holding me to him tighter. And then we broke our kiss, our eyes locking as I continued to move on him. Chest to chest, nose to nose, there was barely an inch of space between us. And I couldn't tear my eyes off his as I made love to him.

Love, not lust.

That's what this felt like. Where he held me tight and took his time, where he watched me and drank in my moans, where he kissed me like I was priceless to him, where he looked at me like I was the answer to every question he'd ever had.

We connected on every level, not just physical and I *felt* that combine with the relentless pleasure that ripped through my body as we came together.

This was more than convenience, more than a passing infatuation.

This was love.

And now there was no going back.

BROGAN

The winning streak broke, but it was bound to.

When you played eighty games a year, it's not like going undefeated was ever an option. But we were still winning more than we were losing, and still ranked number one in the conference.

I ignored every whisper from every reporter suggesting that this might be our year, and refused to even turn on the television to hear what ESPN had to say. The only game tape I'd been reviewing was the stuff coach assigned us. The pressure was on, that was for sure, but the second I walked in my front door, I belonged to my girls, period.

Hell, the second I got off the ice. I'd even somehow gotten used to Fiona driving us home after home games. It gave me time to think out anything that was bothering me before we pulled into the garage. My temper might get the best of me on the ice, and fine—off it, too, when it came to reporters, but I never brought that shit home.

Maxim, however, was the shade of a ghost as I drove us home from the airport.

“You are going to have to find a way to relax,” I told him as I pulled onto the interstate, the engine purring as I accelerated into traffic.

“We lost.” He shook his head. “I should have been faster on that breakaway in the third, or known he was going glove-side in the first—”

“If masochism was an Olympic sport you would be the gold medalist, you know that?” I shook my head, glad that Sterling wasn’t in the car. The brothers were still awkward at times, but this game...well, Sergei had been there.

If I could blame Maxim’s less-than-perfect performance on anything—and the guy had played at ninety-five percent—it would be his asshole of a father watching from the stands. Nothing fucked Maxim up like Sergei. Sterling, on the other hand, had the opposite reaction. That guy lived for showing up his old man, and his glove had been on *fire* tonight in Nashville.

So, naturally, Maxim had a moment of complete assholishness toward his brother after the game that even their sister, Mia, couldn’t dissolve entirely.

“I know where to place blame, and we both know if I’d nailed either of those two goals, we wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“We lost *one* game. We won Friday,” I reminded him.

“Whatever.”

“But your dad wasn’t there to see you hat trick on Friday, so now you think it doesn’t matter.” I shook my head.

Silence filled the car for a few long miles until we pulled into Sweet Water, the tiny town just outside Charleston where our housing development was.

“I hope he stays the fuck away for the rest of the season,” Maxim finally muttered, looking out the window.

“You and me both.” I turned into our neighborhood, slowing down considerably. “But just in case he doesn’t, you have to find a way to ignore him.”

“Easy for you to say.” The muscle of his jaw ticked.

I pulled into my driveway and hit the garage door opener, my chest already swelling with sweet anticipation of seeing my girls. “Yeah,” I agreed. “I guess it’s easy to say when I’ve never had a dad to watch me.” I shrugged.

“Shit.” He flinched. “I’m fucking sorry.”

I killed the engine. “Don’t be sorry. You didn’t kill my dad, and I didn’t make yours a dick.”

“Point taken.” We got out, retrieved our suitcases from the trunk and went our separate ways—Maxim to his house across the street, and me inside my house.

The scent of cinnamon and Christmas hit my nose the second I opened the door. I had no idea what Fiona used to make our house smell like some incredible slice of Santa’s village, but I loved it. It smelled like a house was supposed to during the holidays, and nothing like the chaotic bouquet of burned leftovers and days-late baths my aunt’s house had, regardless of the time of year.

“Girls, I’m home!” I shouted, lifting my suitcase so I didn’t drag it along the hardwood.

Fiona had given me a look once, and that was all it had taken for me to get the message that she was a little particular about the hardwood. Personally, I loved it, because it meant she was staking a claim on the house, which was technically mine, but I already thought of as ours.

“Daddy’s home!” Fiona exclaimed as she came around the corner with Skye on her hip, both girls smiling wide.

“There you are,” I said softly as I cradled Skye to my chest, pressing a kiss to the top of her head and breathing in her sweet scent. “Hey, Skye.”

Skye gave me a toothy, drooly grin and immediately grabbed my beard with the fists of pure determination.

“Yeah, I missed you, too.” I untangled my face from my laughing daughter, and wrapped my empty arm around Fiona, tugging her close and kissing her quickly.

Now I was home.

How the hell had I survived so many years coming home to an empty house? Or empty hook-ups? This was *everything*.

And she loved me.

I pulled a Grinch and my heart grew two sizes just thinking about it. Fiona loved me. She’d told me a week ago, and it had

been the best present ever. I didn't even need anything under that tree. I had her.

"I missed you," she whispered, kissing me softly as Skye tugged at my collar.

"I missed you, too."

Skye let out a jaw-cracking yawn. I checked the clock. "Bed time for this one."

Fiona nodded. "I was keeping her up to say hi, but she's way past bed time." She wiped away the drool from Skye's chin. "She's teething something awful."

"How about I put this one to bed," I leaned down to Fiona's ear. "And then I take *you* to bed."

Fiona grinned. "That's a deal I'll take any day. I'll put away some laundry, and then maybe get *out* of my sweatshirt." She crinkled her nose. "I meant to change before you got home."

"You look perfect to me." Sweats or a cocktail dress, it didn't matter. I knew what she looked like—felt like under all those layers—and I couldn't give a shit what she wore. She was gorgeous.

We parted ways and I read Skye a short, cardboard book as she finished her last bottle, gliding back and forth in the rocker. Her little bow mouth pursed when she was finished and looked up at me with sleepy blue eyes.

Her mouth was one feature she didn't get from me. Her nose? She was stuck with mine, unfortunately, and those eyebrows? Me, too. Her eyes and her mouth were her mother's... wherever she was.

The DNA genealogy site said it could take up to six weeks to get her results back, and we were only at four, but there was part of me that didn't want the results back. Did that make me a shitty human? Maybe. But perhaps Skye was better off right now, in this moment where she had just me and Fiona in her life. Maybe we were all better off not knowing.

My stomach twisted a little. Apparently one night I hadn't cared, but I couldn't bring myself to regret it, not with Skye in

my arms, her blinks coming slower and slower as she fell into sleep.

I carefully got out of the glider and laid her into her crib as she drifted off, all tucked into her little sleep suit. Thank God for Fiona, or I never would have thought twice about tucking her in with blankets. Fiona was the one who'd known to get her the zippable, wearable blanket that lessened the chance of SIDS. Fiona had been the one to tell me when to lower the crib, to start child-proofing the house when Skye had decided to crawl. I would have been lost without Fiona.

"I love you," I whispered to Skye, then crept out of the room so I didn't startle her back awake. As bedtimes went, it was easier than usual, or maybe everything with Skye was becoming easier as I adjusted to parenthood.

I shut her door as silently as possible and then headed for my bedroom, which was officially *our* bedroom, even if Fiona hadn't moved her stuff into the closet. I didn't give a shit where Fiona kept her clothes as long as I had her in my bed every night.

Tugging my tie lose, I walked into our bedroom. What had been only an efficient space for sleeping was now the obvious setting where two people shared a life. Fiona's robe was draped over an armchair nearest the closet. She kept a stack of books on the nightstand, two novels and one non-fiction—always keeping up in her field.

Guilt sliced into me like a paper cut. Was I holding her back? The woman had her doctorate, and there was no doubt she was needed in her field, and yet here she was, applying all her expertise to Skye and Skye alone.

I heard rustling in the closet as I kicked off my shoes. "Fiona? You in here?"

"Hmmm?"

"Skye went down like a dream." Socks, tie, dress shirt—they all made it to the hamper. I started to unbuckle my belt when Fiona stepped out of the closet. My heart stopped.

Her eyes were wide and there was a slight tremble in her lips, but her hand...her fisted hand actually shook.

“Sweetheart?” I asked softly. Was there a mouse in there? Wait...was Fiona even scared of mice?

“I...” She shook her head, walking slowly to where I stood at the center of the room. “I...don’t even know how to ask this.”

My stomach churned at the expression of absolute horror on her face. “Fiona, what’s wrong? Just ask. There’s nothing I won’t tell you.” As ugly as parts of my past were, I never shied away from them.

“I was putting away your laundry—”

“I told you to let the housekeeper do that,” I interrupted. “You already do so much—”

“—and when I was putting your socks away—”

Oh. Fuck.

My eyes widened and a knot the size of the arena set up shop in my throat. This wasn’t happening. Right? I hadn’t really been that stupid to put it there...

“—and I found this.” She rotated her wrist and opened her fist, revealing the small, black velvet box I’d foolishly stashed in my sock drawer right before flying out a few days ago.

“Right.” *Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.* This right here is why I’d never be cut out for romance. Sterling would have hidden it better. Cannon had probably been smoother and he’d been blitzed out of his mind when he’d married Persephone. Me? I had a sock drawer ring.

“Please tell me this isn’t what I think it is.” Color drained from her face, and she swallowed, her eyes searching mine with a frenzy I could almost taste. “And I know I shouldn’t have picked it up. It’s none of my business what’s in here. I shouldn’t be holding it, but I saw it, and suddenly it was in my hand, and I’ve probably been staring at it for ten minutes.”

“Fiona,” I cupped her cheek and brushed my thumb over her soft skin. “There’s no reason to panic.”

“Brogan, is this a ring?”

Shit, was that really panic in her voice? Or possible excitement? I mean, wasn't this what all women wanted? A whirlwind, passionate relationship that ended with someone playing *Here Comes the Bride*? It was all my female cousins had talked about growing up.

“I mean,” Fiona started to babble. “It’s just a box, right? Or it could be earrings?” Her eyebrows rose. “Or maybe a nice... broach?”

“What the hell is a broach?”

“Okay, not a broach.” She nibbled on her lower lip and it took everything in me not to suck it free and kiss her. “Or maybe it’s something for Skye?”

“It’s for you.” I took the box from her hand and studied her face, trying—and failing—to get a read on what she really wanted it to be. “But here’s the deal. We can just put it back, Fiona. We can pretend you never saw it and we can deal with whatever has you scared shitless another day.”

“I want to know what it is,” she said softly. “I need to know.” Something flashed in her eyes—a heartbeat of hope that eclipsed the panic.

“Okay.” My pulse skyrocketed. I was really about to do this. “I was out in LA a few weeks ago, and I stopped by my security deposit box. We’re not supposed to be out there again this year, and I wanted to have it here for when the timing was right.”

“The timing?” she whispered.

I nodded. “It’s my mother’s ring.” I fidgeted with the box, opening it a centimeter or two before letting it snap shut. “I had it sized. For you. It’s for you.”

“Oh, Brogan.” Her eyes shone.

“I know this is new between us, but Fiona...you’re it for me. I know it with every fiber of my being. I feel it every time we kiss, every time I touch you. I can’t imagine a single day of the rest of my life without you in it.” The words fell out of my

mouth. “Whether it’s next week, next month, or next year, I want you to be my wife.” I turned the box toward her. “And I’ll get down on one knee, if that’s what you’re ready for—”

“No!” She closed the box before I could get it open.

I was going to be sick. Right here. Right now.

“I mean, not yet, not...*no*.” She covered my hand with hers and squeezed gently, blinking quickly.

“Okay.” Air filled my lungs and my heart started beating again. “Do you want to see it?” Fine, there was a slightly hopeful pitch to my voice.

“No!” She shook her head vehemently.

“Okay.” My fist closed around the box tightly.

