



CHEAP SHOT

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KAT MIZERA

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LAUDERDALE KNIGHTS BOOK 7
KAT MIZERA

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*S*loane

FORT LAUDERDALE WAS a lot warmer than I'd been expecting for January.

I'd lived in California and France the last eight years, so this kind of heat in the winter was somewhat jarring. Stepping out of the airport and into the midday sun, I headed for the ride share area, opening the app on my phone.

Coming here had been a last-minute, impulsive idea, but two things had happened simultaneously to nudge me in this direction.

The first was the finalization of my divorce.

God, that had been long overdue.

Then I'd seen my younger brother's face on TV.

Purely by accident.

It had been more than a decade since I'd seen him in person, but I would have recognized him anywhere. Dark brown hair and cobalt-blue eyes just like mine. The nose we

shared. Even the smile. We were two years apart, and while he was male and I was female, we looked so much alike it was eerie. Which was why I'd recognized him immediately.

And suddenly it had felt like the right time to reach out.

I was done with my marriage and the life I'd been living the last eight years, so I'd packed up the little bit I owned and flew to Fort Lauderdale. I had no idea how I was going to find Alan. Well, Decker. I had to remember he used the name Decker Reese now.

I didn't know when he'd given up the name he'd been born with, Alan Decker Rickman, to use his middle name and our mother's maiden name, but that was what I'd found online. He'd only been fourteen when I'd run away from home, so a lot had changed in that time.

For both of us, apparently.

I'd never planned on seeing anyone in my family again, but nothing that had happened had been Decker's fault. Even as a gangly, knobby-kneed twelve-year-old, he'd always had my back, kicking ass and taking names. I'd never imagined he would grow up to be a professional hockey player, but in retrospect it made sense.

The driver dropped me off at my hotel, and I checked into my room, trying to figure out how I was going to approach the brother I hadn't seen in all these years.

Decker hadn't done anything wrong back when I'd run away, but I didn't know who he'd grown up to be, what his beliefs were, or if he still had contact with our family. Because

I wanted no part of that. I'd disappeared at sixteen for a reason, and I was never, ever going back. Not to Michigan, not to my family, and sure as hell not to my ultra-conservative evangelical roots.

I had to be careful with Decker, but I'd missed him, and frankly, it wasn't like I had anyone else. I'd been alone for a long time despite being married. My marriage had been a disaster, and it felt like it was time for that to change.

Now I needed a little luck.

I freshened up, grabbed my purse, and called for another Uber. This one would take me to the arena for a hockey game. I wasn't sure how I would get to Decker, but surely if I told someone I was his sister, they would at least get a message to him? This probably wasn't the smartest approach, but I'd been desperate to get the hell out of L.A., and once I'd figured out where my brother was, Fort Lauderdale seemed like the logical choice.

Decker was the only family I had left. My parents and older brother John were all but dead to me, and Decker and I had been close as children. He was the only person I hadn't wanted to leave when I'd run away, so I held out hope he might want to have some sort of relationship again. I honestly didn't have a clue what I would do if he didn't want to see me.

I was a survivor, though, so if that was the case, I'd move on.

I had a friend in Atlanta who'd said I could stay with her while I figured out what to do next, as well a couple of friends in New York City. My ex's stepmother and I had gotten close,

and she wanted to hire me as her assistant, but there was a legal battle happening over the hockey team she'd inherited from my late father-in-law, so it would be a while until that was a viable option.

The problem was that I had to figure something out sooner rather than later because I hadn't left my marriage with a whole lot of money. I needed a job unless I wanted to blow through the fifty grand I'd gotten in the settlement, and I wanted to save that for the proverbial rainy day. To buy a car. Maybe a down payment on a condo.

That line of thinking was for another day, though.

Today I was going to see my kid brother.

I hoped so, anyway.

The warm-ups had just started when I got to the arena, and I spotted Decker right away. He wore the number sixty-five, and the long dark strands of hair peeking out from beneath his helmet were easy to spot.

He was big.

Much bigger than I remembered.

As I made my way closer to the ice, I was amazed at his size. In my mind, he was still the same tall-but-skinny fourteen-year-old he'd been when I'd left. Except he wasn't. He was a grown man, six feet one according to the internet, and around two hundred pounds.

He would always be my baby brother, but he was also a big, muscular professional hockey player.

I couldn't help but grin as I watched him shoot the puck at the net, laughing with his teammates as they warmed up. I hadn't followed hockey over the years, so I'd had to do a little digging online to catch up with his career, but I remembered watching him play as a kid and it brought another smile to my face.

I edged closer to the railing that paralleled the tunnel where I assumed the players would head back to the dressing room. This was the one place where I might be able to talk to him directly, but I had to get to the railing, and it was already packed with fans.

"Excuse me." I pushed forward, determined not to miss this opportunity.

The guys from the team were slowly heading back, and I practically held my breath as I saw Decker coming off the ice.

"Decker!" I called his name, but he was busy signing a jersey a little boy had thrust in his direction.

He moved past me, and I knew this was it. If I couldn't get him to turn around, it was going to be much harder to get to him.

"Decker! It's me. *Harper!*"

His back was to me, but he'd obviously heard me.

His body stiffened, and he stopped before slowly turning in my direction.

He scanned the crowd around me before his gaze settled on my face.

“It’s me,” I mouthed, nodding.

His eyes widened for a moment, and he took a step closer, his gaze never leaving mine. As if he couldn’t quite believe I was real.

“Harper?” He stared. *Hard*. “Is that really you?”

I nodded again. “It’s really me.”

“Holy fucking shit.”

We stared at each other for another moment.

Then he turned to someone in a suit, whispering something to him.

“Don’t go anywhere,” Decker said to me. “I’m going to get you a pass to come down to the family lounge after the game, okay?”

I nodded.

He took another look around, as if realizing where he was, and that people were watching us.

“I have to go, but I’ll see you later.”

He turned and disappeared down the tunnel.



THE FAMILY LOUNGE was a big room with couches, chairs, and a small bar set up on one side. There was a massive TV mounted on one wall and a toy box stuffed with the kinds of things kids of all ages would enjoy. Obviously, this was a

place the families of the players came to relax as they waited for their boyfriends, husbands, and fathers.

I caught more than one curious look from the other women, and I wasn't sure whether to smile, start a conversation, or just look away. How could I explain my presence?

Hi, I'm Sloane. Decker's older sister who ran away when he was fourteen.

That seemed ludicrous even in my head.

"Hi." A pretty blonde who appeared to be in her thirties approached me with a friendly smile. "I'm Tessa Petrov."

Great.

No idea who that was.

And she was holding out her hand.

"Hi. I'm Sloane." I shook her hand.

"Are you dating someone on the team? Usually, they warn us so we can make sure you're not awkwardly standing here by yourself while the rest of us talk and socialize without you." She cocked her head, curious but still friendly and relaxed.

"Uh, no." Shit. I didn't know how to explain everything. "I'm here to see Al—uh, Decker."

Her brows lifted a fraction of an inch. "Decker?"

"Yes." I shifted from one foot to the other. "We haven't seen each other in a long time. I—"

“Mommy!” An indignant voice interrupted us, and a towheaded little boy with a huge scowl tugged on Tessa’s leg. “Andy took my truck.”

Tessa didn’t even look down. “Andy, give AJ back the truck.”

“Mo-om!” Andy’s voice was only slightly less whiney than AJ’s.

“Now.” Her eyes were still locked with mine.

“Listen to your mother!” A tall man with what sounded like a Russian accent, blond hair cropped close to his head, and a nose that had undoubtedly been broken a few times, came over to glare at Andy. Then he said something in Russian and the boy sighed, handing his younger brother the truck.

“I had it under control,” Tessa muttered to him as he kissed her.

“Yes, but I don’t get to yell at them in Russian very often. Don’t ruin my fun.”

She laughed and kissed him back. “Fine.” She turned to me. “Have you met Coach Petrov? He’s our head coach. And my husband. I don’t know how much Decker has told you about us.” She emphasized Decker’s name as she glanced at her husband.

He didn’t seem surprised and smiled as he held out his hand. “Decker’s caught up with a reporter, but he’ll be right out. He asked me to tell you he’ll be here soon. I’m Toli, by

the way. Unless you plan to try out for the team. Then it's Coach Petrov."

I smiled, feeling more at ease as I shook his hand. "I can skate, but I don't think hockey's in my future. So it's nice to meet you, Toli."

He grinned. "Likewise. Anyway, he'll be down shortly." He turned, scooped up AJ, and went back into the hallway.

I glanced in his direction just as a tall guy with dark hair and shockingly blue eyes came into the room.

Jesus.

Whoever he was, he was beautiful.

He had broad shoulders that filled out the jacket of his suit perfectly with a smaller waist and hips. A little bit of dark hair peeked out from where he'd left the top three buttons of his dress shirt undone, and when he lifted a hand to wave to one of the women, I noted long, thick fingers. He had great hands, and I momentarily imagined them cupping my ass.

Fuck.

What was I doing?

I wasn't going to fuck one of my brother's teammates.

But if I *were* going to do something like that, this would be the guy.

A pretty blonde approached him, though, laughing at something he said and then shaking her head.

Oh, well.

The chances a gorgeous guy like him was single were small.

Probably for the best since I wasn't going to be here long.

He was sweet to look at, though.

“Harper?”

I almost didn't turn around since no one had called me that in a very long time.

But that was why I was here.

To reconnect with the younger brother I hadn't seen in over a decade.

I turned and looked right into his eyes.

“Decker.”

The name sounded foreign on my lips, but it was him.

“It's really you.” He hesitated for long seconds, his eyes on mine.

Then he took three long steps toward me and pulled me into his arms.

S loane

I CLOSED my eyes and breathed in the faint scent of his aftershave.

There was something comforting about him, despite the years since I'd last seen him, and I hung on for a handful of seconds before pulling away.

It was way too soon to get attached.

To assume he was the brother I remembered, the one I'd been dreaming of for so long.

I wanted a brother.

A family.

Some semblance of normalcy.

To feel like I wasn't alone in the world.

But I didn't trust easily, and certainly not someone from the past.

Besides, there was a blonde eyeing me like she was going to chew me up and spit me out, so I was a little confused. I thought she was with Tall, Blue-Eyed, and Handsome, but the look she was giving Decker told me I miscalculated on that one.

“Decker?” Her voice was soft, as if it took a lot of restraint not to make a scene.

“Babe.” He turned, immediately taking her hand. “Come here. I want you to meet Harper. My *sister*.”

“Sloane,” I said quietly. “I legally changed my name. But it’s nice to meet you.” I held out my hand, and the blonde blinked.

“Sloane, this is my fiancée, Eden.”

Her face underwent a handful of emotions—very visible ones—before she reached out to shake my hand. “Oh. Hello. I’m so sorry, I had no idea you were coming.”

“Neither did he.” I smiled, hoping I looked friendly and non-threatening. I would imagine seeing your fiancé hug an attractive stranger would be jarring, and I wasn’t here to screw up his life.

“I’m so confused,” Decker said after a moment. “But really happy to see you. I tried to find you, but the picture the private detective sent me wasn’t you. Her name was Harper Barrowman. Does that ring any bells?”

I wasn’t sure how much I liked the idea he’d tried to find me, but I would reserve judgment until I’d at least had a conversation with him. “Funny story, but here’s the long and

short of it. When I turned eighteen, I married a guy named Edward Barrowman, the Third. Then I legally changed my name to Sloane Barrowman. My father-in-law, Edward Barrowman, Jr., met a woman named Harper, whom he then married. Making *her* Harper Barrowman.”

“Geez.” Decker shook his head. “Well, at least it makes sense. Father and son both marrying women with the same name is ironic, I guess.”

“A little. But I haven’t been Harper in a long time.”

“What made you come look for me?” he asked, his fingers intertwined with Eden’s.

“I saw you on TV,” I admitted. “I was with Harper—who is my now ex-mother-in-law—and we had hockey on. They interviewed you between periods, and I almost fell off my chair, staring at the screen. I made her rewind it at least four times so I could just look at you.”

“I started looking for you a few years ago,” he said. “But your mother-in-law was as close as I came.” He hesitated. “She looks young in the pictures I saw.”

I nodded. “Thirty-five. A much younger woman to my father-in-law. But the best thing that ever happened to him. He passed away earlier this year, but she and I are still close, despite the divorce.”

“Edward Barrowman.” Decker frowned. “Wait, are you talking about the owner of the L.A. Phantoms?”

I nodded. “I didn’t know anything about hockey or the team. My husband, Eddie, and I moved to the South of France

a couple of years after we got married, when he graduated from Yale. I was running from...the past, and he was running from Daddy's expectations. It worked out well for a while."

"Until it didn't?" Eden met my gaze as if she knew something about running.

"Basically."

"Hey, Decker, we're going to Cicero's!" someone yelled out. "You coming? And bringing your friend?"

Decker turned to me questioningly. "Are you hungry? Cicero's is an Italian restaurant owned by the family of one of my teammate's wives. Or we could head back to our house? I'd love to talk for a while."

I wasn't sure I was comfortable going home with him, despite him being engaged. We had a lot to talk about, and a restaurant with his hockey team wasn't the venue for it, but it was a nice neutral place where we could at least start getting to know each other again.

Right?

I wasn't even sure what I was afraid of at this point. It wasn't like he was going to hurt me. He never had as a child, and he seemed happy to see me.

I had to stop thinking like a victim.

I would *never* be anyone's victim again.

"I could eat," I said aloud.

"Did you drive?" Eden asked. "You want to ride with us?"

I didn't.

But I would.

I couldn't continue to be afraid of the big world out there.

I'd let Eddie shelter me and look where that had gotten me.

No, it was time to get back to the land of the living.

One tiny step at a time.

"Sure," I said, swallowing. "I took an Uber here. I just got to Fort Lauderdale this afternoon."

"Did you come specifically to meet me?" Decker asked.

"I did. I was hoping..." I bit off the rest of that sentence. What was I supposed to say?

I was hoping you're not an abusive evangelical prick like everyone we grew up with.

"You were hoping...?" he prodded.

"I was hoping you didn't grow up like most of the other people we were raised with."

His face changed from curiosity to horror, and he quickly shook his head. "Fuck no. I don't talk to our parents and only have a very superficial relationship with John."

John was our older brother.

"He's not like them?" I asked doubtfully.

He wobbled his hand from side to side. "Abusive and crazy? No. Still a little too religious for me? Yes. We, uh, well, things got physical between us after a game last season when your name came up, and he swears he didn't know. He'd heard inklings, but he didn't know what had happened to so many of

you. He gave everyone the benefit of the doubt. I also had him talk to Kristy and—”

“Kristy!” I remembered his childhood best friend. “You’re still in touch with her?”

He nodded, breaking out in a grin. “Absolutely. Still good friends. She and her wife are trying for a baby.”

“Oh. Wow. I guess there’s a lot for me to catch up on.”

“A hell of a lot.”

“Well, let’s go eat then.” I turned, momentarily locking eyes with the blue-eyed god from earlier.

He was so damn hot.

Too bad I wouldn’t be here long enough to get to know him.

I’d be here long enough for a one-nighter, though.

Hmm.

Probably not a good idea.

I didn’t want to do anything that would make Decker look bad.

Not that there was anything wrong with two consenting adults having sex, but I wasn’t stupid. It would probably be frowned upon for Decker’s sister to hook up with one of his teammates on a quick trip through town.

Unless no one found out...

Stop it. I chided myself as I broke the gaze and followed Decker and Eden down a hallway.

“See you at Cicero’s!” he called to someone.

Another guy knuckle-bumped him, and several others followed us out to what appeared to be a private parking lot.

The players’ lot.

I had to remember this wasn’t my teenaged kid brother.

He was a professional hockey player, most likely making millions of dollars a year.

“Tell us about you,” Eden said once we were on the way.

“Well, after I ran away, I fell in with a group of runaways who wandered the country together. We went from Detroit to Chicago and then to New York. It was easier to get lost, I guess. I met Eddie the summer I was seventeen, and we fell in love, for lack of a better word. He was already an angry rich kid anxious to piss off Daddy, so he moved me into his apartment at Yale. He knew my story, what I was running away from, and it was his idea to get married. Once I turned eighteen, I could legally change my name and it would be hard for anyone to find me. Except someone did.”

“Someone?” Decker met my gaze in the rearview mirror.
“Who?”

“Dad.” I made a face. “About a year after we’d been married. My name change hadn’t quite gone through yet, so I guess he’d been looking for me once I wasn’t on the run anymore. Thank goodness I saw him across the street from where I was working before he saw me. I hid and called Eddie. We were in L.A. at the time, so he came and picked me up, and we talked to his father, who knew everything. My father-

in-law was amazing.” I smiled. “I miss him. Anyway, he agreed my family was dangerous, so he sent us to Europe. Eddie would work for one of the family’s financial institutions, and I got to be a spoiled trophy wife.” I hesitated. I didn’t love this part of the story.

“When did you come back to the States?” Decker asked after a slight hesitation.

“A little over a year ago. Edward, my father-in-law, had cancer, and I still wasn’t pregnant.” I sighed. “We’d been trying for a few years, but it never happened. And Eddie was getting tired of not having any heirs since that was the only way to guarantee him a share of Daddy’s money. They hadn’t been getting along because Eddie wasn’t good at anything except spending. He didn’t work often, and when he did, he screwed up, so they’d essentially asked him not to come in anymore. We spent all our time traveling, and he spent his drinking, gambling, and fucking other women.”

“I’m sorry.” Eden’s voice was filled with genuine regret, and I realized for the first time she had a British accent.

“Where are you from?” I asked curiously.

“Manchester, England.” She smiled as she glanced back at me. “But I went to an American university in Switzerland, so my accent is fading fast.”

“Eh.” Decker made a face, and they both laughed.

There was no doubt she adored him whenever she looked at him, and that made me happy.

My brother seemed like a good guy so far.

“Anyway, Daddy cut Eddie off, and Eddie essentially cut me off. I got to keep all my pretty clothes, shoes, and purses, plus a fifty-thousand-dollar payout—that was in the prenup—and now I’m single and starting over. At twenty-eight.”

“Where are you living?” Decker asked.

“I don’t know yet,” I admitted. “My stuff is in storage at Harper’s house in L.A., and she wants to hire me as her assistant, but I’m sure you’ve heard about the legal battle going on over ownership of the Phantoms.”

Decker nodded. “Yeah, it’s supposedly ugly.”

“You have no idea. The current version of my ex-husband is nothing like the man I married. He and his brother are so angry they didn’t inherit the team. The will is ironclad, but they’ve said they’d rather go bankrupt tying her up in court than to let her have their legacy.” I rolled my eyes even though Decker and Eden probably couldn’t see it.

“Bloody hell,” Eden murmured.

“So in the meantime you’re out of a job?” Decker asked.

“Basically. My friend in Atlanta has offered to let me come live with her while I find something there, but I don’t know if that’s where I want to end up. I’ll probably go back to L.A. and maybe wait tables or something while Harper muddles through the lawsuit. I can live with her, so I have options. I’m just not sure how I feel about them.”

“You could stay with us,” Decker offered.

“Oh, I wouldn’t want to impose,” I replied quickly.

“You’re my sister,” he said, meeting my gaze in the mirror again. “It’s not an imposition.” He glanced at Eden. “Is it?”

She laughed. “Of course not. You’re gone all the time. It’ll be nice to not be alone.”

“I’m not ready for that,” I admitted softly. “We need time to get to know each other again. You have no idea how hard it was to come here.”

Decker pulled into a busy parking lot and turned to glance at me.

“Well, I’m really glad you did.”

J ohan

ENGLISH WAS MY SECOND LANGUAGE, so a lot of the time I missed whatever drama was going on with my teammates. There was no way to miss this, though. The moment Decker, Eden, and his sister drove off our group text went wild. None of us had even known he had a sister.

FELIX: Did we know he had sister?

JOHAN: Did we know he had a HOT sister?

SLAVA: I knew. He'd been looking for her for a long time. She was a runaway.

VAUGHN: You know he's going to kick your asses if he hears you call his sister hot?

Vaughn was our team captain, and always the voice of reason.

Ooops.

But she was hot.

Super hot.

Like, burning up all my fantasies hot.

Those eyes.

Fuck.

They spoke to me.

Mine were as blue as the Mediterranean Sea. Hers were cobalt. Like a pair of brilliant sapphires.

FELIX: She is beautiful. This is secret?

VAUGHN: Beautiful and hot are two different words, boys.

ANDERS: Why are there so many rules when it comes to women? This is fucking exhausting.

He had a point.

Thank god for the translation program on my phone.

Otherwise, I'd miss out on more than I already did.

Two years in Canada and five years in the US, and I still didn't speak English worth a damn.

I was working on it, though.

Slava's new wife, Zoe, was an English teacher, and she'd been tutoring me.

So I was getting better.

JACE: Anyone know her name?

SLAVA: Harper.

GABE: Great. Now I'll have two of them to keep track of.

VAUGHN: Your ex still giving you grief?

GABE: She personifies giving men grief.

FELIX: Is she hot?

GABE: Way too hot for you, buddy.

FELIX: Only you think this. Women love Felix.

I closed the text program and stuffed my phone in my pocket as I walked into Cicero's. Decker and Eden were sitting on one end of a few tables that had been moved together, and I immediately sought out Harper.

Yup.

Still fucking breathtaking.

"Johan." Decker motioned for me to sit. "This is my sister, Sloane. Sloane, this is Johan Hajek."

Sloane? I felt like I'd missed something, but it was probably just a language barrier.

"Nice to meet you." She smiled up at me, and even her voice was hot.

What the fuck?

"My English not so good," I told her. "But yes, nice to meet you."

I had niceties down pat.

And I could talk dirty in about six languages, so I was all set there.

It was everything in between that was a problem.

"Your English is getting better," Eden said, grinning at me. "My friend Zoe's been tutoring him."

“Awesome.”

They started talking about her work and other things I couldn't keep up with, so I turned to Wolf Bodilsen, who was sitting across from me with his wife, Scarlett.

“How's it going, Johan?” Scarlett was lovely, and I genuinely liked her.

The language barrier didn't bother her in the least, and she'd taken the time to download a translation app on her phone so she could talk to the handful of us on the team who struggled with English. It was such a nice gesture; she'd essentially become one of my closest friends.

“Okey-dokey,” I responded, stealing a line from Scarlett and Wolf's eleven-year-old daughter, Naomi. She wasn't here tonight since it was a school night, but I spent enough time with them to have picked up the phrase.

Wolf rolled his eyes. “Do you have to? I hear that at home every five minutes.”

I laughed. “Is okay. I will say fine next time.”

“You hush.” Scarlett nudged her husband. “He's learning new words and using them appropriately.”

Luckily, I understood more than I spoke.

“Whatever.” Wolf leaned back and slid his arm along the back of her chair.

I liked watching them together.

He was a big, burly hockey player.

Very few were tougher than Wolf on the ice.

He looked the part, too, with his long hair and piercing gaze.

But off the ice? As a husband and father?

He was the opposite.

Kind, gentle, and loving.

Caring and engaged in everything, even though he knew next to nothing about makeup and nail polish, which seemed to be most of what Naomi thought about. He and Scarlett had recently adopted her, and they'd only been married for less than a year, so he'd adapted to his new role easily.

He was the type of husband and father I wanted to be someday.

I was twenty-eight, and though I was open to a relationship, no one interesting had come along. I met lots of women as a pro athlete, but far too many were only interested in my money. Between that and the language barrier, dating wasn't easy for me, and I didn't spend enough time in my hometown outside of Bratislava to meet women in the off-season.

Not that my family didn't try.

Every time I went home my grandmother had a line of eligible young virgins waiting for me.

It was almost comical.

I wanted something more, though.

Someone I could talk to, relate to both about hockey and other topics.

Someone who wasn't just interested in marrying a guy with money.

Someone strong and smart and elegant.

Someone who would challenge me and keep life interesting.

I was probably asking for too much.

Hence why I was single.

"You comin' to the cookout tomorrow?" Wolf asked me.

I nodded. "Home-cooked food. I am a fan." I hoped that was the right phrase.

He laughed. "Lots of home-cooked food. I think the ladies are trying to make us too fat to skate so we all have to stay home."

"They're on to us," Scarlett moaned, cutting a glance at Eden.

Eden giggled, which set off several of the other wives and girlfriends.

"I don't know what your plans are, Sloane," Wolf said, ignoring them. "But you're welcome to join us tomorrow."

"Oh. Thank you." Sloane smiled, and it momentarily blinded me. "I don't have any plans. I just wanted to spend time with Decker while I'm here."

"How long are you here?" Scarlett asked her.

"I'm not sure. I didn't know if I was actually going to find Decker, so I left my plans open-ended."

Did that mean she wasn't staying for long?

The conversation went a little faster than I could follow after that, but I understood enough to know she was in town for at least a few days and would be attending the cookout at Wolf and Scarlett's tomorrow.

Now I just had to figure out how to strike up a conversation with her.



I WAS UP EARLY, anxious to get in a workout before heading over to Wolf's. Whenever we had team parties, there was a lot of food. Too much, in fact, and it was hard not to overindulge. I stayed in good shape playing hockey, but there was only so much steak, burgers, and potato salad you could eat without putting on some weight. Not to mention the gourmet cupcakes Vaughn's wife, Juliet, baked regularly. Or the scones Eden had been sending to practice with Decker every time she tested out a new flavor.

It was hard to say no day in and day out.

Not that I worried about my weight, but I'd heard from older guys that it got harder once you hit thirty, and that was less than two years away for me.

My phone rang as I was driving over to Wolf and Scarlett's place, and I sighed when I saw my grandmother's name on the screen.

If I didn't answer now, she'd just keep calling since she knew I didn't have a game or travel today. She knew my

schedule better than I did sometimes, so I answered.

“Good afternoon,” I said in Slovak.

“It’s evening here,” she countered.

I smiled.

Being ornery was her favorite thing.

“I’m on my way to a team meeting,” I said, even though that was a lie.

“Why aren’t you ever going out on a date?” she asked. “Handsome, rich, young man like you should have women following you around.”

“They do, but I’m not interested in them.”

“You’re a homosexual,” she said dramatically. “I wish you would just admit it so I can stop thinking about great-grandchildren.”

I laughed heartily. “I’m not gay,” I said, shaking my head. “I’m just picky. Do you want me to marry a gold-digger?”

“Pre-nuptial,” she snapped. “Then we don’t have a problem.”

“If we have children, I’m stuck with her forever. Even if we divorce.”

She muttered something under her breath I didn’t quite catch, but I figured it was filled with sarcasm.

“Shit happens,” she said finally. “Divorce happens.”

“Professional athletes have anywhere from a sixty- to eighty-percent divorce rate,” I said. “There’s a reason I’m

being extra cautious.”

She sighed. “I know, but you’re not getting any younger.”

“You mean, *you’re* not getting any younger.”

“You should be nicer to me,” she said haughtily.

“You should be nicer to *me*, since I’m the one who will choose the old person’s home I put you in when you can’t live alone anymore.”

She spewed a litany of curses in multiple languages that made me laugh all over again.

“Stop it,” I said, as I pulled into Wolf and Scarlett’s driveway. “Anyway, I have to go soon. Is everything okay? How’s Dad?”

She’d been living with my father and stepmother the last few years, and none of them were happy about it. My father had married a woman twenty years younger than him—just a couple of years older than me—and they were talking about having a baby. I found it a bit frustrating since my mother had only been gone a few years, but I didn’t begrudge him happiness.

My father had played professional hockey in Slovakia, and he was still in good shape in his early fifties. He wasn’t too old to start over, but my sister and I didn’t like his new wife. Not because she was replacing our late mother or anything like that, but because she didn’t seem to do anything but spend his money. She also didn’t treat our grandmother well, which neither of us liked.

My stepmother was a big part of the reason I was as particular as I was about women.

“He’s so in love with his wife he can’t see straight, but that’s a conversation for another time.”

“Don’t let her push you around,” I said firmly. “If she does, let me know.”

“Then I can come live with you?” she asked playfully.

We’d had this conversation more than once.

“If you need to.” It would be a hassle, but I’d do it if I had to.

“Then I could find you a wife!” She cackled gleefully.

“I guess I’m going to start looking into nursing homes now.”

She snorted and hung up.

It was a good thing I loved her.

I got out of my vintage 1965 Mustang and walked toward the front door. It was open since Felix and Anders had arrived right before I did, so I followed them inside.

“Hey, guys! Go on out back,” Scarlett called. “Wolf is grilling.”

I waved at Scarlett and headed out to their beautiful patio. Part of it was covered and included an outdoor kitchen, built-in grill, lots of chairs and seating, and a jacuzzi. The uncovered portion included a pool with a slide, a pool house, and a firepit with more seating around it.

Their house was something else I was envious of.

I'd been saving for one, but it didn't feel right to buy a house without the input of a woman.

Maybe I was just old-fashioned.

I was so lost in thought I nearly stumbled when I collided with a brunette with her back to me.

“Sorry!” I said quickly, reaching out to steady the woman.

Then she turned and smiled, those cobalt eyes of hers made it hard to think.

“Hi. I'm Sloane. We didn't really have a chance to talk the other night.”

S loane

How WAS it possible he was even hotter up close?

“Hello.” I liked his voice too. “I am Johan.”

Rough.

Accented.

Sexy.

He cleared his throat, and even that was kind of sexy.

Geez, this was ridiculous.

It wasn't like I'd never met a good-looking man before.

“Right. I remember.” I tried to keep my voice casual.

“How are you?”

“I am good. My English...” He made a face.

“It's okay, I understand you.”

“You are having fun? With your brother?”

I smiled. "It's nice getting to know him again. I haven't seen him in close to twelve years."

"Is long time." He frowned.

"I ran away when I was sixteen. It's a long story."

"Maybe someday you will tell me." He seemed sincere, and I couldn't help but wonder if I would ever have the opportunity to tell him about the events leading up to my running away from home. I didn't like to talk about it anymore. The therapists I'd seen over the years had pulled it all out of me, and now I tried to look ahead instead of back.

"I try not to talk about it," I admitted softly. "But thank you."

"Johan, you want a beer?" Anders called to him.

"Yes. Thanks!" Johan nodded and started to go in that direction before pausing to look back at me. "We will talk again?" It was a question, but there was no doubt about the answer.

"I'd like that." I watched him go, appreciating the long line of his back and legs.

"You might be drooling," Scarlett whispered, chuckling.

I flushed and quickly shook my head. "He's *gorgeous*. I can't help it."

"He's also single." She grinned broadly, making me chuckle.

"I won't be here long, so it's pointless to start anything."

"How long do you plan to stay?" she asked.

“I’m... not sure. I just got divorced and need to start looking for a place to live and a job. The job I had lined up is temporarily on hold, but I don’t want to do nothing while I wait.”

“What do you do?”

I flushed. “My ex-husband worked for a company in France, so that’s where we lived for most of our marriage. I couldn’t work while I was there, which means my resume is woefully empty. It’s a little embarrassing, but I didn’t know I was going to be divorced at twenty-eight. I’m not formally trained to do anything.”

She didn’t seem put off by that. “Well, if you’re looking for something temporary, we need a nanny to watch our eleven-year-old daughter for a couple of weeks while I’m in Australia and Wolf is traveling with the team. We have a nanny, but her mom died, so she’s back in Oklahoma for an undetermined length of time, which leaves us without backup.”

I stared.

Not what I’d been looking for professionally, but it afforded me the opportunity to get to know Decker and Eden without blowing through my savings.

“You don’t even know me,” I said after a moment.

Scarlett smiled. “You’re Decker’s sister, and we’re all family here. If you’re part of his life that’s good enough for us.”

I unexpectedly teared up.

How long had it been since I'd had a family?

I would've had one if Eddie and I hadn't run away to Europe.

And if he hadn't been such a douche.

He hated his stepmother, and it caused a rift in the family, so I'd missed out on what I could have had with them.

Decker had only been back in my life for a day, and it already felt like I was getting a second chance. That was ironic because I hadn't been looking for anything in particular. I'd given up on second chances a long time ago, and I would've been happy just to have a casual relationship with my brother.

"Thank you," I said quietly. "I would be happy to help out. How long will you be gone?"

"I'll be gone almost two weeks, Wolf ten days. I retired from surfing last fall, but my friend Tawny needs a coach for the upcoming season, so I'll be traveling on and off until I can't."

"Until you can't?"

She grinned. "I'm pregnant. I'm fine for now, and Tawny needs me, so I'll travel with her while I'm able."

"Well, that's exciting!"

"It's *soooo* not exciting." A dour-faced blonde of about eleven made a face as she joined us. "Babies make too much noise and need *soooo* much attention. It's exhausting." She flounced away dramatically, and Scarlett grinned.

“And there she is. You sure you’re happy to help? She’s incredibly hormonal right now.”

“I can handle anything for two weeks.”

“She’s a little gun-shy.” Scarlett dropped her voice. “I was pregnant a little over a year ago and miscarried after a car accident. Naomi was incredibly invested in the baby, so I think she took it hard. She also lost her mother last year, which is how we got to adopt her. She’s been through a lot, so I’m probably more patient than I might be otherwise.”

“Oh, that is a lot,” I said sympathetically. “She’s so young to deal with those kinds of things. And I’m so sorry. About all of it.”

She nodded. “Thanks. I lost something, but I also gained a lot. Wolf and I finally got married—that’s a story for another day—and even though we were grieving, we were in a position to adopt Naomi after she lost her mom. Not to mention my newfound family here with the Knights.”

“It seems like you’re all very close.” I looked around at the happy, relaxed atmosphere.

“This organization is amazing. The guys are great, most of the wives and girlfriends get along, and the owner and his wife go out of their way to make everyone feel welcome. You might want to stay in Lauderdale, you know.” She wiggled her eyebrows. “There are quite a few eligible bachelors here, too.”

I laughed. “The ink isn’t even dry on my divorce yet.”

“Well, love tends to show up when you’re least expecting it.”

“I don’t know if I’m ready for love, but I’d be happy with some good sex,” I admitted with a grin.

“Well, I’ve only been with the one on the team—and he’s not available—but from what I’ve heard, they all attend a special hockey player sex class that teaches them how to be orgasm masters.” She dropped her voice dramatically.

I burst out laughing.

“What’s funny?” Decker asked, coming over to us.

“Girl talk.” Scarlett winked and walked away.

“Your friends are nice,” I told my brother. “I mean, genuinely so.”

“I think so too,” he said, his eyes meeting mine. “So you’re having fun?”

“Yes. Thank you for letting me tag along.”

“I want to spend as much time with you as possible before you head back to L.A. or whatever.”

“Me too. And it looks like I’ll be here for at least a couple of weeks. Scarlett just asked me to watch Naomi while she and Wolf are both out of town.” I paused. “I guess I won’t be able to spend time with you since you’ll be on the same trip as Wolf, but I can get to know Eden a little, and I’ll still be here when you get back.”

“That’s great!” He seemed genuinely excited at the prospect of me staying longer. “And if you don’t want to stay at a hotel, you’re welcome to stay with us.”

I hesitated. I still didn't know him that well, and while I hadn't hesitated to agree to stay at Wolf and Scarlett's with Naomi, staying with Decker and Eden would be complicated for me emotionally.

"No?" he asked when I didn't reply right away.

He was my brother, so I needed to be honest if I wanted a true relationship with him.

"I have trust issues," I said quietly. "Especially with you." My eyes met his.

He didn't look away. "Because of what I'm assuming happened to you when we were kids."

I nodded, though I didn't say anything.

"I know what happened to Kristy," he said after a moment. "She told me everything, so if the same things happened to you, I understand why you left and why you have trust issues. I just want to make your life easier, Harp—er, Sloane. Sorry, it may take a while for me to get used to your new name."

"For years, I couldn't even hear the name without shuddering." I swallowed, looking away. "But I've been in therapy a long time, so I've learned to deal with it when my demons come calling."

"You should reach out to Kristy," he said. "I mean if you want to. You two might be good for each other."

"Maybe." I wasn't keen on rehashing the past. Not even with someone who'd apparently lived it with me, though I hadn't known it at the time. "How did she get away?"

“That’s a long story,” he said. “And not mine to tell. She’s coming to a game next month, so if you’re still here, that might be the easiest way for you two to reconnect.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re here.” He reached out to put a tentative hand on my shoulder and then yanked it back. “Is it okay to touch you?”

I nodded. “Yes, of course. I’m okay, Decker. I’ve spent a lot of time and money getting my head screwed on straight. It’s just you, in particular, that gives me pause because you were part of the life I left behind. I never thought I’d see you again.”