“Shit, why isn’t anything coming out right?” She flinched, then took a couple of deep breaths. Good, at least one of us was processing oxygen. “I mean, yes, I want to see it. I’m sure it’s beautiful, Brogan. But I know that if I get even just a peek at what’s in that box, I’m going try it on, and then all logical thought will go flying out the window, and I just need some time, you know?”

Was that...fear in her eyes?

“I wasn’t planning on proposing tonight. I just wanted to have it ready.”

“Because you’re organized.”

“Because I’m organized.” I nodded.

“But then I found it.” Her nose crinkled in apology.

“But then you found it.” I tucked the box into my pocket.

“Time is fine, Fiona. We have nothing but time.” It was the truth, and I’d never push her into something she didn’t want or wasn’t ready for. But damn, I hadn’t realized just how badly *I’d* wanted it until this very moment. How ready for this I was. How...slightly disappointed I was that she held onto the very logic I’d long since abandoned when it came to her.

I walked away and tucked the ring back into my sock drawer. It wasn't like I needed to hide it anymore.

"Brogan?" she called my name softly.

"Hmm?" I shut the drawer and undid my belt as I came out of the closet.

She was leaned back against the bed—our bed, worrying that damn lower lip with her teeth again. "Would you have asked me tonight?" she whispered.

Drawn to her like a magnet, I crossed the floor to stand in front of her, close enough that the tips of her breasts rose against my chest with every breath she took. "If you'd wanted me to."

"Really?" A slight smile tugged at the corners of her mouth and she looked at me with such wonder that my chest swelled.

"Really," I assured her. "That's how much I love you."

Her fingertips traced my tattoos as she ran her hands up my body, her touch light, but possessive. It always felt so damn good when she touched me. "I love you, too."

"I know." I gave her a cocky grin. "Does that mean you want me to hit my knee—"

She halted my request with her mouth, kissing me hard. I knew what she was doing—ending the conversation—but I couldn't bring myself to care. I was a goner at the first touch of her lips. She opened for me, and I sank into her my tongue sliding along hers, the crisp taste of her filling my head with only one word: home.

This woman was my home.

We were a frenzy of hands and kisses as clothes hit the floor. She unsnapped her bra, and I filled my hands with her breasts, my cock rising at the sound of her moans as I pinched and teased her nipples.

I worshiped her with my mouth, then laid her out across our bed like a buffet once we were both naked. She was all hollows and curves, her skin flush with desire as she crooked her fingers at me, a devilish smile playing across her lips.

“You want me?” I teased, running my tongue from the top of her thigh to her breast, where I flicked her nipple with my tongue.

“Always.” The word ended on a gasp as I slid my fingers over her pussy, already slick with want.

“Tell me what you want.” I licked and sucked at her throat, grazing her skin with my teeth.

“You.” She arched her back and her hands grasped my shoulders. “I want you.”

“You already have me.” I flipped her to her stomach and rained kisses down her spine as my hand worked between her thighs. “Fuck, you’re so wet, baby.”

“Brogan,” she whimpered as I pumped one finger into her.

“So ready for me.”

She tried to rock back, but I pinned her hips with my weight. “Tell me how you want it, Fiona. Soft and sweet? Hard and fast?” I slid another finger inside her. “You can have whatever you’re bold enough to ask for.”

Her hands grasped for the covers as her hips rocked against my forearm in futility. “I want you to ruin me.”

A slow smile spread across my face. “Yeah. I can do that.” It would be my pleasure.

I worked her clit with my thumb as I fucked her with my fingers, bringing her right up to the keening edge before I pulled away from her, leaving her panting underneath me.

“You’d better get back here,” she warned me, her eyes flashing fire as I reached across her and grabbed a condom from my nightstand.

“I’m not going anywhere.” I rolled the latex over my cock, then shoved her knees apart, kneeling between her thighs. “Fuck. I had so many plans for you tonight.” I gripped her hips and lifted her up and back, stretching her back out like a cat. “I was going to tease you. I was going to lick every inch of your body until neither of us could take another moment.” My cock settled at her entrance, but I resisted and gave a slow thrust

against her sex instead, coating myself in her slickness. “I was going to take you so slowly that we’d both combust from need.”

“And now?” She pushed back against me.

My hands spread over the curves of her ass as I struggled for control.

“And now I want you too badly to wait.”

I thrust inside her with one long push and the pleasure of it engulfed me as I sat back on my heels, dragging her with me.

She cried out, her hands scrambling for purchase underneath her even as she pushed back into me. But I had her knees on either side of my thighs, held off the bed by inches, stealing her control. She couldn’t thrust back, couldn’t increase the pace as I thrust slowly within her. She could only take what I would give her.

“So hot. So tight. So wet. So mine.” I punctuated each claim with a thrust, pulling her back by the hips every time I pushed forward so our skin slapped.

“Brogan,” she moaned into the bed.

Slow. Hard. Steady. I dragged her up my thighs for every roll of my hips, taking her so deep that she cried out with each thrust. God, just the sounds of us coming together again and again were nearly my undoing.

I tilted the angle of her hips and rocked my hips forward, hitting her where and how she liked it. I lived for each keening cry. I took my breaths when she did. I lived through her pleasure. Sex had never been like this for me—not just an exchange of mutual pleasure, but also a driving need to meet my partner’s every single need, to become whatever she needed.

Only Fiona.

I was the one in control, but she was the one with all the power.

She got her elbows under her and leveraged her weight, fucking back onto me so that we came together even harder,

even deeper.

“So. Good,” she moaned, her body going tight.

“Don’t you dare come,” I warned her, rising up on my knees and bringing her to hers. “Not yet.”

“Brogan,” she whimpered.

“Not yet,” I repeated, watching my cock disappear inside her as I took her over and over, giving her just enough to keep her on the edge of coming. “You should see me take you. So fucking hot, baby.”

Sweat dripped down our skin, making us both slick as we strained against each other, riding that fine line of pure need and satisfaction.

“Harder,” she demanded.

I laughed low. “That’s right. You wanted me to ruin you.”

“You’re doing a good fucking job of that,” she spat back, her voice just as breathless as mine. “Now stop holding back and fuck me.”

Her words snapped whatever was left of my self-control, and I unleashed, dropping us from our knees and fucking her into the mattress with deep, hard, strokes. Every inch of her was heaven, from the flushed skin of her back to the slick flesh of her pussy, gripping me tight as I rode her.

“Oh, God.” Her hands fisted the covers and she swirled her hips.

Such a simple thing, and yet I was fucking *gone*.

Release barreled down my spine, and I only had time to work my hand under her, flicking her clit hard and fast.

We came together.

Lights. Stars. Heaven. Whatever it was flashed in my brain as pleasure consumed me, roaring in my ears as wave after wave took me.

I came to what felt like hours later, already rolled to the side with Fiona tucked against me, her breathing just as unsteady as

mine.

“You okay?” I asked, tracing a path from her shoulder, over the dip of her waist and the curve of her hip.

“Absolutely. Ruined.” She turned her head and met my lips with a breathless kiss.

“Good. Now give me two minutes and I’ll ruin you again.” There was never enough when it came to her. I was an addict and she was my drug of choice.

“Excellent plan.”

FIONA

“*I* absolutely love this place,” my mother said after finishing a bite of her swordfish. “I’m considering asking the owner if she would consider catering for my wedding.”

I nodded, swallowing a bite of snapper. White linen tablecloths covered all the tables in the quaint room, and the food was beyond delicious. It *would* be the perfect place to seek catering from—not too fancy, not too casual, just humble elegance and wonderfully prepared dishes. If I ever got married, I’d love it if they made a smaller version of the snapper I was eating right now, narrowing it down to a perfect bite for appetizers.

My heart clenched, and terror slicked through my veins. I could *see* the wedding, right down to the outdoor venue with a view of the water, the smell of salt in the air, and the dress code super casual. I could see Daisy and Madeline in dresses they chose to fit their body best, and Skye bedecked in a sweet little dress with lace trim and Brogan—

I stopped my racing mind with the effort of stopping a train from racing down the tracks.

“Did you get the links for the dresses I picked out for you?” Mother asked, and I forced myself to the present.

“I haven’t had a chance to look at them,” I said. More than happy to focus on her situation and not mine. “Can’t I wear the same one I wore two years ago?”

Mom gasped, her fork clanking against her plate as she dropped it. “You can’t be serious, Fiona,” she said, staring at

me with wide eyes. “Would you truly want to jinx my wedding by wearing the same dress you wore at my last—”

“*Wedding*,” I cut her off, the word coming out sharper than I’d meant it to. She visibly swallowed, and I flashed her an apologetic look. “I’m sorry,” I said, and she waved me off.

“I understand,” she said. “I know it’s not easy being my eldest child,” she said. “I know my lifestyle choices have...taken their toll on you.”

I sighed and grabbed my iced tea, taking a nice long gulp to try and dislodge the knot in my throat.

It didn’t work.

“I’m not a little girl anymore,” I said, setting down my glass. “What you do doesn’t affect me.”

Mom pursed her lips, a sadness flashing in her eyes. She reached for my hand across the table, and I slid mine into hers. “We both know that’s not true, Fiona,” she said, and I tilted my head at her. “I know I’m not the best mother,” she said, and I opened my mouth to argue, but she hurried on. “I never gave you a stable home or a stable father figure. I’m a servant to the pursuit of true love, constantly questing for that perfect happily ever after.”

I sighed, the urge to tell her she’d always kept me fed and warm and gave me some of the best siblings I could’ve asked for. I wanted to tell her she’s the reason I went into child psychology or the reason I worked so fiercely to be independent, to stand on my own, to not need a man to take care of me...but those words died with the seriousness in her eyes as she continued.

“My failures have clearly made you utterly terrified of marriage, and that is one of my biggest regrets for you, Fiona. I never wanted my relationships to ruin your own.”

I furrowed my brow. “I’m not terrified—”

“Well,” she cut me off. “Of course, you are. Why else would you be *hesitating* to say yes to someone like Brogan Grant?” She said his name with a sort of reverence that made my skin crawl. She’d never even met Brogan. She only knew what

little pieces I'd told her about him and how the media painted him.

"If it's not my failed marriages, then what *is* holding you back?" she asked when I didn't respond.

I opened my mouth, then closed it. I fiddled with the snapper on my plate, no longer hungry. Because I didn't have a clear answer for her. "Fine," I admitted. "I can't help how I see marriage. My entire life," I said, my voice heavy. "I've seen you get married, seen you be blissfully happy until you're not. And it seems more often than not that the second two people get married is the second the love disappears." Tears gathered in Mom's eyes, and I internally scolded myself. "I'm sorry," I continued. "I'm not trying to hurt your feelings, Mom. I can't help the way I saw things growing up. The way I see them even now."

She sucked in a sharp breath, clarity and regret coloring her eyes as she dabbed at the corners with a napkin. "I'm not hurt," she said, gathering herself. "I'm disappointed."

My shoulders sank, my already warring emotions taking a hit.

"Not in you," she hurried to say. "In myself." Her eyes went distant as if she was only now realizing the affects her lifestyle might have on her children. Sure, I was the oldest, but I wasn't the only one of marrying age. Had she really not thought about how we'd feel about it until someone proposed to me? "I should've done better," she continued, shaking her head. "I should've made sure you understood that all the marriages and divorces had everything to do with me and my needs and nothing to do with you or any of your siblings."

"I know that," I said. "I really do, Mom. I know you love me, love all of us. It's not that."

"But you have to understand that marriage doesn't cause love to disappear," she urged, squeezing my hand. "It has everything to do with how we work as partners, and for some reason, I haven't found the right one yet."

I sighed. "What about Paul?" I asked, and she smiled slightly.

“Maybe. I feel like he’s the one, but I know my own heart. I won’t be certain until I’m certain. And that’s the thing, sweetie. I’ve *never* been certain.”

“Then why keep saying yes to every man who proposes to you? How can you risk your heart like that over and over again?” I asked, seriously curious.

“I believe, down to my core, that love is worth it.” She shrugged, sipping from her white wine.

I puzzled over that, my soul feeling stripped raw with the battle inside me, with the pressure mounting with Brogan’s proposal.

What I had with Brogan was unlike anything I’d experienced before, and here I was, scared to death to say yes to any kind of future with him. There were a million reasons—my mom’s history, my own fear of the love vanishing the second we said *I do*, the absolute fact that Skye’s mother *would* return to her life at some point, and then where would that leave me?

And even if Skye felt like mine, she wasn’t. I was her nanny, Brogan’s live-in nanny. How could I be one hundred percent sure that he loved me for me and not for the fact that I was magic with his baby girl, and a decent, convenient lay?

Bitterness clung to my chest, making it hard to breathe. Brogan had never once made me feel like a convenience, but I couldn’t stop the traitorous thoughts from creeping into my mind. It was an awful defense mechanism I possessed—find every excuse in the world to not commit to someone, no matter how amazing they were.

No matter how much I loved him.

Because I knew I did. I loved Brogan so much it scared me, but we’d only known each other a few *months*. How in the hell could I give him my forever when we didn’t even know if we could stand each other for a year, yet?

“Does he make you happy?” Mom asked, and I nodded. “Does he make you laugh?” I nodded again. “Does he acknowledge your worth?”

I swallowed hard but nodded. “He does,” I said. Even though it was hard to separate my job from the relationship we had. We’d crossed that line, so now everything was blurred. He’d reward me with kisses and passionate nights when I’d get Skye to sleep. He’d thank me for making her smile or reading to her. Was that about *us* or was that about my job? It was hard to understand where my job ended, and his and my relationship truly began. And that, in itself, added to the dilemma I was having when it came to my heart.

“Then I think you have your answer,” she said, leaning back in her chair like she’d made her point.

“It’s not that simple,” I said.

“Love never is,” she replied.

I blew out a breath, my heart aching. If I shut off my brain and drowned out all the reasons why this *shouldn’t* work or why this *could* fall apart and crush me in the process...if I only listened to my heart, then the answer was clear.

I loved Brogan.

I didn’t want to be with anyone else.

I loved his daughter and knew in my soul I’d love her always.

But who I was, wasn’t *just* my heart. I was a complicated, stubborn woman with enough commitment issues to fill a textbook. So I couldn’t just listen to one or the other. I had to find a definitive answer, something concrete that helped me know I was making the best choice for everyone involved, and when it came to Brogan and me? That other person involved was pretty damn important. I needed to make sure I didn’t ruin Skye’s life, and that might’ve been the most important reason of all to think this through.

“You know I love you,” Mom said. “Right, Fiona?”

I blinked away the emotion in my eyes. “Of course, Mom,” I said. “I love you too.” I sighed. “I’ll figure this out. On my own time.” And I had time, right? Brogan seemed in no hurry, and he’d proven time and again he understood my commitment fears. I could take a breath and sort through my baggage.

“I know you will, sweetie,” she said. “You’re so smart, and I’m so proud of you.” She pressed her lips together.

“But?” I laughed.

“Well,” she said. “Speaking from experience, I wouldn’t wait too long. Especially if he makes you as happy as you’ve sounded lately. The rest of your life is waiting for you, and you shouldn’t let anything or anyone hold you back from it. Even yourself.”

She hugged me, and after we’d paid the check, we went our separate ways. I hadn’t thought an innocent meal with my mother would unearth the years of issues I had or help soothe some of them, but it had. And while I was grateful for the raw honesty with my mother about the effects of her lifestyle on me, I was more than certain I couldn’t become her moving forward. If I *did* choose to say yes to Brogan, it would be for life.

And knowing that? I needed to be certain, regardless of what my mother said about never having that luxury.

* * *

I smiled down at Skye’s sleepy eyes as I slipped her freshly bathed and lotioned body into a super cozy onesie. The sound machine was already softly tinkling out her favorite sleepy tunes, and after only a few minutes in the glider, she was out cold.

There was something magical about laying a contently sleeping baby into their crib, some kind of warmth that filled all the dark and empty pieces of a soul. I hovered for just a few seconds, watching as she breathed evenly, before heading out of her room and down the stairs. I don’t know how I got so lucky to love my job, but I really, really did.

That thought brought me up short while I cleaned up the mess we’d made in the kitchen, and that familiar, warring ache was back in the center of my chest.

I loved my *job*.

But I'd blown those professional walls down weeks ago. Turned them to ash when I'd hopelessly fallen in love with Skye, no longer able to separate fondness from pure, unconditional love anymore.

And then Brogan.

I'd dove headfirst into him, and now...

He wanted me to marry him. After just a few months. Who does that? And did he want to marry me quickly so he'd ensure he never lost who he thought was best for Skye? Because no one could deny my loyalty to that girl or my love for her. Maybe that was all his affections boiled down to—wanting the best for his baby girl. Could I really blame him for that? Was I expecting too much to want him to love me for me and to want me for Skye as a bonus?

I pinched the bridge of my nose, thoroughly annoyed with myself. I never had these thoughts when Brogan was *here*. When we were together, I never doubted anything. But after the lunch with my mom and then a long day without him, I was more on edge than I had been before.

Shaking off the thoughts, I forced myself to sit down in the living room and plunge headfirst into some much-needed distraction. Social media always proved a rabbit hole of a time sucker, so down it I went.

And after a few funny puppy videos and more than enough cats playing the piano, I was properly, blissfully out of my own mind, and enjoying the numbing kind of happiness that accompanied ridiculous videos.

But all that went to shit when I scrolled across a video where Brogan's chiseled features filled up the screen. Even when I was actively trying not to think about him, he somehow found his way to me. I bit down on my grin, admiring the way he looked without his helmet but still in his Reapers gear while he graciously answered questions. After the run-in with the last paparazzi, Langley had told him to strategize. Answer questions on his own terms and to give them bites so they would stop relentlessly pursuing him because of his aversion to them.

The post-game interview was from a few hours ago, and he had his *Demon* face on. All business, no bullshit, he answered all the questions regarding Reaper strategy, and he almost even cracked a grin when they asked him about his thoughts on how well they'd do the rest of the season.

Then the interviewer moved on to more personal questions, some about Skye, which Brogan answered calmly, mostly saying his daughter was off limits. I breathed out a sigh of relief when he made it through those without getting raged, and then the breath stalled in my lungs when the reporter held up a picture for Brogan to look at. It was one of him, me, and Skye, walking through the players' lot together.

"Who is this woman to you?" the reporter asked, and my chest cinched tight. "Rumors are flying, but no one seems to have the scoop. You're one of the Reapers' most eligible bachelors, but you've been sighted with this unnamed female for weeks now. Are you off the market?"

His gaze narrowed, those hazel eyes focusing on me in the photo before he looked at the reporter and shrugged.

He *shrugged*.

"Oh, don't keep us in suspense. You know how much the fans adore learning about Reaper partners!" the reporter urged. "They're as much a part of the fandom as any. You know fans will be chomping at the bit to find out any intel they can on the mystery woman if she's managed to capture our own *Demon's* heart."

"She's just the nanny," he said, deadpan as if he'd said that dozens of times to dozens of different people.

The three words hit me like blocks of ice.

Just. The. Nanny.

I furrowed my brow at the phone, barely hearing the follow-up questions from the reporter as the interview closed out. The video started over again, the damn app playing it in a loop when I couldn't connect my brain to my body to turn the thing off.

The front door to the house opened and shut, the sound of Brogan's heavy gear bag thudding to the floor shortly after.

Then footsteps.

I couldn't move.

I was frozen in this horrible place of pain and confusion. I felt like an idiot. I'd been sitting here, stewing back and forth, torturing myself on whether I should say yes to *forever* with this man, and he was off telling people I was just the nanny.

"Hey," Brogan called as he rounded the corner, and my mind finally realigned with my body. I muted my phone but didn't take the video off the screen. "How are my girls?"

His words stung, especially when his tone was so damn different from what I'd just heard on the interview he did not two hours ago.

"Skye is good," I said on autopilot. "She had a bath, and she's sleeping."

Brogan tilted his head, noticing my tone, and sank onto the couch next to me. "What's wrong?" he asked, and I just stared at him for a few breaths. I couldn't get my thoughts straight, my feelings, everything just...hurt. "Is this about me proposing?" he asked, reaching for me, but I backed up, rising from the couch. "Because you know I'm not going to rush you —"

"Why did you really propose, Brogan?" I asked, my phone shaking in my hand as I stood there looking down at him.

He looked utterly confused, and anger helped ease some of the heartbreak in my chest. How could he play me for a fool like this?

"You know why," he said, his tone suddenly shifting like he was defusing a bomb.

Maybe he was because I couldn't stop the onslaught of emotions storming inside me. "Because I'm all you've got for Skye?" I snapped, and the words stung on their way out.

Brogan narrowed his gaze, going wholly still on the couch. "You're joking, right?"

“Does it look like I’m laughing?”

He visibly swallowed, then took a deep breath. “If I haven’t shown you enough how much you mean to me then—”

I turned the volume up on my phone, turning the screen toward him.

“*She’s just the nanny,*” spilled from the speaker, and he scowled at himself on the screen before he quickly stood up.

I backed up a few steps as he approached me, and he dropped his arms, defeated. “Fiona,” he said, saying my name like a plea. “I said that to protect you.”

“Protect me?” I snapped, closing the video and shoving the phone in my pocket. “How? By ripping my heart out?” I shook my head, my entire body shaking now. “If that’s all I ever was,” I said, angry tears clogging my throat. “Just this convenient thing who happened to be really great with your daughter, then that’s all you needed to say. You didn’t have to make me feel...make me fall for you.”

He flinched like I’d slapped him. “You know better,” he growled, and I glared up at him.

“Do I?” I clapped back. “I mean, honestly, it’s been *months*. That’s. *It*.” I stomped from the room, heading to mine to grab my bag. I had to get out of here. I had to run, to escape the sounds of *she’s just the nanny* repeating over and over in my head. I shoved some clothes into my bag, my chest cracking as I did.

“You know me better than people I’ve known for years,” he said, voice rough as he followed me from my room and back downstairs toward the entryway. He stood in front of the door, blocking my exit. “I’ve shared pieces of myself with you that I’ve *never* shown anyone, Fiona. So don’t come at me with this bullshit. You *know* I love you. And yeah, it may be fast, but I don’t like waiting on things once I’ve made up my mind. You’re it for me. I want you for the long haul. *You’re* the one who’s terrified of commitment.” He glanced at me, pain and anger churning in his eyes. “Look. It has you running scared.”

Tears rolled down my cheeks, and I swiped them away. “You telling the world I’m nothing more than your employee has me running,” I snapped, and he raked his palms over his face.

“If you give me permission, I’ll tell the entire world right now that you’re mine. I’ll hold a fucking press conference. But you haven’t said yes to me, Fiona. You’re terrified, and I get it. I’m here. I was protecting you by not labeling you. The paparazzi are relentless. They’d dig up your past and haul it out for everyone to see. I thought I was making the best choice—”

“By saying I’m just the nanny,” I cut him off, shaking my head. “And really, isn’t that what I am? What I’ve always been? I came in and saved the day when you needed help. I love your daughter like she’s my own, take care of her like it too. And hey, I’m not bad in bed either, so why not try and lock me down—”

“I’m not trying to lock you down,” he growled over me. “I just...” He breathed out deeply, searching for the right words.