“What made you want to?” he asked, frowning slightly.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “There was something in your eyes when I saw that interview on TV. I can’t explain it because obviously you were talking about the game, but it felt like you were talking to me. I saw kindness and gentleness and... I mean, let’s be honest, we have the same damn face, except for the whiskers and your terrible eyebrows.”

He burst out laughing. “I guess we do.”

“Look, don’t be offended I’m not ready to stay with you yet.” This time I reached out and put both my hands on his biceps. “I’m going to stay at the hotel until Wolf and Scarlett leave, and then I’ll be here. We can reassess when they get back, and it’s time for me to find another place to stay.”

“Can you afford it?” he asked. “I know money is a touchy subject, but I’m your brother, and I have plenty. I can help.”

“I sold a bunch of shit when I left,” I told him. “And that brought in almost ten grand. Plus, I had a decent amount already in my checking account, and the fifty grand I got in the divorce settlement. I’m good for now. I’m assuming Scarlett and Wolf are going to pay me, so I think I’m fine for another month. After that, I’ll have to look at what I’m going to do.”

“Fair enough.”

“So... any of your friends single?” I asked playfully.

He frowned. “Hon, you do *not* want to get involved with my teammates. The single guys are... dogs. Some of those guys have women in every city we play in. Some nights the hotel hallways are like a revolving walk of shame.”

“There’s nothing shameful about *consensual* sex,” I said, lightly smacking his arm.

He lifted his hands, as if surrendering. “No, you’re right. I apologize for wording it that way, but seriously, I want you to be able to come visit, hang out with me, be a part of my life again. That’s not going to be comfortable if you’ve had a bad experience with one of my teammates. And then I’d have to kick his ass, and Coach would be mad.”

Okay, so he was the overprotective type.

It was sweet if not annoying, but he had a point.

If things went well, I did want to be able to spend time with him here, and it would be awkward if I slept with half of his teammates. Not that I would.

But Johan was a serious temptation.

Dammit.

Oh, well.

There were plenty of attractive, single men in L.A. and Atlanta.

Now I just had to figure out where I was going.

J ohan

IT WAS ALWAYS a good time when I hung out with my teammates outside of hockey. As expected, there was a ton of food, but we worked some of it off with a vigorous game of water volleyball. The pool was huge, so there were a dozen of us in the water playing at any given time. Scarlett and a few of the other ladies joined us, but for some reason I was surprised to see Sloane get in the water.

She wore a striking electric-blue bikini that covered everything but somehow managed to show off every gorgeous curve of her body. She was tall, probably five foot eight, with long legs and what appeared to be perfectly shaped breasts. C-cup if I had to guess, and I tended to know what I was talking about in that department. Her medium-length dark hair was up in a ponytail, she wore dark sunglasses hiding those gorgeous eyes, and she had an impish grin as she served.

The ball went over the net and all the way past the farthest player on the other team, but not out of the pool, which was

what we had designated the foul line. If it was in the water, it was good.

And so our team scored.

Over and over.

She had a strong arm and perfect aim.

It was brilliant.

“You are talented,” I said to her at one point. “You play this before?”

“My ex and I spent a lot of time playing volleyball when we lived in the South of France. It’s a twenty-four-seven party during the summer.”

I’d never been to France, so I had no idea, but she obviously shared her brother’s athleticism.

“Next time I want Sloane on *my* team,” Decker complained with a grin.

“Sorry, little brother.” She served again and the ball splashed down just out of his reach.

There was a lot of laughter and lighthearted teasing as we played.

It was January, but a beautiful warm, sunny day.

The only thing that seemed to be different in the winter in South Florida was the humidity. There had been two days that dipped into the fifties overnight in December, and the sixties during the day, but that had been the extent of what anyone might call winter here. Personally, I enjoyed the year-round warm weather, though the summers were brutal. Luckily, that

was the off-season when I traveled and went home to Slovakia.

Being in the pool in January was great, though.

Of course, in a few days we were leaving for a trip that would include Minneapolis, Calgary, Winnipeg, Seattle, Vancouver, and Anchorage, so that would be more winter than I cared for. But it was hockey, which was one of my favorite things.

Second only to sex.

And as I watched Sloane's strong, lithe body in the water, it occurred to me it had been a while since I'd gotten any.

"I don't think you should be looking at Decker's sister like that," Anders whispered as we got out of the pool. "I doubt he'd be happy about it."

"The only one who must be happy is her," I replied, chuckling.

He laughed. "I see you like living dangerously on *and* off the ice."

"Maybe." I grinned, but I wished that wasn't the case.

Somehow, even though I was a second-line center and a decent scorer, I'd morphed into the team's unofficial backup enforcer. Our six-foot-seven-inch defenseman, Zakk Marcus-Cloutier, would take the top spot as long as he was on the team, but this season I'd been jumping into the fray more often than not. I wasn't sure why because that had never been my thing, but it had all started last season during our playoff run when a couple of guys from Tampa had gone after our captain.

I'd been in a bad mood that night, and it had been the perfect opportunity to vent my frustrations.

Out of nowhere, my reputation as a bruiser had taken on a life of its own, and they'd written a bunch of news articles about me becoming the team's rising-star enforcer. How I'd toughened up over the years or some shit. It was ridiculous because I was truly no different than I'd been at twenty, just a little stronger and a lot more experienced. I'd always been able to fight, merely content to choose my battles.

Coach Petrov liked this new toughness, though, and the twenty-five-million-dollar five-year contract I'd gotten over the summer said the Knights organization did too.

"I didn't think anyone was as competitive as the guys on the team," I heard Decker say to Sloane. "But you're badass, sis. I don't remember you caring about sports when we were kids."

"Oh, I did, but I was always going to be in my hockey-playing kid brother's shadow, so what was the point?"

I couldn't hear Decker's response, but he looked sad as they continued talking, and I couldn't help but wonder if that had been the case with my sister. She was only eighteen months younger than me, and we'd been close growing up. She'd always been interested in clothes and makeup, things like that, and I didn't recall her showing any interest in sports. I was going to have to try to remember to ask her the next time we spoke.

"I think I'm out of shape," Sloane said, wrapping herself in a towel and sinking into a chair.

“You do not seem out of shape to me,” I said under my breath, making sure she was the only one who could hear me.

She cut a glance in my direction, a faint smile playing on her lips. She didn’t say anything at first, but her eyes twinkled, and the look she gave me told me we were on the same page.

“Nice to know you noticed.”

“I always notice beautiful woman.”

Woman?

Women?

English grammar was hard.

I was certain she’d get my point regardless of whether I used the right form of the word.

Before I could say anything else, Naomi came bounding over to us, hands on her hips as she stopped in front of Sloane. “Are you going to be my babysitter while Dad and Mom are gone?” she demanded.

“I’ll be your nanny, yes,” Sloane said patiently. “Is that okay?”

Noami frowned. “I haven’t decided.”

“I’ll do my best not to interfere in your routine.”

“I guess that’s okay.” Naomi chewed her lip. “Do you know anything about makeup?”

Sloane smiled. “A little.”

“Can you show me?”

“What does your mom say?”

“Mom says no makeup until you’re thirteen,” Scarlett interjected, arching her brows. “Except for special occasions. And don’t even think about going behind my back, young lady.”

Naomi sighed dramatically, turned her back on them, and then stalked back into the house.

“Are you *sure* you want the job?” Scarlett asked Sloane.

Sloane chuckled. “In for a penny, in for a pound.”

Now I had to ask someone what that meant.



THE PARTY WENT LATE, as they usually did. I probably would have left, anxious to get in a good night’s sleep before tomorrow’s morning skate, but I couldn’t seem to tear myself away from Sloane. I basically followed her around most of the day, staying close enough to listen to her voice and watch who she interacted with but not close enough to piss off Decker. He’d already told Anders to behave after he’d made a flirtatious comment, so I figured I’d have to watch myself. At least until I knew for sure Sloane was interested.

I came out of the bathroom just after nine and found Sloane waiting to go in.

“Hi.” She smiled, her eyes meeting mine.

“Hello.”

We stared at each other.

Fuck, she was beautiful.

What kind of moron was her ex-husband to divorce someone like her?

I wasn't an idiot. I understood there was more to marriage than looks, but so far, she'd been sweet, friendly, and easy to talk to. I couldn't imagine what kind of problems they'd had that had been insurmountable.

Of course, I was perpetually single, so what did I know?

"You're a man of few words," she said after a minute.

"I am man with bad English. If you speak Slovak, we talk a lot."

She chuckled. "I do not speak Slovak, but I have a translation app on my phone."

"So do I, but this is not..." I yanked out my phone and typed out the word I needed. "Intimate."

"It's not." She cocked her head. "But there are lots of ways to be intimate."

Was she flirting with me?

Oh, yes.

She absolutely was.

"Your brother..." I began.

She shrugged. "He's a little overprotective, but I'm twenty-eight years old and have been on my own since I was sixteen. I think I can take care of myself."

"I would like—" I bit off what I was going to say as Decker came around the corner. He narrowed his eyes at us.

“What are you guys doing?”

“Talking?” Sloane gave him a look. “Don’t be so overprotective. I’m an adult, not a scared sixteen-year-old anymore. Leave the past in the past, Decker.” She touched his arm and then headed back toward the party, abandoning the restroom.

And me.

“My sister is off-limits,” he said to me.

I arched my brows, suddenly a little irritated. “We were talking. This is bad?”

“It can be. Because I know what *talking* leads to with you fuckers.” He made quotation marks with his fingers when he said the word talking. “I’ve been looking for her for years, and now that I found her I don’t want a one-night stand to make her want to leave before I get a chance to know her again.”

I understood and respected his point, but she’d been the one to start the conversation with me. And there was no mistaking the attraction between us. I didn’t know what to do about that.

I shrugged. “This is not my wish. Was conversation. Nothing more.”

He sighed, leaning against the wall. “I know. Sorry, man. Just trying to step up and be a good brother since I couldn’t when we were kids.”

“She run away?” I asked, wishing I could be more articulate in English.

He nodded. “Twelve years ago. So it’s been a long time, you know? I was shocked when she found me at the game the other night. Now I don’t want her to leave.”

“She will go?”

“I think so. She’s got job possibilities in Atlanta and L.A.”

“You can play for Atlanta team,” I joked. “They will be happy to have you.”

That was our minor league affiliate.

Decker rolled his eyes. “Thanks, bro. Appreciate that.”

“Is okay.” I laughed and ambled back to the party.

If I was going to pursue Sloane, we were going to have to be much more careful.

And despite what I’d said to him, I already knew that was what I was going to do.

Maybe I really was the badass they said I was.

I almost laughed at the thought.

*S*loane

I SLEPT in the morning after the party and treated myself to room service breakfast. Staying at a nice hotel was expensive, it was going to be hard to suddenly watch every penny. I'd been married to a multi-millionaire for a decade. I hadn't been the type of woman who spent recklessly, but I'd never had to think about whether or not I could afford to order food or how much tip to leave. That had always been a given.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed and padded over to the window, opening the curtains. I'd gotten a room that overlooked the Atlantic Ocean on Fort Lauderdale Beach, and though it cost a little more than I wanted to spend since it was tourist season, it was worth it. I'd only be here two more nights, and then I'd move to Wolf and Scarlett's place. The guys were leaving tomorrow and Scarlett the following day.

Then I'd be in charge of a very hormonal pre-teen.

Naomi was sweet, though.

I'd spent a little time with her last night, and I'd seen a softer side. The side that missed her mom while simultaneously hating her for leaving her. Scarlett had told me it had been a drug overdose, so there was a lot of anger there.

And God knew I understood those kinds of emotions.

Anger, fear, disappointment, guilt.

So much guilt.

I figured she was dealing with some of that, too, so I could afford her a little grace.

I'd been sixteen and barely able to handle what life had thrown at me, and while I didn't see any signs of sexual abuse, the abuse Naomi had suffered by her addict mother still qualified as traumatic.

Brushing off thoughts of the past, I stretched and then got on the floor to do my morning meditation and yoga. My first therapist had recommended starting every day that way to calm and center myself. Back then I'd still had nightmares, so it had been helpful. And it had stuck even though the nightmares had stopped a long time ago.

As much as Eddie pissed me off, he'd also saved me.

He'd taken me away, put me in a position to change my name, and could afford to get me help. If nothing else, I'd always be grateful for that. The fact that he'd kicked me to the curb because I couldn't seem to produce an heir, well, that was something else.

I'd just finished breakfast when my phone rang, and I saw Harper's name on the screen.

“Hey!” I hit the button to put her on speaker while I tidied up the room. “How are you?”

“Ugh.” She moaned. “Your ex and his brother are making me batshit crazy.”

“I’m sorry. What now?”

“Well, there’s good news and bad news. The good news is that I can take over the team now if I want, since it’s legally mine. But the bad news is there’s going to be another hearing in March and the judge could technically overturn the will.”

“But how?” I demanded. “Ed put everything into place before the cancer diagnosis. He knew what he was going to do years ago.”

“Yes and no. He knew he didn’t want the boys to get the team, but he didn’t leave it to me until he got the diagnosis. Our agreement had been that he would start showing me the ropes, and I could decide if I wanted it or not since he would inevitably die first, considering the age difference. Then he got sick and put it in the will without telling me.”

“Eddie was fine until Tim put the bug in his ear. Tim wants the team, not Eddie. Eddie prefers being a rich playboy with zero responsibility.”

“I know, but they’re spending a fortune to oust me.”

“What does Madeline say?”

Madeline Aronson was one of the top attorneys in California, and though her main focus was the music business, she’d taken on Harper’s case because they were friends.

“She says the will is ironclad. Unfortunately, we have to go through the process and deal with each motion as they’re filed. Some will get thrown out, but obviously not all of them.”

“Christ.”

“I’m so sorry I have to keep you on hold, but I’m going to put you on the payroll.”

“What? No. You can’t pay me for doing nothing. They’ll use that in court against you if they find out.”

“I’m entitled to an assistant. How are they going to prove what my virtual assistant does or doesn’t do? And you need health insurance. This is the only way I can give it to you.”

“I’m fine. I’m healthy. I can go without for—”

“Would you stop being a pain in my ass?” she demanded. “I’m going to need you going forward, and you can manage my calendar and stuff remotely.”

“You have a calendar?”

She laughed. “I do. I’m meeting with the league to talk about taking over ownership. In fact, maybe I can fly you to New York to meet me when I go.”

“Oh, wow. Are there any other female owners?”

“Nope. So I’ll need you and Madeline with me just to keep things balanced.”

“Let me know when it is. I’m tied up the next two weeks, but after that I’ll probably head back to L.A. anyway.”

“Things not going well with your brother?”

“No, they’re fine. He and his fiancée, Eden, are lovely. The teammates I’ve met are nice too. And there’s this one... whew.”

“Hot?”

“Johan Hajek. Look him up.”

“Oooh.” I could hear her nails clicking on the keyboard.
“Oh, those eyes.”

“Right? And you should see him without a freakin’ shirt. We were in the pool at a team party yesterday and... fuck. He’s gorgeous.”

“Why do you sound... frustrated?”

I laughed. “Because my little brother is playing the part of overprotective big brother. I think he’s telling the guys I’m off-limits. So they don’t break my heart and scare me away.”

She hesitated. “He could be right, you know.”

“Come on, not you too.”

“I’m just saying, you’re barely divorced.”

“Which is why I could use some hot, uncomplicated sex before I start thinking about dating.”

“I guess there’s that. Assuming he’s any good in bed.”

“Yeah, that’s always a risk, but something tells me... I don’t know. It’s hard to explain. It’s like, when we look at each other, the room gets really warm. It goes beyond just being attracted to each other.”

“Well, you’re an adult, and if you want to sleep with a hunky Slovakian hockey player, you do you. Your brother needs to relax. The last thing you need is another guy trying to run your life.”

Eddie had been controlling.

That had been part of our problem.

At first, I’d liked it. Wanted it. Hell, I’d needed someone to take over after two years of wandering aimlessly while trying to stay under the radar of the authorities looking for me. Then I’d just wanted to be anonymous, so it had been easier to let Eddie make all the decisions. Eventually, though, that had gotten old.

“All right, well, I’m going to go meet up with Eden and some of the others before the game tonight, so I’ve got to get in the shower.”

“Okay. I’m going to send you some paperwork to fill out, so you can get on the payroll.”

“Perfect. And thanks.”

“You didn’t even ask about salary,” she said, laughing.

“I mean, if it’s under twenty grand, we’re going to have to talk. Beyond that, the health insurance alone is worth more than the salary.”

“I hope you’re not this much of a pushover in other areas of your life.”

I chuckled. “I’m not. Promise.”

“You’d better not be.”

“How much, Harper?”

She named a figure that made me gasp.

Was I worth nearly six figures as an executive assistant who technically didn't have any duties yet?

“Thank you,” I whispered.

“Talk soon.”

“Bye.”

I disconnected and got into the shower.

I didn't have to worry about money anymore, and it was suddenly incredibly freeing. I'd have to do some math once I got a paycheck to make sure I was living within my means, but while I hadn't been worried, I'd been keenly aware that I was no longer married to a millionaire.

I could have fought for more. The prenup prevented me from taking anything from his family or the trusts set up for him, and I hadn't wanted to draw it out or make it costly since he'd agreed to pay my legal fees if I didn't. I should have asked for alimony, but by the time we'd started talking about specifics, I'd just wanted out. Not my brightest move, though it was too late now.

Wrapping my wet hair in a towel, I pulled on the robe supplied by the hotel and sank onto the edge of the bed. Eden was going to pick me up at three o'clock, and we were going to meet up with a group of other wives and girlfriends at Vaughn and Juliet Elliott's house. This was apparently a thing, where a group of them met up at someone's house before

every game and they either carpoled or took Ubers to the games.

It seemed like they had fun together, and I briefly wondered what it would be like to be a part of them. Not just as Decker's sister, but as someone's wife or girlfriend.

Like Johan.

I smiled as I began towel-drying my hair.

There was no doubt we were both interested, but Decker was being ridiculous. I had a feeling he'd already made a big deal out of telling his teammates to stay away from me. It was as sweet as it was annoying, and I understood his need to protect me. It was just that he was protecting me from the wrong thing. I had no problems with casual sex or friendship.