But honestly, what right words were there to say? He clearly couldn’t deny the truth I’d just laid down. Our relationship was solely built on the job, the convenience, and his no-effort response to an interview question just fucking proved that.

And yet, I *waited*. I stood there, tears on my cheeks, and watched him. Waited for him to say all the right things, to choke out the words I needed to hear in order for me to drop my bag and race into his arms. Because I was just a glutton for punishment, I guess. I wanted to stand there and bleed until he told me that he loved me for so many more reasons than how convenient I was or how good I was with Skye.

“Fiona,” he said, his voice almost a whisper.

And cold fear and reality drenched me with the way he floundered for something to say.

Because he didn’t have anything else to add.

He didn’t have the right words.

And despite how desperately I wanted to fall into his arms and have him tell me this was just a stupid misunderstanding, he wasn’t reaching for me.

“Brogan, I—”

A knock on the door cut me off, and I sucked in a breath. I hurried to wipe the tears off my face, *so* not wanting Maxim or Sterling or whoever might be on the other side of that door to see me fucking crumbling.

“Ignore it,” he said, but I pushed him out of the way.

“I was leaving anyway,” I said, utterly broken and needing nothing more than to get some space to clear my head and heal my heart—even if I didn’t think that was possible. I swung the door open, prepared to say a quick bye to Maxim or whatever Reaper was there and rush to my car.

But I stopped dead in my tracks at the sight of the woman standing on Brogan’s front porch.

Tall, leggy, and with blue eyes I completely and utterly recognized.

Skye’s mother.

BROGAN

“Ignore it,” I said, but she brushed right by me, anyway.

This. Was. Not. Happening.

I didn't give a fuck who had just knocked at the door. How could Fiona question *my* feelings? I was the one who'd gotten my mother's ring. I was the one who'd had it sized for *her* so I could ask her to marry me. I was the one who'd said, “I love you,” first. I'd been the one to take the first step every damned time, and now she was running away because I was trying to give her privacy in the press?

“I was leaving anyway,” she said, her back ramrod stiff as she strode for the door.

Dumbfounded. I was completely and totally dumbfounded. And she thought this was all about being *convenient* because she was Skye's nanny? Fuck that. It happened in spite of the fact that she was Skye's nanny, and if she didn't already understand that then—

Then what? You'll just let her walk away?

The thought drove a spike through the center of my chest.

“Tell whoever it is to go the hell away so we can sort this out.” I said every word with low, calm deliberation as I turned to face the entry. There was no chance I was letting my temper get the best of me. Not now.

Fiona stood in the doorway, her hand white-knuckling the doorknob as she stared straight ahead.

“Fiona?” I started toward the door.

She turned toward me, and *stricken* didn’t even do a half-ass job of describing the widening of her eyes, or her dropped jaw. “I think it’s best if I go, since the person who’s *supposed* to be in this family has finally arrived.”

What the hell?

Fiona snatched her car keys out of the dish on the entry table, and the person standing in the doorway came into full view.

The woman was tall, model thin, and dressed to be seen, with a full face of makeup and long black hair. If it wasn’t for the sneer on her lips directed at Fiona, I might have used the word *striking*, but the look on her face was pure ugly. “Yeah, you should run along. *Demon* and I have things to discuss.”

I blinked. There was something vaguely familiar about her that I couldn’t put my finger on. Like one of thousands of fans who came through a meet and greet line, or—*Holy fuck*.

She had Skye’s eyes.

“You’re Skye’s mother?” My brow furrowed, my brain taking in the similarities of their features while everything in my soul rebelled at thought of acknowledging that this was the woman who had abandoned my daughter.

“I’m Justine Miller, but I go by my middle name, Tiffany.” She flashed me a predatory smile that sickened my stomach. “And yes, I’m Skye’s mother.” She tilted her head. “What? Don’t you remember me?”

I was stunned silent. There were no hazy memories. No sudden recall of that night. There was...nothing but this stranger standing in my doorway. Her legal name wasn’t Tiffany. No wonder we never found her.

“I’d use the term *mother* loosely, if I were you,” Fiona snapped, flat-out glaring at Tiffany. “Last time I checked, moms don’t just ditch their babies on doorsteps.”

Tiffany’s gaze narrowed on Fiona, her eyes turning glacial. “And the last time I checked, you’re just the nanny.”

Fiona's chin jutted upward, but the words hit their intended mark. Her eyes flashed with hurt. Rage flooded my veins.

"Fiona isn't just Skye's nanny," I seethed, stepping closer to Fiona. "She's family."

Fiona sucked in a strangled breath and her keys jangled as her fist tightened around them. "And on that note, I'm leaving."

"Fiona—" I reached for her.

"Don't," Fiona jerked her arm out of my reach. "Just..." She looked between Tiffany and me, then back again. "If you let her walk out with Skye right now, I'll never forgive you." There was pure fear shining back at me in her eyes.

Tiffany scoffed.

"I would never," I promised Fiona. They'd have to sedate me with horse tranquilizer and tie me to the support beams of the house before that woman walked out with my daughter.

Shit. *Our* daughter.

Fiona searched my eyes for a moment, then nodded, as if she'd gotten the answer she needed. Then she walked away without another glance, brushing by me, her head held high as she disappeared around the corner of the entryway and into the kitchen. A second later, I heard the garage door open. She was leaving.

And I couldn't go after her.

"You have shit timing," I growled at Tiffany.

She arched a black brow at me. "I could say the same for you, considering you knocked me up right as my modeling career was taking off."

A model. Why wasn't I surprised?

"Aren't you going to invite me in?" Her entire expression shifted and she batted her lashes at me.

"I'm a stupid fuck if I really fell for that act the first time." I folded my arms across my chest.

She shrugged. “You were drunk. I was drunk. I figured it couldn’t hurt to fuck a Reaper. The rest is history. Now do you want to have this conversation on the porch for the whole world to see?”

“The whole world around here consists of Reapers at every door, so I hardly doubt they’d be shocked considering they know exactly what you did to Skye.” My jaw clenched as hot anger churned in my stomach.

“What I did to Skye?” She scoffed again. “You mean, leaving her with her *millionaire* daddy for a little bonding time?” She leaned to the side, peering around me. “Where is the little cutie, anyway?”

“Asleep. And there’s zero chance that you’re seeing her.” Fuck, did I even have a choice? Long term, probably not, but here and now I did.

“You’d seriously keep her away from her mommy?” Her face fell in a practiced pout.

“Until you present me with a court order, that’s exactly what I’m saying.” The anger in my gut mixed with something acrid—panic. This was far worse than the shock of finding Skye on the porch, or the anxiety that I didn’t know what the hell I was doing when it came to fatherhood. There was a very real chance that Tiffany could fight to take my daughter, and for the first time in my life, I was fucking *terrified*.

“I could, you know,” Tiffany said softly. “I could show up with the lawyers and the media. I could force you into co-parenting for the next eighteen years.”

Bile rose in my throat.

“Just imagine it.” She flashed me a grin. “Giant birthday parties thrown with the thousands of dollars of child support you’ll be paying me. Sharing every holiday. Tagging you in every post about just how fast she’s growing up—”

“That’s not what you want,” I interrupted, every muscle in my body locked down tight. “If what you wanted was to co-parent, you would have called when you realized you were pregnant. You would have been standing on that front porch

with her after she was born. I would have helped. We could have made the whole co-parenting thing work, but instead, you left my daughter on my porch and *hoped* I'd find her. You had every available chance to come forward, but you didn't. So what the fuck do you actually want, Tiffany? Because there's zero chance you're getting *any* custody of Skye without a hell of a fight. She's *mine*."

"Let me in and I'll tell you."

* * *

It always came down to money, didn't it?

Wrap it up. That was the first piece of advice I'd gotten from the coaching staff when I'd committed to the University of Minnesota, and again when I'd signed with L.A. Guys who made millions were targets for the kind of women who liked fat child support checks.

I'd broken the cardinal rule of professional sports, and now I sat across Silas's conference table from the consequences of my actions.

It had taken twenty-four hours to get the paperwork in order, but now we were all here: me and Houston Bowman—Asher's personal attorney—on one side of the table, and *Justine* Tiffany Miller and the attorney Asher had provided for her on the other.

Asher himself was leaned up against his desk, watching with a carefully blank face as Houston handed out a set of papers in triplicate.

With just a few signatures—and a shit ton of money, Tiffany would be out of our lives.

Fuck, I wanted Fiona here. I wanted to know what she thought about all this. I wanted her advice, her opinion. I just wanted *her*. But after the first dozen calls and texts had gone unanswered, I'd gotten the fucking point.

Fiona didn't want to be *here*.

“As we went over on the phone, this is a one-time offer,” Houston said with that austere professionalism only attorneys were capable of. “The settlement amount is listed here,” he tapped on the bold-typed figure on the first page. “And covers what was mutually agreed upon as twelve months of child-support. Nine for your pregnancy, and three for the minor’s first three months of life.”

The *minor* was Skye Miller. Tiffany hadn’t given Skye my last name, which was one of the first things I’d remedy once this was over. My daughter sure as hell wasn’t going to carry the name of a mother who had never wanted her and only used her for financial gain. Fuck that noise.

“Where is she now?” Tiffany asked through her perfectly lined lips. “Skye?”

My first instinct was to mouth off and tell her Skye’s location was none of her fucking business, but I wasn’t about to blow this deal by letting my temper get the best of me.

“In a friend’s office down the hall,” I answered. “Why? Would you like to say goodbye to her?” Skye was in Langley’s office with Mia, Evie, Maxim, and half the Reaper team standing guard.

Evie had saved my ass during the game last night, and there was only God to thank for the coincidence that we’d been playing at home this week. I couldn’t have gotten on a plane with all this shit going on. But what really floored me? Fiona had been the one to call Evie and ask for help. She might be pissed as hell at me, but she still managed to show up for Skye.

Tiffany tilted her head as if giving the idea some thought. “Would you let me?”

Would you charge me for the privilege?

“Yes,” I ground out.

“Really?” She tapped her pen against her chin.

“Really.” I shifted in my chair and did my best not to glare at the mother of my daughter.

“Why?”

I sighed and raked my fingers through my hair in agitation. “Because one day Skye will ask about this moment, Tiffany. She’ll ask about her mother. She’ll want to know why you walked away and why I let you. She’ll probably think she did something wrong, something to deserve the hot fucking mess her first seven months were, and why she wasn’t enough to get you to stick around.”

Tiffany paled.

“And it’s my job to make sure she knows that this,” I gestured to the paperwork, “had nothing to do with her and everything to do with *you* and your choices. I will have to look her in the eye and tell her that I offered you every reasonable arrangement and the chance to stay in her life, and you chose *money*.” I hated that word and everything it represented. “And I’ll have to do it in a way that doesn’t make you out to be a total monster just to make her feel better about where she comes from. But you bet your ass the one thing I’ll never do is lie to *my* daughter, Tiffany. So yes, if you want to say goodbye to her, then you absolutely can, because I’ll never be the one who cut her off from you. You’re choosing to do that all on your own and that’s on *you*.”

We’d gone back and forth for days with the attorneys, hammering out an offer Tiffany would accept. The urge to be viciously petty had been overruled by wanting to do what was best for Skye, so we’d offered visitation—supervised of course, and full contact, but that had been the only thing Tiffany *hadn’t* wanted. Apparently, she’d had her fill of motherhood during those three months, and wanted what she called a *clean slate*—enough money to start a new life, and zero legal obligation or connection to Skye.

The relief I felt that she’d never be in a position to abandon Skye again was secondary only to the pain of my heart fracturing for my daughter at her own mother’s callous disregard.

“Is that what you want?” I asked, leaning forward on my forearms. The suit felt too constraining, the tie, too tight, the

air too stuffy to truly breathe. “To say goodbye to her?”

Tiffany swallowed and looked away, then shook her head.

Pure loathing flowed through my veins for the woman sitting across from me. I was supposed to be happy, right? Fuck her. She didn't deserve another second of Skye's time. But I was all too aware that I'd told Tiffany the truth. One day I'd have to answer to Skye about what went down in this room—her mother's disinterest and my blatant pay-off disguised as a one-time payment of a million dollars in child support.

“I need to know why.” I bit out every single word.

“Why I won't say goodbye?” Tiffany clarified as she flipped to the second page of the contract.

“Why you left her on the porch that day.” It was the one subject she had shied away from, probably due to the criminal neglect of it all.

Tiffany looked up slowly, then set the papers on the table. “To get your attention. Obviously, it worked.”

I shook my head. “She had a car seat. Clothes. She wasn't malnourished. You took care of her for three months and then...” I fumbled for words. “I need to know why.”

Her lips pursed. “And you won't tell her?”

“I already told you that I won't lie to her.”

She clicked her tongue, then sighed. “Fine. I wasn't sure you were her father, to be honest. I'd done the math and knew that was a possibility, but that weekend was...” She shrugged. “Anyway, when she was about six weeks old, she scowled at me, and damn if she didn't look just like you.” She narrowed her eyes. “And don't you dare judge me for not knowing who her father was.”

I put my hands up. “Zero judgment here since I didn't know who her mother was.” Everything I judged her for came after conception.

“Right. The whole motherhood thing never clicked with me. I mean, she was fun to dress up, but she cried incessantly, and I just never felt it—that whole connection you're supposed to

have with your kid. She was just...there. I knew what happened to models who were mommy-tracked.” She gestured down her body. “This is not a catalogue body. This is a runway body, and when I was offered a show in Italy, I took a gamble that you were her father, and decided it was my turn to get my dream job and your turn to have your life turned upside down.”

“She’s mine,” I declared just in case she needed to hear it. “We did a paternity test and everything. Just so we’re clear.”

“I figured, or we wouldn’t be sitting here.”

“And why show up now?”

“It was convenient timing. I happened to be in Charleston, and I happen to be leaving tonight.” Another fucking shrug. How could I have ever found this woman attractive? Her cold, calculated features were nothing compared to the warmth of Fiona’s smile, or the way her face softened when she held Skye.

My heartbeat stuttered, but I forced myself to focus.

“Plus, I’d gotten a call from my great-aunt that she’d been notified there was a new member of the family thanks to some genealogy test, but don’t worry, my parents are dead and no one else is going to come looking for Skye. Now are there any other touchy, feely questions, or can we get this over with?”

“Let’s do this.” My jaw flexed, and I took the pen my attorney offered.

Asher brought the notary into the room as Houston finished going over the details of Tiffany signing over her parental rights, and the delivery of the child-support payment.

It took less than a minute for Tiffany to sign away her rights.

She pushed up from the table and retrieved a folder from her bag, passing it across the table. “As promised. Her birth certificate and medical records.”

“Thank you.” I took the folder and opened it. May fourteenth. Skye’s birthday was May fourteenth. A lump formed in my throat. It was such a small fact, but knowing meant everything.

I looked up just in time to see Tiffany walk out the door, her lawyer following close behind her. That was it. The whole thing was over.

I sagged in my chair and rubbed my hand over my face.

“I’ll take care of these,” Houston said, gathering up the papers before he took off.

Silence filled the room, but my thoughts were deafening. What had I just done? Paid her off? Bought my daughter? Should I have pushed her to accept visitation? Would Skye hate me for this in ten years? Would Fiona have agreed with the settlement? Or would she have balked at the exchange of money and non-disclosure agreements?

“I think I know just what you need,” Asher said somewhere in the distance.

Was there any way to sanitize the reasoning Tiffany had just laid out so Skye didn’t feel abandoned? How the hell could I possibly make up for what Skye had just lost in the last hour? Selfish and shitty as Tiffany was, she was still her biological mother, even if she didn’t want her.

The door opened, and a second later, Skye was in my arms.

She gave me a drooly smile as she clutched at my face with surprisingly strong fists, babbling something incoherent. The pressure in my chest eased up and I took my first full breath in days.

I kissed her forehead and breathed her in. Yeah, the last twenty-four hours of anxiety and stress had been worth it to know that she’d never be abandoned again. Had I paid a million dollars for that security? Absolutely. *And I’d do it again to keep her safe.*

The seats around me filled. Maxim to my right, then Mila, Evie, Langley, Axel, Sterling, and London.

“Where’s the rest of the team?” I asked, stroking Skye’s back. She was wearing a Christmas-themed outfit Fiona had picked up recently.

Fiona.

“Making sure Tiffany gets to her car,” Maxim answered.

Suddenly, the reality of what I was facing smacked me in the face. “I’m going to need help.”

“We know,” Langley answered.

“Fiona…” I started, but I couldn’t get another word past the fucking boulder in my throat.

“We know about that, too,” Evie added, her voice soft. “She’s the one who called me, remember?”

“Right.” I shook my head. “The last few days have been a blur. We were fighting because I’d told the press that she was just the nanny—”

The girls around the table gasped.

“—and then Tiffany showed up, and now we’re here.” I swayed gently, patting Skye’s back out of habit.

“Just. The. Nanny.” Langley’s eyebrows rose.

I flinched. “Yeah. I was trying to give her some privacy. The press was all over Skye, and Fiona had made it clear she wasn’t ready to define what we were, and the whole ring thing didn’t exactly work out in my favor—”

The women gasped again.

“You proposed?” Mila’s eyes widened as she grinned.

“Kind of?” My face scrunched. “I pretty much fucked that part up, too. She said she needed time, and I thought that was what I was giving her.”

“By publicly declaring that she was *just the nanny*?” Langley looked at me like I was the stupidest man on the planet.

“Okay, why don’t we handle the logistics of his life, and then try to solve his issues in his love life?” Axel suggested.

“Good idea,” Maxim agreed, even though I was pretty sure I heard him mutter “*just the nanny*” under his breath with a tone of disgust.

“We’ll help out!” Mila offered.

“How about, *I’ll* help out,” Evie corrected her, pushing her glasses back up her nose. “Because Mila, I love you, but you’ve never changed a diaper in your life.”

“True,” Mila agreed with a shrug. “But I’ll keep Aunt Evie company while she changes your diapers, Skye,” she sang in a baby-talk voice at my daughter.

“You sure you have time?” I asked Evie.

Every head turned her way, and she flushed, sinking back in her chair as if the attention was too much for her. She never sought the spotlight like Mila. Even her clothes—baggy sweatshirts and jeans, seemed like they were chosen more for camouflage than fashion. “Finals are over, and I’ll need all the money I can get to cover the apartment on my own with Mila studying abroad next semester.”

“I told you I’d help—” Mila started, her brow puckering with worry.

“And I told you that’s not fair. I’ll figure it out,” Evie argued. “You’re my best friend. I’ve never once asked you for money just because you come from it, and I’m not about to start now.” She was the shade of a tomato.

Maxim spoke up then, concern furrowing his brow. “I can give you—”

“Absolutely not,” Evie snapped, meeting his gaze for only a second before looking back at me. “Like I said, I’ll take whatever babysitting job you can give me, Brogan. At least until classes start back up again in January.”

“I’d appreciate the help.”

She smiled and nodded. “And I’m happy to give it, starting tonight, since you guys have a game. I’ll be at your house at four.” She left no room for argument, and I nodded in response.

An hour later, I carried Skye into the house. It was barely noon and not quite time for her nap, so I set her in her jumping contraption and started making us lunch.

I opened the fridge and reached past Fiona's apple juice for the yogurt Skye liked.

Fiona.

No wonder the house felt so...cold. It was missing Fiona's warmth, the joy she brought to it with her laughter and love.

"Fucking hell," I muttered, putting the food on the counter. "I don't love you because of Skye," I said to no one, declaring my decent into insanity. "I love you because you make me laugh. Because you make me feel. Because you make me see the world through a different point of view. I love you because you are scared to death of commitment, but you're trying your hardest. I love you because you're smart, and funny, and kiss me like I'm a meal and you're starving." I slammed my hands down on the cold granite. "Why the fuck couldn't I just say that?"

Why had my tongue tied when she'd asked me? Why hadn't she given me just a fucking minute to get my words in order? Why had she coaxed me from my emotional stagnation just to turn her back on me when I stumbled?

I rubbed at my chest. Missing her fucking *hurt*, and it had nothing to do with Skye. Did I think that she was the perfect mom for my daughter? Absolutely, but that was just one of many reasons that I loved her. Maybe I'd pushed her too far too fast, but damn it, I hadn't meant to propose. Not yet.

And she'd run at the first fucking opportunity.

Anger. Hurt. Heartbreak. Frustration. Longing. Every emotion took its turn battering me, beating my heart to a pulp as I fed Skye and got her down for her nap.

It hit me as I was cleaning up the kitchen: I'd been forced to evolve, forced to let go of my past and open up because Skye had been left at my door. I'd been jolted into action, into change. I wasn't the same person that I'd been in August.

But Fiona hadn't been thrust into parenthood—into change. She still had to make a *choice* to get over her own shit and the damage her mother had done by playing years of musical marriage. It wouldn't matter if I apologized until I was blue in

the face. She hadn't let go of her issues the way I'd had to. Not yet. Even if we made up, we'd end up in the same exact situation eventually—with her running away, and that was if I managed to keep my foot out of my mouth in the future.

If she'd been ready to talk to me, ready to work us out, she would have called me back. Guess she still needed some of that time she'd requested, but I didn't have a lot of—or any—experience with relationships to even guesstimate how much time she needed. I just knew that I needed to be ready when she was, which meant finding a way to show her that I wasn't with her as some kind of “convenience,” like she'd accused. But would I even get the chance?

It wasn't like she wasn't keeping tabs on Skye through Evie. That much was obvious. She also hadn't cleared out her drawers. She'd be back, even if it was just to get her stuff.

And I'd be waiting.

If I wanted Fiona, then I was going to have to do the one thing I sucked at.

Wait.

FIONA

“Thank you,” I said as Maddie put another pancake on my plate before sitting down the skillet and taking the seat across from me. I dug into the sugary goodness, my eyes aching from crying all night.

Again. That’s all I did it seemed.

“Did you sleep at all?” she asked, sipping her coffee.

I swallowed the massive bite in my mouth. “Not really.”

She flashed me a supportive look. “You didn’t watch that interview again, did you?” she asked, and I shook my head.

I’d come straight to her house the night everything happened, and she’d welcomed me without hesitation. I’d needed to vent, and she’d listened to every word as I cried. She’d even watched the interview on her own, hissing as she did. And then I just...couldn’t leave. I needed the support of my friends too much, and I was lucky as hell to have a safe place to land.

“That’s something,” she said. “At least.”

I shrugged. “Kind of burned into my brain,” I said. “Don’t really need it on repeat on my phone. Plus, what keeps me up nights isn’t just what he said, but who I saw.”

Tiffany.

Skye’s mom.

The person he’d been looking for since he’d hired me.

Maddie sighed, raking her fingers through her long blonde hair. “Do you honestly think he’s going to welcome her into his home with open arms?”

Pain lashed through my chest. “I don’t know,” I admitted.

“Oh, come on,” she said. “That’s bullshit, and you know it.” I gaped at her, and she shrugged. “You know he’s not going to let her waltz back into his and Skye’s life. He loves Skye more than anything on the planet. Anyone can see that. He’s not going to let the woman who left her on his doorstep have anything to do with her.”