I struggled more with relationships.

I would have been kidding myself if I put all the blame on Eddie.

Yes, he'd become heavily influenced—in a negative way—by his older brother the last few years, so that had become an issue. But I wasn't blameless. The pressure of those negative pregnancy tests month after month had made me irritable, and I wasn't the most affectionate woman in the world to begin with. I liked to fuck; making love was more problematic. And Eddie had been clingy. Especially early on.

The more he tried to be romantic, loving, and attentive, the harder I'd pushed back. Until he went the other direction. I'd addressed it in therapy, but it had been too little too late, and by that time, he'd been listening to his brother enough to

become a different man. The man I'd originally fallen in love with was long gone, replaced by someone I didn't even like, much less love.

Divorce had been inevitable, but I knew I had things to work on to be a better person. And hopefully a better girlfriend or wife to the next guy in my life.

I pulled on jeans and a T-shirt, planning to buy one of Decker's jerseys at the team store when we got to the arena, but Eden had a surprise for me.

"Decker had me buy this for you," she said, handing me one of the team's home jerseys with Decker's name and number on the back.

"Oh, this was so thoughtful," I whispered, clutching it to my chest as an unfamiliar wave of emotion washed over me.

Decker was the brother I remembered, and it made me equal parts uncomfortable and delighted.

"He wants you to feel welcome," Eden said after a moment. "I think he's planning to ask you to stay."

"I have a job waiting for me in L.A.—there's been a new development in that department—but even when I go back, I can come to visit. Often."

"He'd like that. We both would."

I suddenly had a feeling leaving Fort Lauderdale was going to be harder than I'd anticipated.

Johan

I WAS on the plane to Minneapolis, playing sudoku on my phone, when a text popped up from my grandmother. Sometimes I regretted buying her a smart phone and teaching her how to use it.

Today was one of those days.

“Fuck my life,” I grumbled, shaking my head. I’d heard my teammates use that phrase, and it felt appropriate right now.

“What’s wrong?” Anders was sitting next to me and peered over at the screen of my phone.

“My grandmother is crazy,” I said.

“Is *that* your grandmother?” he asked. “Because if so, I’m willing to risk it. Can I be your step-grandfather?”

I nudged him with my elbow. “Shut up. This is not my grandmother.”

It would have been better if it was. No, the picture on the screen was the most recent woman she was trying to set me up with.

“Then who is she? She’s gorgeous.”

“Slovak model,” I muttered, reading my grandmother’s text. “She will be in New York when we play there in March, and her grandmother and mine want us to meet.”

“What’s wrong with that?”

“I don’t want anyone to choose my future wife for me, especially not from back home.”

“You don’t have to marry her, dude. Just hook up and move on.”

I scowled. “I cannot. Not when our grandmothers are friends. If I hurt her feelings, I will have problems when I return to Slovakia.”

He shrugged. “It’d be worth the risk to me. She’s smokin’ hot.”

He didn’t understand how things worked.

It wasn’t exactly the “old country” in the traditional sense of that term, but in many ways it was. My grandmother was wonderful. Strong and funny and caring. She loved me and wanted what was best for me. I didn’t doubt that, which was why I put up with her shenanigans for the most part. The issue was that deep down, underneath the banter and laughter, she genuinely wanted me to marry a nice girl and make a bunch of babies because she fully expected me to retire from hockey in the next five to ten years and move *home*.

What she didn't understand was that Slovakia wasn't necessarily home anymore.

I'd spent two years at a Swiss high school, playing top level European junior hockey. Then I'd been in Canada in the minors for a while before coming to the U.S. I'd essentially grown up all over the place.

I was proud of my heritage and loved my family, but my life wasn't there anymore. It hadn't been for years. Hell, half the time when I went home in the off-season I was bored because I'd grown apart from most of my childhood friends. The guys I'd played hockey with were all over the world, so it was hard to stay in touch.

Despite the language barrier, these days I felt more American than anything else. My car, my home, my hobbies—they were all centered around a very North American lifestyle, if not specifically geared to the US.

Finding me a Slovakian woman was part of my grandmother's plan to lure me back to Slovakia.

What she hadn't yet picked up on was that regardless of the ethnicity of the woman I married, whoever she was would have to at least be willing to entertain the idea of living somewhere that wasn't Slovakia. I could potentially go back, but I couldn't look that far to the future. I might play into my forties—some guys did. I might get a job with whatever team I retired from, either coaching or scouting or in the back office. The possibilities were practically endless, so I didn't want to be tied down to a woman who had those kinds of expectations.

Or one whose family would be putting pressure on her to have those expectations.

It was complicated.

That was another big part of the reason I stayed single.

Sloane is American.

The thought came out of nowhere, and though I tried to push it away, I found myself scrolling the pictures I'd taken at the party yesterday. They'd been fairly innocuous, groups of us having a good time, but I'd made sure to include Sloane. In her bikini.

This one in particular was of her and Decker. Their heads were thrown back in the same exact manner, sharing almost identical smiles as they laughed.

And damn, that fucking bikini had haunted last night's dreams.

"What's her name?" Anders was asking.

I quickly swiped the photos app closed and frowned at him. "Who?"

"The model." He seemed confused.

"Oh. Uh, Irena."

"Irena what? If she's a model, I can look her up."

"I am not asking her last name," I grunted, putting my phone away. "I do not want to give her idea I am interested."

My phone buzzed as I spoke, and I grudgingly took my phone back out.

UNKNOWN NUMBER: Hello, Johan. This is Irena Varga. My grandmother got your number from your grandmother. They want us to meet up in New York in March, so I thought I would introduce myself. I don't know if I'll have time as I have back-to-back photo shoots that week, but I would be willing to meet for coffee.

I stared at the text.

Fuck.

What was happening?

I couldn't ignore the situation if she had my number.

JOHAN: Hello, Irena. I won't know my schedule until we arrive in New York. If we can find the time, coffee sounds good.

IRENA: Perfect. Take care.

Well, at least she wasn't trying to be friends.

Hopefully, we'd keep it that way.



THE WEEK FELT LONG, with the team a bit sluggish, and we lost the first two games. It felt like we needed something to shake us out of this mid-season lethargy, and it was during the second period of the Calgary game I got the chance to do what had become my job.

I won a face-off in our zone and sent the puck to Jace Sutherland, who quickly took it down the ice toward Calgary's goal. With two guys on his back, he turned and chipped it

along the boards behind Calgary's net. Calgary's defenseman didn't stop, even after Jace had sent the puck off, hitting him from behind and smashing into him hard.

"What the fuck, dude? Cheap shot, motherfucker!" Jace snapped, shaking it off.

"Well, you shouldn't have been busy admiring your pass."

"It was a late hit, fuck-face!"

I was only a few feet away, and I didn't slow down, hip-checking Calgary's guy and giving him an extra little shove.

"Hey, fuck you!" he shot back.

"You wanna go?" I threw down my gloves and took a swing before he could respond, hitting him square in the jaw.

Calgary's guy didn't hesitate, coming back hard, though he couldn't seem to connect as I dodged his fists.

We were immediately surrounded by our teammates and the linesmen, trying to break things up, but I landed a couple of more hits before they got us apart.

"You didn't have to go there," the ref told me. "I had the original call."

"I know. But I was pissed."

He grinned. "I get it."

"Fuck you, Hajek!" The guy from Calgary grunted as he passed me.

"We can go again," I snapped.

“All right, easy, boys. We’re done here.” The ref gave us both looks.

I grinned at my teammates and then lifted my hands in the air, egging on the crowd, who was booing.

Luckily, I didn’t get any additional penalties for instigating the fight, but we each got five minutes for fighting, and I heard the ref mention the boarding call he should have gotten when Calgary’s guy tried to protest. That shut him up, though he kept talking shit under his breath from the penalty box.

I kept my head down, trying to stay focused.

I didn’t like being the enforcer, but sometimes it felt good.

This guy from Calgary, Erolson, was an asshole. He’d mixed it up with Zakk earlier in the season, so we kind of had the same jobs on our respective teams. Except I didn’t go looking for trouble or hit guys from behind. Those were the types of hits that could cause serious injury, and I would never be that type of player.

Fighting was one thing.

Hurting someone was something else entirely.

I didn’t play those kinds of games, even if I did enjoy throwing a few punches. I just didn’t want to be in the position of always having to take the offensive. That was Zakk’s job. Mine was to win face-offs and help my teammates score goals. Fighting was supposed to be an occasional thing, not an expectation every time something went down on the ice.

“Thanks for having my back,” Jace said once I was out, and we were back on the bench.

“Always.” I nodded at him.

We were both men of few words, especially me, and there wasn't anything else that needed to be said.

“Beer on me at the bar tonight if you want to go.”

“Is not necessary, but yes.”

We grinned at each other.

“Showing off for Irena?” Anders asked, reaching over Jace to pat me on the head.

“What?” I turned in confusion.

“Who is Irena?” Felix asked. “And why didn't you tell me there was a woman in your life?”

“There is no—” I began.

“Wait, there's a new girlfriend, and we didn't know?” Wolf leaned over. “You been holding out on us, bro?”

“No, I don't—” I tried again.

“Johan and Irena. I like it.” Jace nodded, holding out his fist to me.

“When do we meet her?” Slava asked.

“You got a picture?” someone else called out.

Anders burst out laughing.

“You are an asshole,” I muttered.

He just laughed harder.

*S*loane

“HIT HIM!” Naomi jumped to her feet and swung her fist as we watched Johan and the guy from Calgary go at it on the TV screen.

Eden snickered and her friend Zoe, who was Slava Yegorov’s wife, clapped a hand over her mouth to keep her laughter in.

I didn’t know what I was supposed to do with this.

Scarlett hadn’t said anything about whether or not Naomi was supposed to enjoy hockey fights.

I, on the other hand, was horrified.

Not because I was offended or anything, but I barely knew the guy and my heart was in my throat. I couldn’t even imagine watching a man I was in love with fight like that.

Of course, in this particular case, Johan was the clear-cut winner. The other guy couldn’t land a single punch before the refs broke it up. Johan looked spectacularly pleased with

himself, lifting his arms as a distinct “fuck you” to the crowd as he skated toward the penalty box.

It was entertaining, if nothing else, and I figured I’d better get used to it if I was going to be the personal assistant to the owner of a hockey team.

“It’s all fake, though, isn’t it?” I asked.

Eden, Zoe, and Naomi all turned to me, eyes wide with surprise.

“Not really,” Eden said. “I mean, sure, once in a while two guys who know each other might put on a little show for fun, but generally? No. After a hit like the one we just saw, where Erolson boarded Jace? That was a hundred percent real.”

I wrinkled my nose. “Isn’t it usually defensemen who do the fighting?”

Naomi rolled her eyes in my direction. “You don’t know much about hockey, do you?”

I patiently shook my head. “No, I don’t. That’s why I’m asking questions.”

“They fight because it’s part of the culture,” she replied. “And because that’s how they show guys on the other team they can’t get away with playing dirty or cheap shots and stuff like that.”

“Got it.” I tried to keep a straight face since she seemed so intent on explaining things, but I could see Eden and Zoe snickering behind their wineglasses.

“It’s hard to watch them fight,” Zoe said. “Slava doesn’t do it often, but when he does, look out.”

“I don’t think Decker’s been in a fight since we’ve been together,” Eden mused, “but he said he will if the occasion arises. I’m not looking forward to it.”

“You get used to it,” Zoe told her.

“I can’t imagine,” I said, staring at the TV. “Just thinking about it stresses me out.”

“Be glad you’re not dating anyone on the team,” Eden said. “It gets exponentially harder. And don’t get me started on when they get hurt.”

“Ugh.” I made a face, taking a sip of wine. “I don’t want to think about that.”

“When do you go back to L.A.?” Zoe asked when a commercial came on.

“I don’t know. My ex mother-in-law, Harper, has hired me to be her assistant, but ownership of the team is tied up in a legal battle so right now there isn’t a lot for me to do. I’ll probably stay here for another couple of weeks and then head out.”

“You can always come stay with us,” Eden said. “It’s a lot more affordable than a hotel.”

“It’s not that,” I replied. “I’m just floundering a little. I need to settle somewhere. Buy a car. Harper’s paying me a good salary, and I’ll stay in her guest room until I find an apartment. Real estate is a bear in L.A., but it’s time for me to live independently. I went from my parents’ home to my

husband's. I've never been truly on my own." I glanced in Naomi's direction when I saw Eden start to ask me something I figured was about when I'd been a runaway, and she quickly changed the subject.

"Working for a hockey team should be exciting," she said instead.

"I hope so."

"Lots of cute guys on hockey teams," Naomi said, giggling.

I laughed. "I'm not looking. I just got divorced."

"Why did you get divorced?" Naomi asked.

"Well, it's complicated, but we got married really young. We were eighteen and twenty. And sometimes when you get married that young, you change as you grow up. Sometimes you grow together and other times you grow apart. I guess Eddie and I grew apart."

"Are you sad?"

I hesitated. I obviously wasn't going to get into the details of my marriage with an eleven-year-old. "I'm sad we couldn't make it work, but I wasn't in love with him anymore, so I'm not sad it's over."

"Johan likes you." Her eyes twinkled as she blurted that out.

Eden laughed, and Zoe snickered.

"He's very nice," I said carefully.

“He was staring at your boobies when you were in that bikini.”

I mentally grimaced.

“Uncle Decker is probably going to punch him.”

“No one is punching anyone,” Eden said quickly. “And you shouldn’t be paying attention to what the adults are doing. You know how these guys can be.”

“Well, anyone with eyes could see Johan staring,” she said. “I’m eleven, not stupid.”

“Johan is nice,” I agreed. “And very handsome. But I’m leaving in a few weeks so there’s no point in starting something.” I figured acknowledging his attractiveness would catch her off-guard and de-escalate her interest.

“That’s true.” She wrinkled her nose. “I like you better than Harriet. Do you have to leave? Could Mom and Dad pay you enough to stay?”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “But I appreciate you saying that.”

“Go, Knights!” Naomi let out a squeal as Decker scored a goal.

“That’s the way to do it!” Eden yelled.

“Yes!” I got caught up in the excitement without even realizing it.

I’d been here a week, and it already felt like home, which was a dangerous feeling. Eden and Zoe had come over to have dinner and watch the game with me, and I was having a great

time hanging out with them. Feeling like I belonged. Like I could stay.

But I wasn't staying.

I had a job and a life waiting for me in L.A.

This was a vacation.

Right?

So why didn't it feel that way?



THE TEAM GOT HOME on Sunday afternoon, and Naomi and I were watching a movie when Wolf came in.

“Dad!” She got up and practically launched herself at his chest. “I missed you!”

“I missed you too, kiddo.” He hugged her and kissed the top of her head before smiling over at me. “Hey, Sloane. How'd everything go?”

“It was fine. We got along great, and she was a perfect angel.”

I hadn't meant for that to be sarcastic or even funny, but Naomi whirled to look at me and then burst out laughing at the same time as Wolf.

I chuckled, too. “I'm serious. We had no issues.”

“Uh huh.” He grinned. “I'll believe that when I see it. How did your math test go?”

They started talking about everything that had gone on while he was away, and I went into the guest room to finish packing my things. I'd done most of it last night, and I'd showered this morning, so I was ready to go. Wolf had said he would drive me wherever I needed him to, which was another hotel, just not at the beach. Beyond that, I had to decide whether or not I was going to head back to L.A. this week. Now that I was on Harper's payroll, Atlanta was no longer in the running, but the prospect of leaving was suddenly less appealing.

My rational mind said it was time, but my heart wasn't ready to leave.

I hadn't had nearly enough time with my brother and, frankly, I was enjoying getting to know the women involved in the team. I'd spent most of my time with Eden and Zoe, but I'd also gotten to know Juliett, Scarlett, and Sutton, who was Camden Locke's girlfriend. He was the team's goalie, and she was a former goalie, so she was interesting to talk to.

In fact, all the wives and girlfriends I'd met so far were interesting.

Scarlett and Tawny were professional surfers, though Scarlett was retired now.

Sutton was a former hockey player who now ran the Junior Knights kids' hockey program.

Juliet had a fantastic baking business, making gourmet cookies and cupcakes.

Zoe was a teacher who spoke a bunch of languages.

Eden was the CEO of a publishing company.

If I was honest, I was a little intimidated sometimes.

I had a job, but it was nepotism at its finest, and I was the first to admit it.

I hadn't even graduated from high school.

I'd never worked a real job in my life, didn't have a formal education, and had only learned to drive a few years ago. In some ways, I was still the equivalent of a sixteen-year-old. No work experience, limited skills, and completely unsure about what I wanted to do going forward.

Well, one thing I wanted to do was get my GED.

I just needed to stay in one place long enough to do it.

"Are you ready to go?" Wolf asked, coming to stand in the doorway of my room.

"Yes." I zipped my suitcase shut. "Thank you."

"You going to Decker and Eden's?"

"Uh, no. I booked a room at an extended stay hotel." I gave him the location.

"Then what?" he asked as he wheeled my suitcase toward the garage.

"I'm not sure," I admitted. "I'm enjoying getting to know my brother again, but I need to settle somewhere. I need a home, a car, and to belong. Right now, it feels like I'm drifting."

“Sometimes drifting is a good temporary situation to help you figure out what’s next,” he said, opening the trunk of his SUV and lifting my suitcase into it.

“That’s true.” I handed him my carry-on

bag to put into the trunk. I had another suitcase I’d left with Eden since I hadn’t needed all my things while I’d been here, and it was disconcerting to think most of my life could fit into a handful of suitcases. Yes, I had a few boxes at Harper’s, but still. Moving into a new place, wherever that turned out to be, would take about an hour. Maybe less.

How sad was that?

Naomi climbed into the back seat, and I got into the passenger seat.

“When does Scarlett get back?” I asked.

“Tomorrow.” He pulled onto the street. “It’ll be good for the three of us to all be home together for a few days before I leave again.”

“I hate when you travel,” Naomi murmured.

“I know, kiddo, but Mom will be with you. And in a few weeks, we’re going to Cancun.”

“Cancun?” I asked curiously.

“During the All-Star break. A bunch of us made plans. I think Decker and Eden will be there. You should come.”

I probably couldn’t afford a trip like that, but it was embarrassing to say that out loud.

“I don’t want to be a third wheel,” I said instead. “All of you are families and couples, and then there’d be me.”