Anger sizzled in my stomach. “It’s complicated, Maddie,” I said, and she eyed me. “It is. Regardless of how we view her and what she did, she’s her biological mother. There are rights she has, and I have no idea what she wants.” I didn’t stick around long enough to find out. I’d hit my pain threshold about an hour before she showed up. “And I have *no* rights. Zero. I can’t stomp over there after days gone and kick her out.” If she was still there. I mean, she had this amazing, gorgeous, healthy baby girl, and she had no idea who she was. She didn’t know what songs she liked or what her favorite onesie was or how she smiled when I did voices for her stories.

“Maybe she regrets what she did,” I said. “Maybe she wants to learn all the things about Skye she’s missed out on. Maybe she wants forgiveness or closure or a second chance. Whatever the reason, it’s none of my business.”

And that truth hurt like a bitch. A real cold bitch that stung my chest every time I breathed since I walked out.

Not only did I miss Skye, but I missed Brogan even though I was furious at him. Furious at him for making me fall for him, making me question my own boundaries when it came to commitment, only to end up tagging me as the convenient choice in the end.

“You’re her nanny, still, right?” Maddie asked. “You’ve just been on a break. That gives you some rights. At least enough to check on her and see what the situation is.”

I sighed, shaking my head. “I texted Evie before I left that night,” I said, swallowing hard. “She’s agreed to help with Skye while I...” Brogan didn’t even have the decency to fire me himself. Instead, he’d let me replace myself with Evie without a second thought. But I had thoughts. Lots of them. And more were questions than answers. Maybe Evie would be there just long enough to maneuver Tiffany back into the fold, or maybe it was until he’d hired a new nanny. Someone who would no doubt fall for him just as easily as I did.

Oh, hello, fucking bitter, how delightfully you go with coffee.

“I love you, Fiona,” Maddie said. “But you need to get your shit together.”

I scoffed at her, and she grinned at me. “I’m not saying you’re not allowed to wallow, because we’ve all been there. But you know you love this man,” she said, and I cringed. “I’ve never seen you with anyone like this. You’re not just happy, you’re passionate, excited. You practically glowed whenever you were around him.”

I mimed her digging a knife into my chest, and she rolled her eyes. “I support you no matter what. You want to rage at him? Want to think he said those words to hurt you? Fine. I’ll be ready to slash his tires after my shift today. Daisy will bring the knives.” I grinned just a little at that. “But, if you want to do some serious soul searching—not the wallowing you’ve been doing—and dig yourself out of all that commitment baggage and realize that you’ll never make the choices your mother has made? Then I’ll be right here with tissues and chocolate too.”

I loved her, but I hated her because she made all the right points. I shoved my cleaned plate out of the way and leaned my forehead against her table. “And if I don’t know what the hell to think or do?”

“Then you can stay here as long as you want,” she said. “I know you have your place still, but it’s okay to not want to be alone right now. This is deep stuff, and I’m here.” She pushed away from the table and hugged me before she headed toward

the front door, dressed for her shift. “One piece of advice?” she called from where she hovered in the opened doorway.

I turned, looking at her with hope in my eyes. It would be so easy if my best friend could make all the hard decisions for me. “Yeah?”

“If you’re going to take some time to sort things out,” she said. “Maybe you should work on yourself too. Let yourself experience a job outside of Skye and Brogan. It might help you get perspective on whether you truly were just a job to him or not, and your own feelings too.”

I nodded, knowing she wasn’t wrong, but not having the strength to even think about another job right now. “Can I take *one* more day to wallow and listen to Taylor Swift and worry about the big-girl stuff tomorrow?”

She laughed, then winked. “Of course,” she said. “Maybe take two days. Daisy is coming over with wine tonight.” She closed the door behind her, and I cleaned the kitchen before heading back to the spare bedroom I’d been crashing in. I sank under the covers, T-Swift playing from the speaker on my phone.

If there was any silver lining I could take from the miserable mood I was in, it was that I had some fucking fantastic friends.

* * *

“Can you hear me okay?” Doctor Trellis asked from where he filled up my laptop screen, and I gave the camera a thumbs up.

“Loud and clear,” I said and then immediately cringed at the goofy way I’d responded. “Sorry,” I said. “I’m still getting used to the idea of this.”

“We all are,” he said, grinning at me. “This app is secure and totally confidential, and the need for remote sessions is in high demand these days.”

“I understand,” I said. “I’m happy technology is allowing people to get the care they need from the comfort of their own homes.”

“Exactly,” he said. “And with young ones, it’s usually a huge relief to the parents or guardians who are usually already swamped with pick-ups and drop-offs and after-school activities or second jobs. The list of reasons for remote sessions goes on and on, and now we have the security to make it happen. I’m so glad you decided to join our team.”

My heart did that twinge thing it did any time my decision to try remote clinical work was acknowledged, but I managed not to break down into tears this time.

“Me too,” I said and meant it. It had been days since I’d walked out of Brogan’s house. Long, tedious soul-searching and wall-destroying days spent mainly in the company of my two best friends who helped me realize what I needed to do.

I needed to pursue a few paths in order to find out which one I was truly meant to be on. And it didn’t take a rocket scientist to know that I wasn’t exactly where I belonged.

I had a giant Skye and Brogan-sized hole in my heart that I knew could never be healed by taking charge of my career and putting my doctorate to use. Although I was excited to start remotely working with children who needed my help, it could never replace what I’d had with Skye.

And Brogan.

I knew with more clarity than I did a week ago how much I loved him because of how much it hurt to leave him. But what could I do about it now?

Talk to him.

My traitorous voice whispered in the back of my mind, but I shoved the thought down and focused on Doctor Trellis as he explained how many sessions I’d have my first week before launching into policies and procedures.

By the time we signed off, I was more confident in the role I would play for this hospital.

But for my life?

I was lost. I wanted to take back my anger over the comment Brogan had made, but I wasn’t a magician. I was a flesh-and-

blood woman with emotions, damn it, and it had *hurt*. Doubt was a fickle, frosty bitch, and having the stone-cold words forever in recorded, accessible history for me was even worse.

More than that, he hadn't tried to call or text, not since the first day after I left. When I still needed time. And since then, nothing. He hadn't even tried to randomly show up at my apartment, which I'd reclaimed after I'd finally been able to leave the comfort and warmth of Maddie's house. I'd resorted to watching the Reapers' games just to get a glimpse of him even though I was terrified what any post-game interviews might turn up. But it seems he wasn't doing those either.

And I didn't know how to feel about any of that. Because I felt like if he wanted to talk, he'd reach out. That's how Brogan was. He didn't sugarcoat things and he certainly didn't waste time playing games. He wanted something? He went after it full-speed.

So if he hadn't called? It had to mean that what I'd said to him had hit home. He'd realized I was exactly right, and the only reason he was with me was because I was convenient. And even though it hurt like hell, I found myself more and more convinced that it was better this way. It had to be, right? Better to know now that he'd only *thought* he was in love with me because I was great with his baby girl and was around.

I swallowed down the pain, knowing that wasn't how I'd fallen for him, but again, there was nothing I could do about it now.

If Brogan wanted to patch things up, he would've found a way.

And yeah, I was the first to admit I was a stubborn creature, but how could I possibly call him myself? Especially when it seemed he totally didn't want me to?

I raked my palms over my face as I cleaned my already tidy apartment, then headed toward the door when someone knocked. I opened it, already guarding my heart for what I knew was being delivered today.

Skye's Christmas present.

I scooped up the box and took it to my kitchen. I leaned against the counter for a second, wondering if I should just shove it in the closet and never think about it again, but I guess *ripping the band-aid* off was a phrase for a reason. I opened the box, and tears filled my eyes at the set of little swimsuits and matching head caps, the infant goggles, and the towels I'd ordered to go along with the private swim lessons I'd signed us up for together. A yearlong commitment that I no longer had the right to gift.

The tears flowed freely at that realization, but I didn't throw the box of goodies in the garbage. Instead, I cried while I wrapped them in the paper I'd picked out especially for her, sliding the membership card in with the last suit. I figured I could transfer it over from my name to someone else's, whether that be Brogan or...

I wouldn't think about Skye's biological mother. It wasn't fair of me to think about her any more than it was for me to feel the grief I felt over not seeing Skye anymore. She'd never been mine, she'd only felt like it, and that was on me, not Brogan.

After I'd placed the wrapped packages on the table by my front door, I'd resolved myself to be the bigger person and take them over to her. I could do that, right? Sometime soon, when I had my shit together.

I blew out a breath, wondering if I'd ever feel solid again, and then pulled out my cell as I fell on the couch. I was aimlessly cleaning out my inbox when I noticed an email from my student loan lender and groaned as I opened it. I'd made my payments automatic, and I knew that the last one had come out not five days ago. Had it not gone through?

Dear Ms. Andrews,

We're refunding you your last student loan payment and have unenrolled you from autopayment. Your loans have been paid in full without penalty. Attached you will find the closed loan documents and notices. Thank you for choosing us as your lenders and please don't hesitate to reach out with further questions.

My hands shook as I read the email four times before it sunk in. First, I thought it was a scam email and was waiting for the part where the person would ask for my credit card information to properly shut down my account. Second, I realized it wasn't a scam, and wondered who the email was truly meant for, because there was no way in hell I'd paid off my loans. Third, I started hyperventilating as I opened the loan closure documents. And fourth, I was crying all over again because Brogan freaking Grant had paid them off in full.

The day after I'd walked out of his house.

The day after I'd accused him of only loving me because I was easy, I was around.

The day after I'd claimed he wanted to lock me down because he didn't want to lose his nanny.

He'd gotten rid of the whole reason I'd taken the nanny position in the first place—because I'd needed money to pay off those insane loans.

I couldn't help but sit there in shock. I knew he had plenty of money, but I'd never expected him to do this for me, nor would I ever have asked him to. And I had to wonder *why* he would do something so monumental without talking to me about it or even telling me at all. Was it because he felt guilty about me losing my job because of him? Because of the lines we'd crossed? Or was it because he wanted to make amends?

I hated that I didn't have answers, and I knew there was only one real way to get them.

I needed to see him, even if it would be the last time.

BROGAN

“*T*hanks again,” I told Evie as I walked her to the door.

“It’s no problem. Seriously. I’m glad you guys won.” She gave me a quick smile and headed out, closing the door behind her.

I unbuttoned the top two buttons on my shirt—I’d long since ditched the coat and tie, and headed for the kitchen in search of hydration. Flights, even short ones, always seemed to suck the water right out of me, and considering we’d played a hell of a game in D.C. and had one at home tomorrow, I definitely needed water.

Damn, the house was quiet.

The clock on the stove said it was after eleven p.m., which meant I had about a zero-percent chance of seeing Skye before morning skate tomorrow, given how she’d been not only sleeping through the night, but sleeping past my alarm for practice. I paused midway to the refrigerator, weighing the pros and cons of waking her up just so I could hold her.

Don’t be a selfish dick.

Right. No waking up Skye.

I reached past Fiona’s apple juice and grabbed a bottle of water. Throwing it out would have been the easiest solution, but I couldn’t make myself do it. Kind of like cleaning her stuff out of the drawers upstairs. It had been six days since she’d stormed out of here. Six days without a single word or a text.

Five days since I'd quit trying to call her and decided to give her what she ultimately needed—space.

Five excruciating days of questioning every decision I made when it came to the woman I loved—the woman who might not actually love *me*.

And that fucking sucked.

A knock sounded at the door before I could twist open the bottle, so I set it down on the counter and headed toward the entryway. “Did you forget something?” I asked as I tugged the door open, fully expecting to see Evie standing on my porch.

Instead, Fiona arched an eyebrow at me. “Expecting someone else?”

My heartbeat stuttered. She was here, and damn did she look good. She was wearing a blue sheath dress that matched her eyes, like she'd come from an office...or a date, and her hair was down, long and loose.

“Evie,” I finally managed to answer, pushing the words through lips I was sure had to be covered in streams of drool at the sight of Fiona. “She just left.”

“She was watching Skye while you were playing in D.C.,” Fiona assumed correctly.

“Yeah.” I stared at her. She stared at me.

The awkwardness of the moment would have been funny if I wasn't so desperate to pull her into my arms and erase the entire last week. How could something so good, go so wrong, so fast?

She looked away and pursed her lips. “Can I come in? I need to talk to you.”

I stepped back as I nodded, and she swept into the house.

“Were you out...” I couldn't even bring myself to finish that question. If she was already dating, I'd... *You'd what?* I had no fucking clue, but it would probably involve a loss of self-control.

Her brow furrowed in confusion.

“You just look...good.” *Lame, Grant. So lame.* “Not that you don’t always look good, but you’re...” *Just quit while you’re behind.*

“Oh.” She glanced down her body, like she’d forgotten what she was wearing. “I’d just gotten home from the office, and then I...”

The office. She’d taken another job. She wasn’t coming back to us. Disappointment sank like a rock in my stomach.

She shook her head and her expression changed, anger and frustration radiating from her frame as she crossed her arms over her chest. “I needed to talk to you, but then I remembered that you were playing in D.C., so I just drove around aimlessly for hours, and finally took a gamble that you’d be home.”

“What did you want to talk about?” She still kept up with my schedule. A tiny flicker of hope lit up inside my chest, illuminating the dark thoughts that had kept my head occupied.

“You paid off my student loans, didn’t you?” she asked, her tone leaning toward accusation.

I blinked. “Um. Yeah.”

Her eyes flew wide. “Why would you do that? Did you think I needed some form of *extra* payment for services rendered or something?”

My head jerked to the side. “I’m sorry, are you asking me if I think you’re a whore?”

She gasped.

Shit, guess I’d read that comment all wrong.

“No,” she ground out. “I’m asking if you felt you had to pay me off for our relationship.”

I cocked an eyebrow at her. “Isn’t that pretty much the same thing?”

She swallowed and seemed to weigh her thoughts. “Why did you pay my loans off, Brogan?”

“Because I didn’t want you feeling any sense of obligation to come back to me.”

Another gasp.

“What the hell did I say wrong this time?” I threw my arms out. “I’m trying to be open, honest, and direct. You know, that whole *communication* thing you’re supposed to do when you’re in relationships.”

“You didn’t want me to feel like I had to *come back to you*?” she spat.

“Financially!” I flinched. “Skye is asleep.”

She nodded. “You thought I’d have to return to you for money?” she whispered loudly.

It would have been hilarious, how easily we both slipped into lowering our volumes for the sake of Skye, but nothing about this situation was humorous at the moment.

“For fuck’s sake, it’s like you’re *trying* to deliberately misunderstand me.” I raked my fingers through my hair, no doubt making it stand up at the edges. “Yes, Fiona. I thought you would come back to your *job* because you needed the money to pay for your student loans.”

“Well, it wasn’t like you needed me, was it? Evie slipped right in with no problem.”

“You didn’t even *quit*!” I hissed. “You walked out on us!”

She drew back like the words had been a physical blow. “I...I called Evie to make sure you weren’t left in a lurch!”

“Evie is *not* you!” I laced my fingers behind my neck and paced slightly, taking in deep breaths to try and maintain some sense of control. Once I felt like I could talk without shouting, I stopped and faced her.

Anger and frustration were still there on her face, etched in the purse of her lips, the fire in her eyes, but there were also dark purple shadows under those blue orbs, which told me she’d been sleeping just about as well as I had, and there was something in the set of her shoulders—they drooped just a tiny bit. There was sadness in her, too.

“Fiona, everyone in my life only needs me for money.”

Her lips parted and her arms fell to her sides. “That’s not true.”

I laughed. “Yeah. It is. My aunt and uncle only call when they need me to bail them out. Silas needs me to bring fans to the ticket booth. Tiffany showed up for a million-dollar payout to sign away her rights to Skye—”

“She wanted *money*?” Fiona squawked.

“Well, she sure as hell didn’t want Skye.” I shook my head. “But you would have known that if you’d bothered to stick around that morning.”

Her jaw dropped. “You told reporters—”

“Yeah, I fucked up!” I winced at the way my voice rose. “I thought I was giving you the privacy and non-labeled relationship you wanted. I’ve already explained that. But you...” I shook my head. “You walked away when I needed you most. Why? Because of some shit I said to a reporter? A fucking misunderstanding? Or because you decided that was a good enough excuse enough to cut bait and run? Admit it, you had one foot out the door the second you found that ring.”

She inhaled harshly, and her gaze hit the floor.

“And yes, even you only needed me for money. I was your boss, remember? You needed to pay your student loan debt. So I paid it off for you, so that if you ever decided to walk back through my doors, we would both know it was because you *wanted* to and not because you *needed* to.”

“Brogan,” she whispered.

“And guess what, Fiona?” My hands fell to my sides. “Evie’s been watching Skye for a whole week now, and I’ve managed *not* to fall in love with her because she isn’t you! So there goes your *convenience* theory. That’s the thing you don’t seem to grasp! I don’t need you anymore—not to be Skye’s nanny.”

Fiona flinched.

“But I *want* you. I need you for *me*. For *us*.” Frustration welled within me, rising to a boiling point. Why couldn’t she

understand that I loved her? That I was flawed, and imperfect, and would inevitably fuck something up, but I was *hers*?

It didn't seem to matter what I wanted to say, it wouldn't come out right. I had to find a way to make her—

A slow grin spread across my face. We'd always communicated better with our bodies.

"What?" she asked, tilting her chin and meeting my heated gaze with one of her own.

"You want me, too. You're just too scared to admit it." I stalked forward.

She held her ground. "I'm not scared of *anything*."

"Yeah," I argued slowly. "You are." Two steps and I was all up in her space. "You're scared to need me the way I need you. You're scared to admit that if you let yourself stick around, that you'll lose the ability to run, aren't you?"

Her lower lip trembled.

"But you want me, Fiona." I slowly lifted my hand, giving her time to run, to protest. She didn't. I slid my fingers into the mass of dark, silky hair at the nape of her neck. "You want this."

"Brogan," she whispered, her hands rising to my chest. But they didn't push me away.

"It's easy, sweetheart. If you tell me to stop, I will." I lowered my head and breathed in the sweet scent of her. God, I'd missed this scent. Missed how fucking warm and soft she was. My world was fucking arctic without her in it. "But something tells me you won't."

I kissed her neck and bit back my own moan. Need exploded within me, replacing the anger, the hurt—all of it.

She swayed on her feet and clutched my shirt with both fists.

"You won't say no, because you want this. You want me." I nipped her earlobe, then flicked my tongue over her skin.

"Oh, God." Her head fell back.

I took the opening, setting my mouth to her throat, and skimming her waist, her hips, with my free hand. I fucking loved this woman, needed this woman like I needed air. But none of my feelings mattered if she couldn't admit that she was as in this as I was.

And I was all fucking in.

"Tell me you want me," I whispered against her throat, my hand coasting to her thigh.

"I..." Her breath hitched as I worked my hand under her dress and met the smooth, creamy flesh beneath.

"Or tell me to stop," I demanded as my hand journeyed higher. My lips grazed hers, catching every pant as her breaths came in uneven little gasps.

"I don't want you to stop," she whispered.

My cock jerked, already hard and hurting, but it wasn't enough.

"Then tell me you want me." I brushed my fingers along the band of her silk thong.

"Brogan!" She cupped the back of my neck and pulled.

"Tell. Me. You. Want. Me." I didn't budge, and it cost me, unraveling the tethers of my control bit by bit. My lips hovered over hers for a breath of a second, and then I brushed them over her mouth in a slow, light caress that wasn't nearly enough.

Her hips rocked into my hand.

My fingers dipped beneath the silk.

I hissed.

"You fucking feel like you want me." I grazed one finger over her pussy. "You're slick and swollen for me, Fiona." I swirled some of that moisture up over and around her clit.

"Brogan," she whimpered.

"You know I love it when you say my name like that, baby, but that's not going to get you there this time." I sucked her lower

lip between my teeth and raked it gently before letting it pop free. “Tell. Me. You. Want. Me. Say it.”

“Please.” Her hips rolled again, and I walked forward two steps, putting her back against the foyer wall.

“I want *you*,” I growled low in my throat. “I want to shove this dress up to your waist, snap the strap of these panties, and bury my cock so deep inside you that you’ll feel me there for days. You won’t be able to take a step without feeling me, remembering exactly what I can do to you, remembering what we’re like together.”

Her fingers clutched my hair and pulled, her eyes hazy as our gazes locked. “You really won’t touch me if I don’t say it?”

I shook my head and started to withdraw my hand.

“I want you!” she blurted.

I froze, my muscles locking tight.

“I mean it.” She leaned up and kissed me. “I want you. Please don’t make me beg.”

“Fuck, yes.” The tenuous hold I had on my control snapped, and I was all over her. Our mouths collided in an open-mouthed, blatantly carnal kiss. My world righted, as though it had been off its axis since she left, and I finally had steady ground under me again.

Her hands tore at my shirt. Buttons flew.

I snapped the straps of her delicate little thong.

“Yes!” she cried when I plunged two fingers inside her tight heat.

“You’re so fucking ready for me.”

Her hands were already at my belt, tugging it free then undoing my pants. Then her fingers—

I groaned.

She fisted my cock and gave it a long stroke.

“I can’t wait.” It was both a promise and an apology.

“Then don’t.” Another pump.

I jerked my wallet out of the back of my pants, took out the condom and rolled it on in record time. My pants and underwear fell to my ankles.

My hands yanked her dress up to her waist. “I’ll savor these later,” I vowed, cupping her perfect breasts.

“Take the rest of me *now*,” she ordered, her nails digging into the back of my neck.

Our mouths met in another deep, drugging kiss as I gripped her ass and lifted her against the wall. She wrapped her ankles around my waist and little sharp pricks of pain bit into my thighs.

Her heels.

“Say it again,” I demanded as the head of my cock rested at her entrance.

“I want you, Brogan,” she answered immediately, her eyes locked on mine. So fucking beautiful.

I plunged inside her with a hard thrust, seating myself to the hilt.

Then I fucked her against the wall with hard, driving thrusts, using my body to say what my words couldn’t. I needed her. She was my air. She made me desperate and hungry. I was nothing without her warmth, her love. Every time I sank inside her was better than the last time, and soon there was no finesse to our lovemaking, just pure, primal need.

Her moans and whimpers stripped my soul bare and took down any defenses I’d managed to build, leaving me completely open. Completely hers.

“Don’t stop,” she begged between kisses.

“I won’t,” I promised, and I didn’t.

I kept her beneath me all night, wringing every gasp, every moan, every bit of pleasure from her body that she could give. I used our chemistry, our undeniable need as my only weapon to remind her that this was where she belonged—in our home, our bed.

We fell asleep after round four.

When my alarm went off for morning skate, she was gone.

FIONA

“*I*t was smart to leave, right?” I said as I paced the length of Maddie’s living room floor.

Daisy and Maddie both looked up at me with confused faces, neither one of them daring to speak.

“I mean,” I continued my ramble. “I couldn’t stay. Staying would mean that we’re back together. That the engagement is back on the table. All of it. And it wasn’t like he came out and said those exact words to me.” I raked my fingers through my hair, my heart racing like I’d run a marathon.

“You need to sit down,” Daisy said. “You’re making me dizzy with all your pacing.”