“You could hang out with me,” Naomi said happily.

I almost laughed.

Poor kid probably felt as left out as I did.

I hadn’t realized until just now how much I missed being part of a couple.

I didn’t miss Eddie, but I’d liked being married.

You always had a date, always had someone to travel with, hang out with. Even if they were a pain in the butt sometimes.

There was no help for my situation now, though.

I wasn’t ready for another relationship, and I had too many other things to worry about.

Once I got settled in L.A., with a place to live and a car, I’d think about dating again.

Too bad the only guy I was interested in was a blue-eyed hockey player who lived on the other side of the country.

J ohan

AFTER TEN DAYS on the road, it was great to sleep in my own bed.

We had practice today, but beyond that I had nothing else I had to do. I was planning to go to the beach for a couple of hours, and then maybe meet up with Anders and Felix later for a beer or something. Anders had been dating someone for a couple of months, and she'd unexpectedly dumped him, so now he was on the prowl, usually dragging Felix and me with him.

I'd just gotten in the car when my phone rang, and Anders' name flashed on the screen.

"Hello?"

"Hey, dickhead. What are you doing?"

"Going to beach."

"Perfect. We're down by the pier in Dania. There's a bunch of us here. Come find us."

“Who is there?” I asked, not really in the mood to hang out with the guys since I’d just spent ten days with them.

“Sloane.”

With that, he disconnected.

I didn’t know whether to be excited he’d thought to let me know or worried he knew I had a thing for her. I hadn’t told him anything specific about her, but he knew me well, and I was almost certain he’d caught me looking at her pictures on my phone.

Shit.

He and I were going to have to talk because I didn’t want trouble with Decker.

If I’d been smart, I would have continued to Fort Lauderdale beach and left it alone, but no one ever said I was smart. I headed south to Dania and parked in the usual spot. We’d been here for enough team events that I had a good idea where everyone was, and sure enough, it only took a few minutes to spot them.

The pier was popular for fishing but there was a nice stretch of beach, too.

I spotted Anders’ blond hair from a distance and made my way in his direction. He and Felix were throwing a frisbee back and forth, so I kept my gaze on them instead of on Sloane, who was under an umbrella with Zoe.

“Yo.” Anders gave me a grin before glancing at Felix. “Told you he’d be here if I called.”

Felix pulled a twenty out of his pocket and handed it to him.

“What are you doing?” I demanded, frowning at them.

“Told him you were hot for Sloane.” Anders wiggled his eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes. “I was going to the beach. You call. I come to join friends. Big deal.”

He laughed. “Uh huh. Keep telling yourself that. The good news is that Decker and Eden had something else to do, so he’s not here to rain on your parade.”

A dozen retorts were on the tip of my tongue, but since I wasn’t sure what that phrase meant, I decided not to fuel the fire.

“Whatever.” I wandered toward the others and put my beach bag down a few feet away from where Zoe and Sloane were talking.

“Hey, Johan.” Zoe waved.

“Hello, Zoe. Sloane.” I smiled at both of them, my eyes locking with Sloane’s for a moment.

“You have to practice your English,” Zoe said. “And do your homework.”

I chuckled. “I practice.”

“It has to be more than hockey-related words.”

“I am trying.” I spread out my blanket and sank down next to them.

“You can practice with me,” Sloane said. “Tell me what you had for breakfast.”

“Oatmeal.”

She shook her head. “More detail. And make it a complete sentence. Like, ‘I had oatmeal with bananas and granola’ or whatever you actually ate.”

I paused, thinking. “I had oatmeal with brown sugar, cinnamon, and raisins this morning.”

“Nice.” She nodded. “What about to drink?”

“I had...coffee with one tablespoon of...almond milk, one brown sugar, and—”

“Wait, one what of brown sugar?” Zoe interrupted. “One teaspoon? One cube?”

“One...cube. One cube of brown sugar.”

This required too much brain power for a day off.

“Very good.” Sloane smiled, and I forgot all about how difficult it was to speak English. “Now tell me what your plans are for later.”

I didn’t even hesitate. “I have no plans for later. Not yet.”

Zoe coughed lightly, and Sloane slowly lifted her sunglasses, fixing those blue eyes on mine.

“What would you like to do later, if you could do anything?”

I smiled. “There are many things I would like to do. Many of them are maybe not polite to say out loud.”

“I feel like a swim,” Zoe said, getting to her feet and heading toward the water.

Leaving Sloane and me alone.

Or as alone as you could be on a beach full of people.

“What makes you think I want you to be polite?” Sloane asked when Zoe was out of earshot.

I chuckled. “I do not think you do. But Zoe...”

“Zoe’s fine.”

She was waiting for something, and I had a feeling I knew what it was, but it was hard to have a conversation like this. I could fake it with guided sentences like what I’d had for breakfast. This was different. Intimate. And the words got jumbled in my head when I tried to think of flirtatious things to say in English. I could show her how I was feeling, though.

“Would you like to go for swim?” I asked.

“Sure.” She gracefully rose to her feet, pulling off the denim shorts she wore.

Today she had on a hot pink bikini with fringe along the edges. The top was a bandeau-style, and the fringe moved as she walked. I watched for a moment, and then followed.

She splashed into the water and sighed happily.

“This is nice,” she said. “The water in California is always freakin’ freezing and that’s where I’ll be living soon.”

“What about in France?”

“It was lovely. I miss it.” She turned onto her back, her legs floating out in front of her, and her hair fanning out behind her. Her body rose and fell gently with the motion of the water, and my cock practically jumped to attention.

I waded in deeper, anxious to get control of my raging hormones.

“What do you think of Florida?”

She smiled. “It’s beautiful right now, but I’ve been here in the summer, and it’s way too humid for me.”

“Where would you go right now if you had no work, no responsibility?” I asked curiously.

She didn’t hesitate. “Monte Carlo. Maybe the Cinque Terre in Italy. I love Europe. What about you?”

“Hawaii. Or maybe Turks & Caicos.”

“So you love the beach.”

“Very much.”

“Me too, but I also like good food and wine and beautiful scenery.”

“This is nice also.”

“What about Slovakia?”

I moved a little closer to her, enjoying the sound of her voice and the peacefulness of the ocean. “I do not know. My country is beautiful. I go every summer to see my family and spend time, but always I am anxious to return.”

“To the US or to hockey or something else?”

“I do not know. All of it? I am...” How the hell did you say restless in English? “When I am there, I am easily bored. Most of my friends are gone. My family is nice, but they do not understand my life here. I cannot sit in my father’s house all day, every day, and just talk and eat. I have to *do* something. But there is nothing.”

“So you’re restless,” she said.

“Yes! This.”

She understood me, which was nice. Most women I met these days didn’t even try. They only cared about being seen with me, which I didn’t understand. I was a professional athlete, but not exactly a household name.

“But not when you’re here?”

“No. Not even when season is over. I have friends, the beach, always something to do. My town, where I come from, is small. There is nothing but restaurants and shops and family.”

“And you can only take it in small doses.”

“Yes.”

She really did seem to understand me, which was refreshing.

“I’m starting to feel that way, too. It’s not the same, obviously, but there’s a part of me that’s torn. I want to stay and get to know my brother again, but I’m also anxious to start my new life now that I’m divorced. I have to find an apartment, buy a car, get settled somewhere. I feel like a drifter, so it’s hard to relax.”

“But this is the perfect time for relaxing,” I said quietly. “Soon, you will go back to California and start job. Buy car, find house, do these very important things. Then you will be very busy, with no time to just... *be*. To understand your brother again. To make friends. To find new family and enjoy this time. I’m sorry, with my English, I am not sure I make the sense.”

She straightened and moved closer to me, so we were just inches apart. “It does make sense. Thank you. That’s a perspective I didn’t think of so articulately.”

“You will never again have this opportunity with your brother, to begin the new relationship. He cares for you very deeply. I hear in his voice when your name comes up.”

“I care for him, too. That’s why I came to find him. I don’t miss my parents or my other brother, but I always missed Decker.”

“Then enjoy this situation. When you go to California, you will have different life. What you can have now is only for short time.”

“What can I have now?” she asked softly, resting a hand on my arm.

That was a loaded question, but there was no time like the present to make a move. If I’d been misreading her signals, I would back off and leave it alone.

“From me? You can have anything you want.”

There.

I’d said it.

Consequences be damned.

“I’m not looking for a boyfriend, Johan.”

“I am not looking for girlfriend.”

“I’m barely divorced, and I have a lot of emotional baggage.”

“Almost everyone is divorced,” I said lightly. “And emotional bags are part of life.”

She smiled, probably at the way I’d butchered what I’d just said. “I’ll be gone soon. Maybe a week, maybe a month, but then I’m moving across the country.”

“I know.”

“And my brother won’t like it.” Her voice was a whisper, as if someone might hear us.

“I know this, too.”

“You’re not... worried? I don’t want to cause trouble for you on the team.”

“He does not have to know everything. We are adults, no?”

“Yes.” Her lips were slightly parted as we stared into each other’s eyes, something we did far too much for two people who barely knew each other. If we were anywhere else, with any other people, I would have kissed her.

“You will go on date with me?”

“How about we start with drinks? Tonight, at my hotel.”

“Yes.” I didn’t have to think about it.

I’d be there.

*S*loane

IT WAS a fun day at the beach, and without Decker there to keep me on my best behavior, I was able to have a good time. Flirting with Johan was a blast. Partly because he was incredibly hot, but also because his command of the English language was a little off-kilter, so he tended to mix up words and use the wrong expressions. I knew what he meant most of the time, though, and it was fun to playfully correct him.

By the time Slava and Zoe dropped me off at my hotel, I couldn't decide if I wanted to skip drinks and invite him up to my room or ask him to take me to dinner so we could spend a few hours just gazing into each other's eyes.

We'd done a lot of that today.

Part of me worried it would get back to Decker, but he was going to have to settle down if he wanted to be in my life again. I'd dealt with more than my share of people trying to control me, so while I knew it came from a place of love and concern, I wasn't willing to deal with that type of relationship.

He and I would have to talk if he continued being overprotective.

In the meantime, I had to figure out what to do about my date tonight.

I'd side-stepped the date question when Johan had asked, but that was what this was, no matter what we wanted to call it. And the truth was, I hadn't been on a date of any kind in years. Hell, technically, I'd *never* been on a date. There had been sexual hook-ups before Eddie, but those hadn't been what anyone would call dates.

When Eddie and I had met, we'd been hanging out in a group and our relationship snowballed quickly once we got together. We went from a one-night stand to living together over the course of a few weeks, and that had been that. No dating, no romance; just sex followed by marriage. It had felt right at the time, but in retrospect, I'd been all kinds of fucked up. Of course, I'd run away from a living nightmare. The pastor at our church had been sexually abusing me from the time I was ten years old, and no one had believed me.

Except Decker.

But he'd been a little kid, too, so there hadn't been anything he could do.

And when I couldn't stand it anymore, I'd run.

Eddie had listened and empathized and offered me not just love and companionship, but a true escape. So I hadn't put much thought into whether or not we were truly in love—as long as I could hide from my fucked-up past, I'd been all in.

So going out with Johan tonight was somewhat cathartic.

Dating hadn't been on my short-term bucket list, but now that it was happening, I was genuinely excited.

Except I didn't know what to wear.

Drinks meant casual.

The sexual attraction between us meant I wanted to look pretty for him.

It also meant I needed to shave every inch of my body and dig out underwear that would look good both under my clothes, and if I got the opportunity to take them off.

He was picking me up at seven, and it was a quarter of, so I only had a few minutes to decide on what to wear.

The yellow and green summer dress with capped sleeves and a scooped neckline was pretty, but it felt weird wearing it in January since it was technically winter. It was so hard to know how to dress for the weather here. It was cooler than normal, but not cool enough for boots or sweaters, so I had to find something that matched the weather, my mood, and my plans for the evening.

I was still holding two dresses in my hands when someone knocked on the door.

Crap!

Was he early?!

I knotted my robe around my waist and peered through the peephole.

Yup.

Early.

Dammit.

“Hi.” I opened the door a crack. “I’m not quite ready.”

“Hello.” He smiled. “I will wait.”

Damn, he was nice to look at.

His dark hair was a little messy and damp, as if he’d just gotten out of the shower. His skin was tan after a day in the sun, and it showed up nicely against his white button-down shirt. His navy slacks showed off a tapered waist and slim hips, but I knew there were muscles hidden beneath the fabric. After our day at the beach, I knew his abs rippled and his thighs were like steel.

“Uh, why don’t you come in?” I asked, opening the door. “I’ll just need a minute.”

“Okay.” He leaned over and brushed a soft kiss on my cheek as he came into the room.

Jesus, he smelled good too.

If I wasn’t careful, we were going to wind up naked sooner rather than later.

And somehow, that didn’t seem like a bad thing.

“Are we staying here or going out?” I asked. “I can’t decide what to wear.”

“I thought maybe the bar at Pier 66.”

“Is it fancy?”

“Not too much, but maybe no shorts or sandals.”

“So you’re saying you want me to wear a short skirt and heels?” I teased, putting a hand on my hip and striking a playful pose.

The look he gave me was *not* playful.

Oh, no.

Those blue eyes heated right up.

And it was so, so erotic.

“Whatever you wear... I will be happy.” He was perched on the edge of the bed, and I had the strongest urge to untie the belt and open my robe. I’d let it slide down off my shoulders, slowly, before letting it fall free. He had big hands with long fingers, and I was momentarily lost in the fantasy of what it would be like to have those hands caressing my skin. Would he be gentle? Was the skin rough? Did he know how to please a woman with his fingers?

“I...” It was hard to think because he’d gotten to his feet and was slowly coming toward me.

“Sloane.”

“Y-yes?” It was maddening to be so infatuated with a man I could barely form words, but I was rooted in place as he got closer.

“I can kiss you?”

“Oh. Yes.”

And not just yes, but hell yes.

I willed my eyes to stay open simply because I wanted to continue to enjoy how gorgeous he was, but his closed the

moment his lips touched mine, forcing me to forget everything but how this felt. His body was strong and hard, but his touch was gentle and protective. When he teased the seam of my lips with his tongue, I didn't hesitate to respond, opening to let him in.

He was a take-charge kind of guy, no doubt about that, but he was also responsive and receptive, as if he understood exactly what I needed. As I leaned into the kiss, he dug the fingers of one hand into the hair at the nape of my neck while the other circled my waist. His tongue tangled with mine in a delicious and sensuous pattern that made me melt against him.

Lots of men knew how to kiss, but Johan seemed to know how *I* liked to kiss.

And it had been a long time since I'd been kissed like this.

Strong and sexy and passionate.

The moan that left me was inadvertent but enough to make him pull back a little.

"You are okay?"

"God, yes. More, Johan."

His mouth found mine gruffly this time, our tongues impatient to come together again. He tasted almost as good as he smelled, and that was saying something because he smelled like cinnamon toast on a brisk fall morning. With a touch of masculinity and maybe a smidge of Old Spice aftershave.

Fire whipped through my veins and settled right between my legs with enough impact to make me moan into his mouth. These kisses were even better than the fantasies I'd been

having about him for days. Each stroke of his tongue was a promise of the bliss that was to come, and with his erection pressed against my mid-section, I was suddenly wearing too many clothes.

This was unexpected but also inevitable.

From the first look we'd shared, I'd known it would come to this if I allowed it.

And I was not just allowing it, I was taking the lead.

I reached down and managed to get the belt of my robe untied, letting it—and the flaps of my robe—fall free. He was pressed against me, so the movement was subtle, but I knew the moment he realized what I'd done because the hand that had been at my waist slid around to the front.

He pulled away slowly. The look in his eyes was one that could have made me a billionaire had I been able to bottle it. All smokey lust and hazy passion with a healthy dose of desire.

Thank god.

Because there were no words for how much I wanted him.

It had been years since I'd had good sex, and this was going to be good.

There was no way it wouldn't be.

“You are...” His voice was husky as he gazed down at my bare torso. “Perfect.” Then he murmured a bunch of things in what I assumed was Slovak. It didn't matter that I didn't understand the specific words because just the timber of his

voice and the look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know.

“Touch me, Johan.” My own voice sounded husky and raw to my ears, and I watched as he used one big hand to cover my breast. He slowly rubbed his thumb over the nipple, moving back and forth as it pebbled into a hard, needy nub.

“God, that feels good.”

He parted my robe further so he could put both of his hands on me, giving the other breast equal attention. My breath caught as he cupped both breasts in his hand, squeezing and massaging as we both watched.

Still murmuring in Slovak, I watched his gorgeous dark head lower until his lips covered one nipple. He dropped to his knees, sucking and licking, his hands sliding back to cup my ass. Looking down to see his mouth on me was incredibly erotic and my clit throbbed in anticipation.

When he'd worshipped both of my breasts, making them hard and red and beyond sensitive, he glided his lips down my torso. He kissed and nuzzled, pausing at my belly button to lick a trail around it. One hand was on my hip now, and I nudged the robe off my shoulders, watching his face as he watched it fall free.

“Perfect,” he whispered.

With both hands on my hips, he pressed his face against my mound.

I didn't know if it was possible to be any more aroused than I was right now, positive I'd be dripping if I could spread

my legs, but he had his knees on either side of my feet.

“Johan, please...” I whimpered.

“What do you want?” he asked, lifting his eyes to mine.

“You.”

“I am here.” He pressed a finger between my folds.

I hissed out a breath as he grazed my clit.

“Oh, god.”

He pulled his finger free and stared at it for a moment before putting it in his mouth. “Delicious.” He leaned forward and slid his tongue where his finger had just been. Back and forth until he found my clit. Then he rubbed a little harder, increasing pressure until I nearly exploded with need.

“Johan!”

He squeezed and kneaded my ass cheeks as he licked me, keeping me right where I was, instead of letting me ride his face the way I wanted to.

Out of nowhere he lifted my right knee, bringing that leg over his shoulder.

I wobbled on my one leg, latching onto his hair to steady myself.

“Now you will come,” he said in a throaty whisper.

Johan

I'D KNOWN it would be good between us but sitting here on my knees while I licked her pussy shouldn't have been as scorching hot as it was. I was hard as granite, and she was so wet I could feel it pooling between her legs. When I was positive I'd driven her right to the brink of the loss of control, I brought one leg over my shoulder and went to town.