I sank into the chair across from the couch. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” she said. “I’m just totally baffled how you don’t see it.”

“See what?” I asked, my eyes jumping between my friends.

“How deep in love that man is with you,” Maddie answered. “You can’t even fight without ending up having crazy-hot sex. That doesn’t happen to everyone, you know?”

“Not to mention all the other obvious reasons,” Daisy added. “Like the fact that he trusts you with his daughter or that he makes you laugh or that he is totally aware of your commitment issues and isn’t pushing you on the matter. And the fact that he paid off your loans so you wouldn’t feel obligated to come back to him for a job.”

I let my head fall into my hands, feeling like an absolute asshole for leaving him before he woke up. But I'd panicked. I'd spiraled right back into that scary tunnel of not knowing what to do about how much I loved him. Because I did. So much. Too much.

"What if I give in?" I asked. "What if I say yes to him, and the minute we say *I do* everything vanishes." I snapped my fingers for emphasis, and they both rolled their eyes.

"You are not your mother," Maddie groaned.

"And you're smart enough to know what's real and lasting and what isn't," Daisy said.

I bit my lip, panicking.

"Seriously," Maddie said. "Look at the facts." She ticked off reasons on her fingers. "Did you and Brogan meet at a casino in Vegas and drunkenly get married?"

"No."

"Did you meet him on an island resort and have a vacation fling that led to a marriage?"

"No."

"Did you get stuck in an elevator with him and convinced yourself he was your one true love?"

"No," I said and actually laughed a little. Though the reasons sounded ridiculous, they weren't far off from the way my mother found husbands.

"How did you fall in love with Brogan?" Daisy asked.

I inhaled deeply, letting myself really feel everything from the past few months. I fell for him in the moments between the job—the tiny pieces of time carved out especially for us. Between his kisses and his jokes, between being the cure to soothe his sharp edges and him being the strength to carry the baggage I held. I fell for him with every smile, every laugh, every rough night that threatened my sanity, but just the notion that we were going through it together somehow made it bearable.

"Fiona?" Daisy asked when I'd bolted out of the chair.

“There were a million reasons I fell for him,” I said, heading toward the front door.

“And?” Maddie asked.

“And none of them are fleeting. They’re the long-lasting, solidarity, get-us-through-anything kind of reasons.”

Daisy and Maddie sighed, their faces screaming *finally*.

“And?” Daisy asked, biting back a smile.

“And I’m an idiot. I have to go.” I whirled toward the door, my heart racing with a whole new kind of rush.

I loved Brogan Grant.

And not just the quick, passionate kind of love.

The forever kind of love.

And I needed to tell him before I lost my chance at a happily ever after.

BROGAN

Enough was enough.
“You sure you don’t mind watching her for another hour or two?” I asked Evie, leaning out of my car window.

“Not at all,” she promised from the door, Skye on her hip. “You do whatever you need to.” She gave me a reassuring smile and shut the door.

I’d held my shit together through morning skate. I’d even kept myself in check during the game, though I did get called on roughing when one D.C.’s forwards got a little too up in Sterling’s crease.

But the second we’d come off the ice, I’d started to lose it.

Fiona hadn’t been there when I’d woken up. Apparently my message hadn’t quite gotten through to her. Fine, I guess I was going to have to try another way. This entire situation was so fucking stupid that I could hardly stand it. I loved her. She loved me.

I’d planned out my speech the whole drive home. I was going to tell her how much I loved her—lay it all out on the line, and if that still wasn’t enough for her, then fuck it.

Liar.

Fine, I was going to bare my truth, and if she still didn’t see, then I’d just have to find another way to win her back.

I threw my car in reverse and backed out of the driveway—nearly sideswiping the car that had skidded to park at my mailbox, blocking my way.

I slammed the gears into park and flung open the door. “What the actual fu—” My brow furrowed as I caught sight of the driver. “Fiona?”

She scurried around the front of the car. I’d never seen a woman look so damn good in a Reaper hoodie before.

“I’m sorry for leaving!” she yelled as she ran at me.

“What?”

She flung herself into my arms, and I caught her, rocking back on my heels to absorb the impact so we didn’t both go tumbling down on the concrete.

“I’m sorry,” she said into my neck, her voice muffled.

“You keep saying that.” I hugged her tight for one second, letting myself drink in the relief of having her in my arms again, but then I put her back on her feet. We had to get a couple things clear.

“I know.” She bit her lip as I stepped back, putting some space between us. Then she glanced at my car. “Where were you going?”

“To you,” I admitted. “To tell you that this whole thing is really fucking stupid because—”

“I love you,” she blurted.

Every muscle in my body locked, freezing me in place.

“I love you, Brogan. I can’t help it.” She shrugged. “And all I keep thinking is that the risk of everything going to shit—of us falling apart—is worth it, because I can’t imagine my life without you.” Her eyes got all glassy, or maybe that was just the afternoon light. “Do you still love me?”

“Baby, I never stopped.” The two feet between us were killing me, but we needed the space, needed these words. “I’m so sorry I said you were just the nanny—”

“It’s okay,” she cut me off. “I mean, it hurt like hell, but I get it.” She wrung her hands and shifted her weight. “I’m just hoping that the next time the press asks you about me, that you can call me something else.”

“Like my girlfriend?” I offered, though I was ready to fly her to Vegas and pull a Cannon just to get my fucking ring on her finger and lock her down.

“Like your fiancée,” she blurted, then slapped her hand over her mouth.

My eyes widened and I barely contained my grin, my lips quirking up at the corners.

“You know, if you still want to marry me. Which, I’m really hoping you do, because I’ll never forgive myself if we threw this away because we’re communicating like *high schoolers*, for crying out loud. I mean, maybe it would actually be a little more effective if we passed notes—”

“I don’t think high schoolers pass notes anymore,” I interrupted, fighting a smile. “I think they text. Or Snapchat. Or whatever.”

“Right...shit, I’m really screwing that up.” She shook her head. “Look, I took a new job, doing my *actual* job—child psychology, and most of it is remote, but I know that means you’d have to find a new nanny for Skye—”

“I don’t need you for Skye!” I shouted, then sucked in a deep breath, trying desperately to regroup. “Sorry. I meant to say that Skye needs you in whatever capacity you want to be there for her,” I clarified. “But I have no issue hiring another nanny. You’re doing exactly what you should be doing and I’m damn glad you’re not using us to hide behind anymore.”

“You are?” Two lines appeared between her eyebrows.

“Of course I am.” Against my better judgment, I crossed the small distance between us and cradled her face. “I never wanted to hold you back. I love you, Fiona. I want a partner, not an employee.”

“Then...I’m not too late? I didn’t fuck it all up by leaving this morning?” Her eyes searched mine, shining with hope, and I fell a little more in love with her.

“No, sweetheart.” I backed away, letting my hands fall from her face as I turned to my car. It took about a minute to open the passenger door, fetch the little velvet box out of the

glovebox and shut everything again. Then I pivoted to face Fiona. “See? I told you I was on my way to you.” I held out the box.

She covered her mouth with her hands.

“There’s no pressure here, Fiona. None. I’ll get down on a knee, or I’ll put it away and we can circle back to it later. As much as I selfishly want you to marry me, I know you’re going to need some time to get past your commit—”

“I want it!” She rushed forward, throwing her arms around my neck. “No knees. No need to ask. I want it. I want you. I want us. Yes, yes, yes!”

Grinning, I slipped the ring free from its velvet bed and slid it onto Fiona’s finger. It fit like a dream, and winked in the sunlight like it had been made for her.

She stared down at the solitaire diamond with parted lips and expressive eyes that I couldn’t read.

“If you want something bigger, we’ll get it—”

She hushed me with a kiss. “It’s perfect. It was your mom’s and now it’s mine. It’s absolutely, stunningly perfect.” She lifted her hands to my face and kissed me.

Soft. Sweet. Perfect.

“There’s only one more thing I need,” she said with a smile, pulling back after we were both breathless.

“For me to communicate a little better?” I teased, my chest feeling like it might crack open with how many emotions were flooding it.

“Well, both of us need to do that, honestly,” she admitted with a crinkled nose grin. “But right now, I just really want to see Skye. I’ve missed her so much. We’ll work on the whole communication thing later.”

I nodded. “We have a while to get it right.”

She brushed her lips over mine again. “We have forever.”

EPILOGUE

“*H*appy Birthday, dear Skye, happy birthday to you!” Brogan, myself, and half the Reapers’ belted out the song as Skye cheesed in her highchair, her blue eyes wide as she looked at the special cake I’d made just for her.

Maddie snapped pictures, and Daisy busied herself with crafting a tiny crown out of the streamers that decorated half of our house.

“Two years old,” Brogan said, tucking me into a side hug as Skye gripped handfuls of the vanilla cake and shoveled it into her mouth.

“Time flies,” I said, my heart swelling with love.

Love that would grow soon.

“Have I thanked you today?” Brogan asked into my ear, his voice slipping into that *Demon* tone that made my toes curl in my shoes. A year plus, and he still had the ability to turn me into a puddle.

“Whatever for?” I teased, shifting to wrap my arms around his neck. Our crowd of guests chatting and munching on their own cupcakes faded totally to the background when I was wrapped up in Brogan like this.

He kissed me quickly, holding me tightly against him. “For giving me everything I never knew I needed,” he said against my lips, and a warm shiver danced down my spine.

“Everything?” I asked, arching a brow at him.

Those hazel eyes were beyond content as he glanced from me to Skye—happily covered in cake and giggling at the goofy faces Maxim was making at her. Brogan focused on me again. “Everything,” he said, and I couldn’t help but smile so hard tears lined my eyes.

I was overflowing with happiness. With a kind of life and bliss I never knew I could experience.

Did we fight? Yes.

Did we have a hell of a time making up? Yes.

Were our lives about to change again? Definitely.

Did I doubt for a second that we couldn’t handle it? Nope. Not even a little. Because I knew now there wasn’t anything we couldn’t face.

“What is it, baby?” he asked, smoothing his thumb over my cheek where a tear had slipped free.

“I just love you so much,” I said. “And I have a question for you.”

“What is it?” he asked, his eyes suddenly serious. I loved that about him. He had this instant ability to switch from playful pursuer to serious partner in the span of a blink.

I ran my hands over his broad chest, drawing out the tension coiling inside me like a spring.

“Fiona,” he groaned, and I glanced up at him.

“What would you say to having another little demon?”

His eyes flashed wide, shock and elation coloring them as he held me out at an arms’ length, glancing from the happy tears in my eyes to my still-flat tummy and back again. “Are you saying...?” He tilted his head, and I nodded excitedly.

“I’m pregnant,” I whispered, unsure if he wanted anyone else to know just yet—

“We’re pregnant!” Brogan shouted at the top of his lungs, and the entire party turned to look at us.

Warmth flushed my cheeks, but an excited laugh bubbled out of me as Maddie and Daisy squealed and ran over to me. Brogan released me to them, gathering Skye into his arms, covered in cake and all.

“You’re going to be a big sister,” he cooed to her, and she giggled, smushing her cake-covered fingers all over his cheeks. He rushed back to me, Maddie and Daisy stepping aside so he could wrap me in his free arm.

He held us together, this little family we created, as our chosen family congratulated us.

And there, in his arms, Skye’s happy giggles echoing in my ears, I knew there was nothing that could ever be as sweet as the life he’d given me.

THE END

Thank you so much for reading! If you love these alphas and want to try something with a little more bite, check out my steamy vampire romance, [Crimson Covenant!](#)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Samantha Whiskey is a wife, mom, lover of her dogs and romance novels. No stranger to hockey, hot alpha males, and a high dose of awkwardness, she tucks herself away to write books her PTA will never know about.

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