Circling her clit with the tip of my tongue, I pushed two fingers inside of her and moved them around, looking for the soft spot that would get her where she needed to go. I chuckled against her overheated flesh when she jerked, knowing I'd found it.

Her muscles tightened, she jerked once more, and then she lost control.

"Johan!" She shrieked my name as she clenched around me, a rush of arousal gushing all over my face. It was rich and tangy and sweet, exactly the way I liked it, and I lapped it up as she writhed and wiggled against me.

When she'd had enough, I gently put her leg down and then scooped her up when I noticed her legs shaking. I settled on the edge of the bed with her in my lap, and she wrapped her arms around my neck.

“Holy shit, that felt so damn good.”

“Will be better when I am inside of you.” I nibbled her shoulder.

“Mm, yes.” She tilted up her face, and I kissed her. I couldn't be sure whether or not she enjoyed tasting herself on my lips, but her tongue sought out mine almost urgently, taking and giving, tasting and twirling.

It was the ballroom dance version of kissing, and I was worked up all over again.

“Undress me,” I commanded in a firm but soft voice.

Her fingers instantly moved to my shirt, and she fumbled with the buttons. I reached down to cup her mound, squeezing lightly.

“I can't fuck you until I'm naked,” I whispered, nuzzling her ear. I licked a trail behind her ear and down the side of her neck, watching as she struggled to get the buttons of my shirt undone. I didn't need to be naked to do the deed, of course, but it was obvious she enjoyed the teasing and got aroused from the anticipation of what I was going to do next.

I loved a woman like her, who enjoyed the journey as much as the final destination. Sure, we all wanted to get off, but I tended to savor this part. The kissing and touching and teasing, even with my cock straining against my slacks in

protest. Watching her skin break out in goose bumps as I brushed my lips against the sensitive skin around her ear and the side of her face. Seeing her skin turn a flushed, rosy pink.

Her nipples were still hard, dusky peaks, and my plan was to have them in my mouth as I fucked her.

Maybe in that chair in the corner.

Beds were fine, but I liked other places better.

Chairs and counters were my favorite.

Bending her over the island in my kitchen was high on my list, too.

Maybe next time.

“Dammit, Johan.” A grunt of frustration escaped her, and she tugged at my shirt hard enough to make a few buttons pop off.

I bit back a laugh as she pushed my shirt off my shoulders and then slid to the ground to work on my slacks. She got my belt off in record time and before I knew it, she’d worked her hand into my boxers, lightly stroking me.

Fuuuuck.

My eyes closed, and I inhaled sharply when she used the tip of her tongue on the head of my cock.

“Yum.” She looked up, her eyes meeting mine, and then she sucked me deep.

She’d turned the tables on me, but that was okay.

It was better than okay.

She was working my cock like she owned it.

A few more minutes doing what she was doing, and she *would* own it.

Along with any other part of me she wanted.

Her mouth was hot and wet, and she knew what she was doing. There was no hesitation in her movements or the way she slid one hand down to cup my balls. I shifted, pushing my slacks down over my ass to give her better access, and she sucked harder.

I didn't need a long time to get it up again once I got off, but I didn't want the first time to be in her mouth. Besides, I liked being in control.

Without warning, I pulled out of her mouth and got to my feet, stepping out of my pants and boxers. I grabbed my wallet, grateful for the condom I kept in there, and motioned to the chair.

“There.”

“What?” she looked over her shoulder.

I picked up her robe and tossed it on the chair before sitting down. “Come.”

She smiled as she sashayed toward me. “You like giving orders, don't you?”

“You like it, too.” I proffered the condom. “Put it on.”

There was a momentary hesitation as she took it from me.

“My ex and I never used them. I literally have never done this before.”

“Is okay.” I softened my tone. “I can help.”

“No, I want to learn. Just tell me if I do it wrong.”

“There is no wrong, unless you tear.”

She held out a hand and wiggled fingers with long red tips. “And I definitely could. But I’ll be careful.” She took out the condom and seemed to be inspecting it carefully.

Part of me wanted to snatch it out of her hand and do it myself, but there was something surprisingly innocent about her in this situation, and it was so at odds with what I knew of her so far, it felt like I needed to let it play out.

Finally, she dropped to her knees and carefully placed it on the head.

“Just like that,” I said. I covered her hand with mine. “Then slide.”

We worked the condom down together, our eyes locked once again.

What was it about her eyes that made me want to lose myself in them? Or maybe it the woman as a whole. I didn’t know, and right now it didn’t matter.

“See? Easy.” I patted my lap. “Climb.”

She straddled me, resting her bent knees on either side of my hips since the chair was spacious enough for us to get comfortable.

“Lift.” I patted her bottom so she would straighten up enough for her breasts to be level with my mouth, allowing me to suck on one of her nipples. She shivered against me, and I

didn't know if it was because of what I was doing or because she was cold.

But she wouldn't be cold for long.

I moved to her other breast, despite her whimper of protest.

I wanted to be inside of her as much as she wanted me to be, but we could wait a few more seconds while I got my fill of her breasts. I'd been right—they were almost definitely a C cup—and possibly the most perfectly shaped tits I'd ever had the pleasure of sucking on. Round and perky and full, filling my hands and my mouth.

She tugged at my hair, forcing me to look up.

“You're killing me,” she hissed.

“Soon.” I captured her lips with mine as I slowly thrust up.

She sank down at the same time and our groans filled the room.

“*Fuuuuck.*” I let the word roll off my lips in between kisses.

Her pussy clamped around me, warm and tight, taking all of me at once.

“God damn.” She gripped my biceps. “Fuck me hard, Johan.”

“This is what you like?”

“Yes. Hard and rough. Until it hurts.”

I wasn't sure what that last part meant, but I could do hard.

And I liked rough sometimes, too.

That wouldn't work in the chair, though.

“Bed or wall?” I asked, lifting to my feet without pulling us apart.

“Wall,” she breathed, her eyes glittering with need.

I found the nearest one and pressed her back against it. She tightened her legs around my hips and wrapped her arms around my neck, drawing my mouth back to hers. I gently bit down on her lower lip as I ground my crotch against hers. With one hand around the back of her neck and one under her ass, I pulled out to the tip. Then I slammed back in hard enough to make her grunt.

Oh, yeah.

This was going to be fun.

“More?” I rasped against her mouth.

“Yes!”

My cock was slick as I started to move, gliding in and out easily. She was so damn wet, and even with the barrier of the condom between us, I felt every twitch and flutter. So smooth and gritty at the same time. She dug her nails into my arms as I picked up speed. There wasn't much she could do in this position except hold on and take what I gave her.

And I gave it to her good, all the teasing of the last few weeks coming out in a reckless pounding that left us both panting for more.

My muscles strained and sweat broke out on my forehead. The only sound in the room was the illicit sound of skin slapping together, and the occasional thump as her back hit the wall.

I bent my head and bit her neck, thrusting in with enough force to rattle the nearby desk.

We were both right on the edge, but I held back, determined she would get off first. I pumped harder and faster, tilting my hips until I found the angle that got the reaction I was looking for.

“Johan!” Her wail filled the room as she came, her body vibrating from the intensity of it all.

My own orgasm shot down my spine and out with so much fervor I threw my head and growled.

“Holy fuck.” Her head dropped to my shoulder.

I couldn’t respond because I was still trembling.

That had been next-level fucking.

Normally I didn’t let go like that, but she’d been all in.

“Did I hurt you?” I asked when I could finally breathe again.

“No.” A faint smile played on her sweet lips. “That was awesome.”

I rubbed my knuckles along the spot on her neck where I’d bitten down. “This is very red.”

“Not my first hickey. It’ll be fine.”

I leaned over to gently brush my lips across the faint bruise. “I will make it better.”

“Okay.”

Slowly, I pulled out and then lowered her to her feet.

“Shower?” I asked.

“Definitely.” She tugged me by the hand as we made our way into the bathroom, and she turned on the water before turning to me. “That was a lot of fun, Johan.”

I kissed her, taking her lips with less urgency now. “Let’s go out to eat after we shower. I am hungry.”

She laughed. “I don’t think your shirt is fit for the public after I took out all those buttons. How about we order Chinese and then...” Her lips turned up and those blue eyes turned dark and stormy. “You can fuck me again.”

As far as I was concerned, there was no better way to spend an evening.

S loane

JOHAN LEFT EARLY the next morning since he needed to go home and change before heading to practice, so I slept in again. Part of me wished he'd been able to stay longer, at least through breakfast, but the rational part of me figured it was better he hadn't. I wasn't ready for anything serious, and the connection between us was strong enough to make me feel a little clingy. Cozy. Comfortable. I'd slept in his arms for part of the night, and I never did that. Not even with Eddie. So keeping a little distance between us was safer.

I was leaving.

Moving far away.

And he had to stay here.

There was no future for us, so why even bother with anything more than sex?

The sex was pretty fucking spectacular, though.

I grinned as I got up and stretched. I'd begun to feel a little lazy and spoiled, not having much to do but eat, sleep, and hang out with my brother and his friends. Friends that were now becoming my friends.

And Johan.

After last night, we were more than friends.

We'd had sex four or five times, and I almost felt bad he'd had to get up so early to go to work while I got to relax.

He was magnificent in bed.

By far the best lover I'd ever had.

He was also gentle and thoughtful, always cognizant of my safety, my comfort, and my pleasure.

Pleasure.

I'd thought I'd known what pleasure was, but this was different.

This had been the type of sex that made you yearn for more.

Which would be a problem since I was moving to California soon.

The question was when.

I didn't have a lot to do in California beyond the stuff like finding a place to live. The only real friend I had was Harper, and she was busy with her own life. We'd work together eventually, but for now she had to deal with lawyers and the Barrowmen brothers, whom I wanted to stay far away from.

Here in Fort Lauderdale, I already had a life.

I had my brother, my future sister-in-law, and a handful of friends like Scarlett and Zoe.

And then there was Johan.

It was hard to think about him without smiling, and I absently brushed my hand over the ridiculously dark hickey he'd left on my neck. I hadn't had one since I was a teenager, but this was one was kind of fun. Decker was probably going to have a stroke, but I wouldn't tell him where it came from. He'd have to get used to the fact that I was an adult who was allowed to enjoy sex.

We were having lunch today after he finished practice, and I hurried downstairs when he texted that he was out front. Eden was swamped at work, so it was going to be just the two of us, and I was excited about that.

How long had it been since I'd had real one-on-one time with my brother?

"Hi!" I slid into the passenger seat of his steel-gray SUV.

"Hey." He smiled over at me. "How's it going?"

"Good. How was practice?"

"Brutal. Coach is kicking our asses into gear for this last week of games before the All-Star break."

"Oh, that's right. That's in a week?"

"Our last game is next Wednesday. Then we're off until Monday."

“Are you guys going to Cancun?” Someone had mentioned that, though I couldn’t remember who.

“Yeah.” He paused. “You want to come?”

“Oh, I can’t afford a trip like that. Not until I get settled with the new job.”

“I’m happy to pay for it, Sloane.”

“I can’t let you do that. I’ve had someone taking care of me the last ten years. It’s time for me to be independent.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t seen you in so long. If we’d been in touch over the years, imagine all the birthday presents your rich brother would have bought you.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “That’s a good one, I must admit.”

“Come on. Come with us. It’ll be a blast. Consider it a belated birthday present for the last few years.”

“You’re hard to say no to.”

“There’s no reason to say no. You’re my sister. I’ve missed you. I want to make up for as much lost time as we can.”

“I know. Me too. That’s why I’m still here.”

“My hockey schedule makes it hard, but I’m trying.”

“It’s not a problem. You have to work. And I’ve made friends. I went to the beach with everyone yesterday, and I’m having lunch with Scarlett on Friday.”

“I’m glad. I wish you could stay longer.”

“Well, if the lawsuit with the Phantoms goes on for much longer, I may not have a job, and it’s a hell of a lot cheaper to live here than in L.A.”

“I could ask around,” he said. “See if anyone knows of availability with the team or—”

“That’s just it,” I interrupted him. “I don’t have any experience, Decker. Nothing. Zero. My resume is a big blank. I never even had a job at the mall as a teenager. I was a runaway and then married to a millionaire. And I can’t put that on a resume. Hell, I didn’t even graduate from high school.”

He was quiet for a long time, and I felt the familiar wave of shame creeping over me. What kind of loser doesn’t even have a high school diploma?

“Do you want to talk about the past?” he asked finally.

“The past?” I glanced at him. “Which part?”

“You know which part.”

“The part where our pastor sexually molested me for years and then, when I got too old, passed me off to his disgusting minions? You want to talk about all that?” The subject always made me a little testy.

“The thing is, I don’t know any of...that. I never knew what happened. I knew something was going on because of Kristy, but you never told me anything specific. I put two and two together when you disappeared.”

“You were a kid,” I said gently. “You were practically a baby when it started.”

“How... uh, how old were you?”

I sighed, breathing in deeply through my nose. “Ten. He was done when I got my period.”

“Oh, fuck.”

“I don’t... I don’t talk about this anymore. I spent years talking about it. First to Eddie, my ex-husband, and then to the therapists he sent me to when he realized how fucked in the head I was. I’m kind of talked out.”

“I get that. And I’m sorry. I just, I don’t know anything. Why you left. Was there something specific that happened?”

“I got pregnant,” I said quietly.

Decker didn’t say anything, merely pulled into a parking space in front of a Mexican restaurant.

“They were going to force me to have it. Marry the father.”

“Which was who?”

“Kristy’s brother.”

“Jeffrey?”

Just hearing his name made me cringe, but I nodded.

“But he was...” He cleared his throat. “God, what a disgusting fucking creep. All of them. I really want to hurt them.”

“They’re not worth it. Hurting them won’t erase what they did. It’s easier for me to move on.”

“And I hate that for you. I really do.”

“I’ve come a long way. I’m okay now.”

“Are you?”

That was so hard to answer because I was, and I wasn't.

“For the most part, yes. I don't trust easily, and I probably wasn't the best wife in the world, but I'm past the nightmares and flashbacks.”

“I hate you went through something so awful. And that I couldn't stop it. Or at least help.”

“You were a kid. John could have helped, but he didn't believe me.”

“I know. He and I have had many conversations about all of that.”

“Have you... does he know I'm here?”

“No. Not only do I want to respect your privacy, but he's going to have a lot of questions and honestly, I don't have answers. Not for me and definitely not for him.”

“I'm sorry about that. I don't mean to shut you out. Really. It's just... a lot. It took years to stop having the nightmares. It took an even longer time for me not to need something for the anxiety that hit me whenever I was around a man I didn't know. Or someone with authority. Eddie wasn't a great husband, but he saved my life by forcing me to get therapy. Unfortunately, talking about the details with anyone else is still hard.”

“Then don't.” He reached across the console for my hand. “I don't need to hear things that upset you. Not yet anyway. I do want to know other stuff, though.”

“Before you ask, I had a miscarriage before I could figure out what to do about anything. And even though we tried for years, I could never get pregnant again, so there must have been an issue that wasn’t dealt with when it happened.”

“Have you been to the doctor?”

“Lots of them. They can’t find anything. Not with Eddie either, so who knows? It’s not like I’m mom material.”

“Oh, I think you’ll be a better mom than you give yourself credit for. I saw how patient you were with Naomi, even when she was being a brat.”

“She’s a scared little girl who’s been through a lot in the last year. And I distinctly remember being a scared little girl.” I held up a hand when he started to speak. “And stop blaming yourself. You were a child. You didn’t know what was going on, and toward the end, when you figured it out, there was nothing you could do. I’m just glad you got out of there.”

“Oh, yeah. Long gone.”

“Can we change the subject?” I asked as we got out of the SUV and walked into the restaurant.

“Sure. What do you want to talk about?”

“Cancun.”

He laughed. “We leave next Thursday morning. In fact, let me text my travel agent to see if we can get you on the same flight.” He typed something into his phone as we walked toward a table. “The resort is brand new, and this is part of the grand opening. Mr. Knight, who owns the team, is an investor

in it, so he got us all suites. Those are probably sold out, but I'm sure I can get you a regular room."

"Anything you get me will be fine," I said softly. "And I really appreciate you letting me tag along. I'll try not to cramp your and Eden's style by being a third wheel."

"Lots of single guys from the team are going, as well as some of the friends of the WAGs. Oh, and Kristy and Anja are meeting us there."

"It'll be nice to catch up with her."

The waitress had just brought us water and chips and salsa when Decker cocked his head. "Is that a hickey on your neck?"

I arched my brows. "As a matter of fact, it is. I'm an adult, Decker. I can get laid if I want to."

He grimaced. "I don't know if I can deal with that."

"You'd better get used to it, kid. I'm your big sister and, believe it or not, women do enjoy sex. Even sisters."

"Yeah, I know, but I've never had an adult sister, so it's a little weird."

"You know how Eden likes sex?" I lowered my voice dramatically. "It's the same for me."

"Okay, no more of that." He lifted the menu. "I can't think about you having sex."

"Decker!" I gave him an exasperated look.

"I know. Sorry. As long as it's not one of the guys on the team, I'll get over it."

I wanted to ask why he was so hung up on that but figured it would only make him suspicious.

He definitely wouldn't want to know what Johan and I had spent last night doing.

And now we were going to be in Cancun.

At the same time.

Same hotel.

With drinking and partying and who knew what else.

A few glasses of wine and my libido would remind me how great he was in bed. Once that happened, how the hell was I going to stay away from him?

Johan

TWO DAYS after spending the night with Sloane, the team headed to Raleigh, North Carolina for a quick two-game road trip. Tonight would be against Carolina, and tomorrow would be against Nashville. Then we'd head home for the last game before the All-Star break.

All-Star weekend was always bittersweet because on the one hand, the break was nice. We got to rest both our bodies and our minds. We usually went somewhere fun as a group and were able to prepare for the unofficial second half of the season. On the other hand, there was an element of frustration.

Why hadn't I been chosen?

Was I not good enough?

Popular enough?

Strong enough?

Something else?

We could act tough to the outside world, pretend it didn't bother us, but most guys would tell you that it did. Even if only a brief moment of disappointment. The older guys with wives and kids, were probably less bothered by it, but I knew I wasn't the only one dealing with it.

"I've never been," Anders said as we sat down for the team pre-game meal. "I've been in the league a long time. Eventually, you'd think they would pick me."

"I have been once," I said. "My second season. Not since then. Sometimes it is frustrating."

"It's a pain the ass," Wolf said, shaking his head. "I mean, yeah, it's an honor to be voted in by the fans and all that. Playing with guys from all over the league is a good time too, but I'd rather have the time off to rest and get geared up for the rest of the season. I've been invited twice, and I'm always glad when there's someone new and shiny on whatever team I'm on that's going to be chosen over me."

"Thanks." Cam gave him a dirty look. "I appreciate that vote of confidence."

"Come on, you know you're psyched to go to Vegas," Wolf said. "And taking Sutton with you. You guys are gonna have a great time."

"She's probably more excited than I am," he said. "I wanted to go to Cancun."

"We'll send you pictures," Vaughn told him.

Cam flipped him off.

“I went a few years ago,” Jude said. “And it was a lot of fun, but I don’t need to go again.”

“I’d go *every fucking year* if they asked me.” Jordan Palmer, a younger guy on the team, spoke with defiance. He spent most of the season up in Atlanta playing for our minor league affiliate, but he’d come down for this road trip since Scotty Lukather had the flu and wouldn’t be traveling with us.

“It’s an honor,” Wolf said. “But it’s not everything. Last thing we need at the end of the season is a pointless injury. And it happens, no matter how hard we try to play it safe.”

“Playing it safe is boring,” Jordan said, shaking his head.

Jordan annoyed me, so I tuned him out. I’d just pulled my phone out of my pocket when I felt it buzz, surprised when I saw who it was from.

I hadn’t spoken to Sloane since I’d left her hotel room two mornings ago. I’d sent her a text telling her I’d had a good time, but hadn’t heard back, so I’d figured either she was busy or not interested. The sex had been fantastic, but she was one of those women you couldn’t easily get a read on. She ran hot and cold to some degree, at least when it came to emotions.

SLOANE: Guess what?

JOHAN: What?

SLOANE: I’m going to be in Cancun with you guys.

JOHAN: This is excellent. Yes?

SLOANE: Yes! We’ll have to watch out for my brother, but think of all the mischief we can get into.

I quickly looked up the word mischief before chuckling to myself.

JOHAN: You need new bikini.

SLOANE: What's wrong with the bikinis I have?

JOHAN: Have I seen all of them?

SLOANE: I have three and you've seen two, but one is a thong, which I wouldn't wear in front of my brother and his friends.

JOHAN: You can wear for me?

SLOANE: Sure.

JOHAN: I can buy you new bikini? My choice?

SLOANE: Yes. But I wouldn't want to wear something inappropriate in front of your teammates, even if Decker wasn't my brother. Does that make sense?

JOHAN: Do not worry. I will never embarrass you. Send me size.

SLOANE: How about I send you my measurements and you figure it out?

JOHAN: YES.

SLOANE: Okay then. And good luck with the game.

JOHAN: You will watch?

SLOANE: Of course. I'll be with Eden, Zoe, and Scarlett. It's our thing now. Wine and watching our men play.

Had she just called me her man?

I really hated not being able to ask my teammates to give me their opinions.

JOHAN: Tonight, I score goal for you.

SLOANE: Yeah? Well, I'll have a VERY special reward for you if you do.

Damn, if my dick didn't get hard just reading that.

JOHAN: Like what?

SLOANE: Now what fun would it be if I told you? Score that goal and you'll find out when you get home.

JOHAN: Talk to you later.

SLOANE: 34-24-34.

I was confused.

What did those numbers mean?

It wasn't even something I could use my translation app for.

I was just about to ask Anders when it hit me.

Those were her *measurements*.

Oh, hell yeah.

After the game tonight, I had some online shopping to do.



DESPITE MY PROMISE TO score for Sloane, the game was a rough one. Going into the third period, both teams were scoreless and there had been a handful of fights already. I

hadn't been involved in them because my focus tonight was on scoring, but it was getting harder to stay out of the scrum every time someone started to mix it up.

“What’s with you tonight?” Jace demanded about halfway through the period. “We could use a little of that Slovak swagger out there.”

I chuckled. “I would prefer to score. I have friendly bet with friend in Slovakia. Brag rights. I have to make this happen, and I cannot do that from the box.”

“Well, get your ass out there and let’s make it happen. We need a win.”

“Tell me about it.” I waited for Coach’s signal and then jumped over the boards, heading for the face-off circle.

I’d been doing this long enough to not get in my own head most of the time, but sometimes you couldn’t help it.

Like when a gorgeous brunette told you she’d have a special surprise for you if you scored.

How often did that happen?

Never, in my experience.

I kept my eyes on Wolf and Jace since they were my wingers, watching to make sure they were in control of the puck. I couldn’t control what the other team was doing, but I could put myself in the best position possible to take a pass. Carolina wasn’t planning to make it easy on me, though, and I went two more shifts before I had a real chance to score.

Jace had gotten the puck behind Carolina's net and moved it along the boards to Wolf, who shot it at the goalie. It bounced off his pads, practically onto my stick, and I tipped it in over the goalie's right shoulder. The red light went off, and my teammates immediately had me surrounded.

"Tell your buddy in Slovakia to suck it," Jace said, grinning.

I just laughed.

Hopefully, sucking would be involved in whatever Sloane had in mind.

The moment we were back in the locker room, I grabbed my phone and texted her.

JOHAN: Now do I get to find out the surprise?

SLOANE: Nope. You're going to have to think about it and wonder until you get home. But you should come straight to my hotel room when you do.

JOHAN: This is EXCELLENT idea.

SLOANE: Well, you looked great out there. I'm proud of you.

I chuckled. The only person who usually said that to me was my grandmother.

JOHAN: Thank you. I have to talk to media now. I will call when I get back to hotel.

SLOANE: TTYL.

Talk to you later.

Me.

She wanted to talk to me again.

She wanted to do more than talk.

Again.

But I liked the idea of us talking.

Now, later, whenever.

Maybe I was in the market for a girlfriend, after all.

Except Sloane had a job in L.A., and her brother would probably beat the crap out of me if he found out I was sleeping with her.

I didn't understand his overprotectiveness. I would absolutely want to know what was going on if my sister were sleeping with one of my teammates, but I wouldn't forbid it. My only concern would be talking about personal details in the locker room or treating her badly. Beyond that, she was an adult. Just like Sloane. Besides, Hana would knock me into the middle of next week if I involved myself in her personal life. I couldn't even imagine telling her she couldn't date one of my friends. It was offensive, and a distinct overstepping of boundaries.

She knew I wouldn't hesitate if someone hurt her physically, and I'd probably have something to say if I knew the guy was cheating on her, but beyond that, it wasn't my business.

Sloane hadn't said much about what had made her run away all those years ago, and I assumed there had been some

kind of abuse. Between the language barrier and the newness of our friendship, it hadn't seemed prudent to ask. Now there were so many questions. And I wasn't confident enough in our relationship—or my translation app—to go there.

Not yet.

First, I had to find a bikini for Cancun.

Maybe a couple of them.

Then I was going to find out how much the upgrade for a private beach cottage would be, and if any were available. Mr. Knight had offered them to us, and the only guys I knew who'd taken him up on them had been Wolf and Scarlett, since they had Naomi and wanted a little more privacy. The hallways of the main hotel would undoubtedly be loud and busy late at night. The single guys liked to party, myself included, but it would be better if Sloane and I could be together without worrying about one of us sneaking in and out of the other's room.

Too much chance we'd be caught, and for now, I wasn't willing to cause trouble.

In her life or mine.

Hockey was my career, so I didn't want or need unnecessary drama.

If things between us progressed, I'd sit down with Decker, man-to-man. But if this was nothing more than a fun fling before she went back to California, neither of us needed the headache.

Now all I had to do was figure out the best place to buy bikinis online.

I'd never shopped for that kind of thing for a special woman before. Most of my experience was in sending flowers or buying some sort of trinket in person. And there was no time for me to go to a bunch of stores. Especially since all I had to go on was her measurements.

Then it hit me.

Hana.

My sister would help.

She wouldn't give me a hard time or ask too many questions.

Some siblings understood boundaries.

*S*loane

THERE HAD BEEN no plan when I blurted out the whole “there will be a special surprise if you score” thing. Now he was on his way, and I still didn’t know what his surprise would be.

Lingerie was boring.

Everyone did that.

Naked was also kind of boring because he’d already seen me naked. I was sure he wouldn’t mind, but it wasn’t a surprise of any kind.

Don’t forget the whipped cream.

I’d briefly considered it when I’d bought a can of the stuff they called whipped cream—even though I didn’t think it was anything like the homemade kind—but then I’d decided it was silly and hadn’t gone any further with it. Food and sex were a messy combination that often resulted in a ton of laundry, changing of sheets, and all kinds of things that were complicated at a hotel. Especially an extended stay place because they only came once a week.

I had towels, though.

And he really seemed to like that chair...

Okay, now I had a plan.

I pulled on my robe, grabbed a couple of beach towels out of my luggage and looked around. I threw one over the chair and put the other nearby. I'd have to have him close his eyes when he arrived because I couldn't leave the door open, and I couldn't sit here with cream on my tits while I waited for him.

I almost laughed just thinking about it, but this was all in fun. I didn't know Johan that well, but I knew enough to sense he wouldn't care if he had to close his eyes and wait for me to prepare. He wouldn't be worried about his big surprise, and something told me he would've come over even if he hadn't scored. Because what we'd shared the other night had been too good to simply move on. I'd spent more time thinking about him the last few days than I'd thought I would, and it was a little disconcerting.

I didn't do emotional attachments.

That was a big part of what had gone wrong with my marriage. It was just easier not to allow myself to get too close to anyone. Even girlfriends. I'd only let Eddie in so far, and once the infertility struggles had started, I'd shut down. That was why I didn't have a lot of friends and why it had taken me so long to come looking for Decker. Eddie had offered to help me find him, but I'd been more afraid of the potential for us to get close again than anything else.

The knock on the door brought me out of my reverie, and I hid the can of whipped cream in the towel before hurrying over to let him in.

“Hi.” As usual, he looked good, and never more so than in a suit. He’d been wearing one the first time I’d seen him, and he looked even sexier tonight. His hair was slightly mussed and there was a couple of days’ worth of beard growth on his face.

“Hello.” He leaned in to kiss me, and I practically melted into his embrace.

“You taste good,” I whispered as he backed me into the room and let the door shut behind us.

“You too.”

We kissed a little longer, lips and tongues tangling nonstop as he kicked off his shoes and undid his belt.

“Anxious for your surprise?” I asked when we finally pulled apart.

“Yes.”

“You’ll have to close your eyes.”

He glanced around the room there was no mistaking the smile that tugged at his lips. “I see the chair is prepared.”

“Yes. Now close your eyes.” I playfully shoved him, and he folded his arms across his broad chest before letting his eyes flutter closed.

“No peeking!” I called, quickly dropping the robe and pulling out the whipped cream. I perched on the chair and

leaned back, jutting out my breasts. I felt a little ridiculous, but I figured we'd both get a chuckle out of this before the fun started.

I sprayed it in a circle that completely covered my right nipple and did it again on the left. I now had two almost symmetrical rosettes of whipped cream on my breasts, and it was hard to keep a straight face as I called out for him to open his eyes.

It took him a moment to focus, and then he threw back his head and laughed.

“You better not be laughing at my body, buddy!” I said, laughing with him.

“Never.” He dropped to his knees in front of me, perched between my spread legs. “And now I get breasts with dessert—this is maybe my favorite thing.”

Without hesitation, he dipped his head and sucked the cream off one breast, taking my nipple with it. He licked it clean, taking the time to trace my areola with the tip of his tongue. Then he moved to the other breast. He was slower this time, licking in strokes instead of all at once. The playfulness was gone now, and as usual, the sight of his dark head buried somewhere on my body was the most erotic thing ever. He nibbled my nipple, lightly biting down and then increasing the pressure. I'd long since discovered I liked some pain with my pleasure, but Eddie hadn't been comfortable doing it, and the guys before him had been too young and inexperienced. I'd had a single one-night stand after the divorce, and the sex had been okay, but nothing special.

Nothing like Johan.

He sensed my every need, sometimes before I even realized I needed it.

“Fuck, that feels good,” I murmured, grabbing a fistful of his hair and pushing his head harder against me.

His mouth was working hard to drive me crazy, sucking and biting my breast repeatedly, and then soothing the sting with firm strokes of his tongue. His left hand was on my hip, but his right hand had traveled south, caressing my inner thighs. The plethora of sensations heightened every nerve ending until I thought I would scream with need. Everything felt so good, it made me want more while simultaneously never wanting him to stop what he was doing.

When his fingers trailed across my mound and between my folds, I moaned.

“So wet,” he murmured. “I think you will come with just my fingers.”

I sighed as he slid two inside of me. He bent his head again, going back to the other breast, and bit down on my nipple at the same time he curved his fingers up. I had no idea what he hit, but it was like a charge of electric voltage shooting through my core. My hips reared up, and I cried out as an orgasm shook me. It didn't build or start slowly, but rather hit me like I'd been shot.

And he didn't stop what he was doing.

His fingers were still buried inside of me, pressing on whatever it was that had me howling with pleasure, and the

second orgasm rolled over the first. I bucked, trying to get away from the intensity as the next orgasm came, and the one after that.

It was exhilarating, but after the fourth or fifth orgasm, it was as painful as it was pleasurable, and I wildly tugged at his hair.

“Johan, please—it’s too much!”

He lifted his head and smiled. “You are sure? I think maybe one more?”

“No, no!” I was frantic but also laughing at the mischievous look in his eyes. “Holy fucking shit. Is there a trick to that?”

He leaned down and pressed a kiss on the top of my mound. “Trick is to learn a woman’s body. To find the... B-spot?” He squinted.

“G-spot,” I said with a grin. “And that was incredible. I’ve read about multiple orgasms, but...”

“I have been told,” he said quietly, getting to his feet and reaching out to help me up. “It is much more intense if you can find the G-spot from the back.”

I froze. “You mean... anal?”

“Yes.” He pulled me toward the bed, but I dug my feet in, my heart beating a little harder than before. And not in a good way.

“Just FYI, anal is not an option,” I said firmly, meeting his eyes. “I’ve had a bad experience, and I’m not interested. Don’t

even suggest it because it's a hard no."

He opened his mouth but then nodded. "This is okay. If you don't like, then I don't like."

I'd been expecting a protest, some type of justification, something to change my mind. But no. That wasn't who he was. Just when I'd been about to get annoyed with him, he said something not just sweet but exactly what I needed to hear.

What was it about this guy?

I kept asking myself that every time we were together but didn't seem to find the answers. What I found was this gorgeous, athletic, sweetheart of a guy who made my insides turn to mush every time he touched me. The sex was rough but everything else was... not. It was hard to understand the dichotomy of the man he was. So much more complex than I'd first thought, and the type of guy who made me wish I was staying in Fort Lauderdale longer.

I'd averted my gaze for a moment, and when I looked back at him, he was sitting on the edge of the bed shirtless. He cocked his head. "You are okay?"

"Yes." I walked over and settled on his lap, a place I seemed to enjoy a great deal since we'd met. "I'm sorry if that came out bitchy. I should have told you my boundaries before we had sex."

"Is okay. I can always stop. *Always.*" He lifted my chin with two fingers. "I will never hurt you. Never."

“Thank you,” I whispered, suddenly choked up. “That means a lot to me.” I rested my head on his chest as he stroked my hair.

“Someone hurt you,” he said.

It was a statement, and I managed to nod.

“This is why you run away?”

I nodded again.

I really didn't want to talk about the past, but with Johan, it felt safe. Easier than it ever had with Eddie or even my therapist in France. With his strong arms around me, I didn't have to fight the demons whom I worked so hard to keep at bay. Somehow, with Johan holding me, his mere presence kept them away. And I didn't understand what that meant. We truly didn't know each other that well. There had been a few days of hanging out in a group, a day of flirting at the beach, one night of incredible sex, and some long-distance texting.

We'd barely gotten past second base tonight, depending on your definition, yet I was ready to bare my soul.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I sat up.

“I, uh, need the bathroom.” I hurried away and shut the door behind me, leaning against it. My eyes closed, and I breathed in and out, slow and deep. In through my nose, out through my mouth. I wasn't having a panic attack, but Johan scared me as much as he soothed me. Which brought on a totally different type of fear.

I did *not* want to get attached.

I couldn't.

Shouldn't.

Wouldn't.

But I'd always been good at lying to myself.

That inadvertent lack of honesty had caused my marriage to crumble.

I didn't want to destroy another relationship, even if it was just a sexual one, by being closed-off and unemotional. My therapists over the years had warned me I'd never truly heal until I was able to be honest. About everything. That didn't necessarily mean talking about the details of the past, but it was about being cognizant of my limitations and not hiding them from the people close to me. More than that, it was about letting people *get* close to me.

"Sloane?" Johan's soft knock made me realize I'd been in here too long. "Are you okay?"

"Hi." I opened the door and guiltily met his gaze. "I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to apologize for. Are you upset?"

"No." Liar. "Okay, yes. A little. But not at you. I'm upset with myself. Because I have such a hard time opening up to people. I keep everything inside."

"To protect yourself." He nodded. "I understand."

"You do?" I stared up at him.

“Of course. We do what we must to protect—” He paused, tapping his chest with his fist. “It is not easy to open when there has been pain.”

I leaned forward, resting my head against his chest again because that was where I felt safest. His arms closed around me automatically, and we just stood there for a while.

“It’s better if we don’t get involved,” I said softly. “I’m a mess on the inside. On top of that, I’m leaving soon. So even if you wanted to deal with all my shit, there isn’t time.”

“I say this often,” he said slowly. “Not ready for relationship. Too complicated. Too busy. Always something. My grandmother, she wants so much for me to be married, but I say I am not ready because relationships require focus. Time. Emotion. These are difficult things. But sometimes... sometimes the life has other plans.”

“Like fate?” I asked in a whisper.

“Yes. This. *Fate.*”

We were barely a couple, yet we were already talking about fate.

I was in so much trouble.

Johan

MY EYES OPENED EARLY, even after a long night of sex, some conversation, and a late-night run to a drive-through because we'd been starving. I tended to be up early no matter what, and with a beautiful woman in my arms, it seemed like a waste to sleep through the opportunity to enjoy her. Especially since I didn't know for how long I would have her. We'd spent some time talking last night, but mostly she'd told me about the failure of her marriage. She blamed herself for most of it, which I thought was bullshit because the guy sounded like a first-class punk.

Everyone in hockey knew about the battle going on for ownership of the L.A. Phantoms, how Edward Barrowman's two sons were fighting the will. It was ridiculous because other than some gifts and jewelry, the only thing he'd left his widow was the team. His sons had gotten the rest of the late billionaire's estate, so they were being petty. Their feelings were hurt because they somehow felt that a billion dollars was just money, but the team was personal.

If I had a billion dollars, I'd be on a beach somewhere, living the good life. Not in court wasting money and causing stress to a woman who was going to have her hands full regardless. The Phantoms had been a mess for years, dealing with difficult players, money problems, and a lack of interest from fans. They hadn't made the playoffs in years, and rumor had it there had been some blackmail going on behind the scenes. Personally, I thought this Harper woman Sloane talked about so fondly might be exactly what the team needed.

It was a big joke whenever we played in L.A. about how it was an easy win. Most coaches put in back-up goalies and rested top players when they played the Phantoms. So nothing about the situation made sense to me, not even now that I had more details than most people did.

"Are you watching me sleep?" Sloane murmured in a husky, sleep-addled voice, nestling closer to me.

"You are beautiful."

Her eyes remained closed, but she smiled. "Thank you."

We laid there for a while, with her drifting off again and me thinking about all sorts of things I probably shouldn't be thinking about.

Spending four days in Cancun with Sloane, even though we would be sneaking around.

Four days of making love to her whenever I felt like it.

Seeing her smile across the table from me.

Hopefully watching her play volleyball on the beach.

And seeing her in the four bikinis I'd bought her. I'd had a hard time choosing just one.

Not to mention the dress.

Hopefully, she wouldn't be offended I'd bought her a dress, but the moment I'd seen it on the screen I'd known it would look amazing on her.

I'd been around enough to know that whatever this was between us wasn't the norm. There had been lots of women over the years. Some had been nothing more than sex, some had had potential that never went anywhere, and a very small number had been special.

Sloane didn't fall into any of those categories.

She was in a category of her own.

I didn't like to overthink things like this, but this specific thing had never happened to me before. I'd never had a teammate with a sister who blew my mind before. Her past, her brother, and the fact that she was leaving didn't seem to matter. I thought about her all the time, and now that I had the chance to spend time with her, I didn't want to do anything else. Not even hockey.

"You're still staring." She shifted, sliding a smooth, lean leg between mine.

"I am not," I protested as I hardened. "I was thinking."

"About what?" She slid a hand beneath the sheets and gripped my erection.

"Cancun."

“Yeah?” She stroked her hand up and down slowly. “What about it?”

“The bikinis I bought you.”

“Bikinis? Plural?”

“I was excited,” I said, leaning in for a kiss. “Almost as excited as I am now.”

“I hope not.” She pushed me onto my back and straddled me.

This might be a good time to mention the dress.

“There was also a dress.”

“Is that so?” She perched above me, her breasts too far for me to reach with my mouth, so I used my hands instead, cupping them.

“It looked like something you would wear.”

She reached for a condom I’d left on the bedside table and expertly slid it down my shaft. “And two bikinis, huh?”

“Eh. Maybe four.”

“Four bikinis?” She paused, the head of my cock right at her entrance. “Seriously?”

“One for each day?” I met her gaze with a lazy grin. “You cannot wear the same bikini twice. This is rule.”

She slid down slowly, her eyes never leaving mine. “I guess that makes sense.”

“I am glad you agree.” I moved my hands down her torso to her hips and groaned as she sank down all the way.

I let her do the work for a few minutes, loving the way she moved over me, the back of her gorgeous frame silhouetted in the mirror behind us. Seeing it from both sides was sensual as fuck, and when I couldn't stand it anymore, I thrust up hard, keeping her from moving by squeezing her hips with my fingers. I kept her right where I wanted her, grinding my hips and watching her eyes turn to liquid fire.

“Johan...” My name came out in a throaty whisper.

I loved hearing my name on her lips.

“Say it again,” I growled, pulling out to the tip.

“*Johan.*”

Our eyes locked, and I slammed back in.

“Again.” I pulled out.

“No! Johan!” She dug her nails into my chest, and the prickle of pain was oddly erotic.

I gave her what she wanted.

We did it over and over until she was shrieking my name, and I was grunting hers. A symphony of whispered curses and growled terms of affection.

There was no holding back once we got going.

And neither of us wanted to.



WE WON the game Wednesday night, and everyone was in high spirits when we got back to the family lounge. I

immediately sought out Sloane, who was talking with Scarlett, Zoe, and Eden, and I felt a moment of discomfiture.

I wasn't used to sneaking around, and while I wasn't afraid of Decker, I really didn't want there to be a problem between us. I should have talked to him, told him I cared about his sister, and would never do anything to hurt her. But we weren't at the point in our relationship. She had a history of trauma that kept her bottled up emotionally, and while she'd opened up a little the other night, nothing had changed. She still had a life waiting for her in Los Angeles, and I still had to be here.

So there was no point in talking to Decker.

Hell, I could barely talk to Sloane, but I was going to anyway.

"Hello, ladies." I sauntered over to them with a friendly grin.

"Hey, Johan." Zoe smiled. "Are you packed and ready for Cancun?"

She had no idea how ready I was.

"I am." I nodded. "I cannot wait to be on the beach."

"I'm ready for a vacation," Zoe said. "Sun and drinks with little umbrellas..." She sighed happily.

"My ex and I left the south of France eighteen months ago, so I'm ready for some sun and sand myself. It's not the same in L.A. Water's too cold." Sloane made a face.

"I tried to get them to pick Hawaii," Scarlett said, "but Wolf said I'd spend the entire time surfing. When he found out

Cancun doesn't have big waves this time of year, he made the decision.”

“That's not what happened,” Wolf said, coming over to kiss his wife.

She laughed. “Close enough.”

“We've got a spa day planned,” Zoe said. “So you boys can go do your golfing and fishing and whatnot. They have a hydro pool with my name on it.”

“What is hydro pool?” I asked.

“No idea.” She shrugged. “It's part of the hotel spa, and they advertise it as good for body and mind. Whatever that is, I'm in.”

“We're doing the whole day, right?” Scarlett asked. “Facials, massage, sauna, the works?”

“Including a champagne lunch,” Zoe said, nodding. “I think there's eight of us total that made the reservation. Noelle, Juliet, and Sutton are going too.

“You will find me on the golf course,” I said dryly, even though a massage sounded better than golf. I'd have to find out about a couple's massage. Would Sloane even want another massage after a day at the spa?

“Are you bringing anyone?” Eden asked me, her blue eyes guileless as she looked at me. “I heard a rumor you've been dating someone?”

I hadn't known the rumor mill was going, but if Eden had heard about it, Sloane and I would have to be more careful.

“Have you been talking to my grandmother?” I demanded playfully, eyeing her. “She is always trying to find me a wife, but so far I have managed to escape.”

“You’re too handsome to be single,” she said, shaking her head. “Don’t you think so, Sloane?”

Sloane turned to me, and the mischief in her eyes was unmistakable. “He *is* handsome. Wanna be my unofficial date for the weekend?”

“Of course.” I smiled and offered her my elbow. She slid her hand through it, and we walked quickly in the opposite direction.

“That was close,” she whispered.

“Now they will not suspect,” I whispered back.

“I think they already suspect,” she said.

“What do you want to do?”

“Nothing. What is there to do?”

“I do not like lying like I am ashamed.”

She turned to me, her face serious. “You know that’s not it, right? I think Decker feels guilty about everything that happened to me when we were kids, so he’s subconsciously trying to make up for it by being overprotective. It’s not ideal, but I’ll be gone in a few weeks, and you won’t have to worry about it.”

I was about to tell her that I was willing to talk to Decker, but Scarlett had called out to her. She turned to respond, leaving before I could.

This was something we would talk about in Cancun.

If we were going to continue to see each other and be intimate, I refused to sneak around. Even if she was leaving soon, there was no reason to behave as though we were doing something wrong. I'd respect her wishes for now, but the longer she stayed, the less I liked the current arrangement. Besides, if there were already rumors, the news would get out sooner rather than later and that wasn't how I wanted Decker to find out I'd been sleeping with his sister.

*S*loane

THE FLIGHT to Cancun turned out to be fun since our group had taken over the entire first-class area. Somehow, Decker had gotten me on the same flight, and we were a lively, rowdy bunch, partaking in enough champagne to have me giggling for most of the flight. I wound up next to Johan's friend Anders Nyberg, who was a big Swedish guy with an infectious laugh. He was charming and sweet with a faint accent and a bawdy sense of humor. Like most of Decker and Johan's teammates, he seemed like a nice guy.

For years after running away, I'd avoided strangers that weren't runaways or teens as much as possible. I'd been seventeen and Eddie nineteen when we'd met, but before that, I'd spent the first year after running away taking back my power by sleeping around. Doing it with other runaways had felt safe, and I'd needed to have sex on my terms, even if that hadn't been the healthiest coping mechanism. Once I met Eddie and became immersed in the real world again, I'd started to panic. Eventually, as we got more serious, it became

my routine to stick close to him to avoid situations where I might be alone with a stranger.

That had been Eddie's first clue that I needed help, and he got it for me. Slowly, through a lot of therapy and inevitable maturity, I'd learned to trust my gut and move past the instant distrust of men in general.

With the Knights, it was more than that.

I genuinely liked many of the people I'd been spending time with, including the men.

Wolf. Anders. Vaughn. Felix.

They were all good guys.

And Coach Petrov had quickly become one of my favorite people, funny while simultaneously serious and focused. I hadn't spent a ton of time with him, but enough to see what a good person he was. And I've come to the decision that Tessa was a lucky woman.

My brother had become a given, even when he was overprotective, but there was no mistaking the kind, gentle, and strong man he'd grown up to be. His protectiveness was part of that, and I saw no signs that he was in any way overbearing or controlling. Not with me, and certainly not with Eden. It made me happy to know he hadn't become like the people we'd been surrounded by growing up. And I was even happier that he was in my life again.

Leaving Fort Lauderdale was going to be much harder than I'd anticipated, but Harper had already put me on the payroll.

“Drinking game,” Anders said, as the flight attendant came around to refill our glasses. “We all start standing up. Sit down if you have *not* done the thing I say. The last person or persons still standing have to down their glass of champagne. Then we start over.”

“Dear god, this can’t be good,” someone murmured.

We all stood up.

“If you haven’t had sex in the last week, sit down.”

Felix sat down and everyone laughed.

“If you haven’t had sex in the last three days, sit down.”

Anders and a couple of other single guys sat down.

“If you haven’t had sex in the last twenty-four hours, sit down.”

A lot more sat down, but Johan and I were still standing, as were Mr. Knight and Noelle, Decker and Eden, and Wolf and Scarlett.

“If you haven’t had sex in the last twelve hours, sit your ass down.”

“Yeah, with a toddler while packing for a trip?” Noelle snorted as she and Mr. Knight sat down.

“The last eight hours.”

Decker, Eden, Wolf, and Scarlett all sat down.

Fuck.

Johan and I were the last two standing.

We'd had sex just before he ran out the door to avoid running into Decker, who'd been on his way to pick me up. That had been at seven-thirty, and it was now just about noon.

“The last six hours.”

Johan and I glanced at each other, and I saw the conflict in his eyes.

One of us needed to sit down.

We couldn't both remain standing.

Decker would know.

My brother wasn't stupid.

And I didn't want there to be a situation before we even got to Cancun.

Reluctantly, I sank down before Johan had the chance.

He weighed a lot more than I did and could probably handle more liquor.

“Drink up, stud muffin!” Anders yelled, laughing.

“At least now we know who the horniest people in the group are,” Felix said dryly.

Johan downed his champagne glass, motioned to the flight attendant to refill it, and then sank down in his seat without looking at me.

Was he mad?

No. Probably just disappointed.

I wasn't sure why I thought that, but the look in his eyes had been one I hadn't seen before.

“How did I not know you’d met someone?” Zoe demanded from the seat behind me.

“Just having fun,” I said, shrugging. “I’m leaving soon, so nothing to talk about.”

I didn’t dare look back at Johan.

“Next game,” Anders yelled. “Everyone up.”

Hopefully, this next round wouldn’t be about sex.

“Who had sex with their most recent partner the night you met?”

“Oh, come on,” Mr. Knight complained as he and Noelle sat down. “You boys do *not* need to know this much about my sex life!”

“You’re just mad you were a gentleman,” Anders quipped.

Interestingly enough, Slava and Zoe were the only two left standing on this round, and they gulped down their champagne happily.

When we all stood up again, much to the flight attendants’ annoyance, I cut a look in Johan’s direction, but he didn’t meet my gaze, and for the first time, I felt bad. Keeping our relationship a secret—no matter what we called it or however long it would last—suddenly felt a little dirty. As if we were doing something wrong. And that wasn’t the case at all. In fact, it was the opposite. For the first time in years, I felt good with a man. Things with Eddie hadn’t been all bad, but the fertility issues had completely ruined our sex life.

Just because we didn't have a future didn't mean I couldn't enjoy it for what it was without having to sneak around.

Once we got to Cancun, I was going to talk to Johan.

Then I was going to talk to Decker.



I HAD a nice room with an ocean view, and I felt another wave of guilt.

Decker was paying through the nose for me to have this room. Meanwhile, I had plans to spend most of my time in the bungalow Johan had upgraded to.

Ugh.

This was supposed to be a fun, relaxing trip, and I was already stressed.

I paced back and forth, trying to decide what to do.

There was no point unpacking if I was going to be with Johan, but I had a few things I didn't want to wrinkle.

I pulled out my phone and texted him.

SLOANE: Where are you? Can you come to my room?

JOHAN: Are you sure you want me to come?

SLOANE: Or I can come to you. Either way.

JOHAN: Bungalow 6.

I grabbed my purse, made sure I had my room key, and went back into the hallway. Members of our group were

roaming around, some heading to their rooms, some back to the lobby. Anders had his swim trunks on and was apparently on his way to the beach.

“Where ya goin’, Sloane?” he asked as we got on the elevator. “Wanna go for a swim?”

I swallowed.

“I have to see Johan first.”

The playfulness in his eyes faded, and he nodded. “You guys are good together. I think he really likes you, but he won’t talk about it.”

I sighed. “Yeah, that’s my fault. I asked him not to. My brother...”

“He’s overprotective. After all the years you were apart, I can see why. But it’s not fair to Johan, you know? He’s into you.”

“Don’t say anything,” I said quietly. “Please? I’m leaving for L.A. soon, and I don’t want there to be issues between him and Decker when I’m gone. That wouldn’t be fair to either of them.”

“Not a word.” He held up a hand. “Scout’s honor. Though I was never a Boy Scout.”

I laughed. “Thanks. Appreciate that.”

The elevator doors opened, and he headed for the bar where Felix was waving, and I went through the glass doors toward the beach. There was a sign indicating that Bungalows 1-4 were to the right and 5-8 to the left. I went left and got

onto a sandy trail that disappeared into a line of massive palm trees. I followed it around and saw numbered signs showing which bungalow was which.

Johan's was the farthest one, set back a way, and I looked around for a minute before knocking on the door.

"Hi." He looked gorgeous in a pair of low-slung swim trunks and nothing else.

"Hi." I smiled, and he moved aside so I could walk in. "This is beautiful. Look at your view!"

"Yes. Is worth every penny." He came up behind me, though he didn't touch me.

"Listen, I'm sorry—" I began as I turned.

"I am sorry if—" He started to talk at the same time. "You first," he said when we both stopped abruptly.

"I'm sorry if I made you feel bad on the plane. Everyone was looking at us, and even though I'm not embarrassed about us having sex, I didn't want my brother to find out that way."

"Yes. I was not happy at first, but I understand this. I would like to talk to him first."

I shook my head. "This is between me and him. He's got a lot of feelings about what went on when we were younger, and though we've talked briefly, I think he has a lot of unanswered questions and lingering guilt. Until we work that out, I think it'll be hard for him to let go, so to speak. Because he's not like that with Eden, you know?"

He nodded. "I understand that." He reached out, pulling me against his chest. "But this, what we have, is not dirty. It is not something I am ashamed of."

"God, no." I wrapped my arms around his neck and held on tight. "I'm not ashamed of you. Or of us. I'm trying to protect you, Johan."

"Protect me?" He tried to pull back, but I held on tighter.

I couldn't look at him while saying the things I needed to say.

"Protect me from what?" he repeated softly, stroking my back when he realized I wasn't going to let go.

"My past. My present. And the potential to be the very worst girlfriend you could ever want."

"This is my decision, no?"

"I'm not serious girlfriend material."

"Why?"

"Well, between the demons of my past, one failed marriage under my belt, and the fact that I probably can't have kids, I'm not the type of woman who can make you happy."

We'd never talked about it, but there was no doubt in my mind he wanted kids. And since there was a good chance I couldn't have them, I didn't want him to be divorce number two. Losing Johan would be a lot more painful than walking away from Eddie.

"Professional athletes have very high divorce rate," he said softly. "So we both have risks. I do not understand your

demons, but I am not afraid of them. If they come, I will fight them with you, at your side. I am not the kind of man who will run if things become difficult.”

“I know.” I buried my face in his chest, listening to the strong beat of his heart. It soothed me like nothing else these days, and that was scary.

“I also think it is very early to be discussing children,” he said after a moment. “Why do you think you cannot have them?”

Finally, I lifted my head. “Eddie and I tried for three years. We went to the doctor and there was nothing wrong with either of us, but it never happened. The marriage ended before we could see a fertility specialist, but my history means there’s a fifty-percent chance I’m the problem. So if you want them someday, you have to take that into consideration before we talk to Decker or take this any further. And on top of all that, I’m leaving, Johan. I have a job in Los Angeles, which is really far from South Florida.”

“It is only a few weeks since we met,” he said. “Why must we make big decisions now?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I just want to be honest. I don’t want to lead you on because there’s no denying this thing between us is intense.”

“Yes. That is why we cannot just say goodbye when you move.”

My heart fluttered with hope. “So, what? You want to try the long-distance thing?”

He hesitated. “You work for the owner of the Phantoms, yes?”

“Yes.”

“Then we can do nothing but wait and get to know each other. And one day, if it is what we want, we can ask her to arrange a trade.”

Johan

THE WORDS CAME out before I could stop them, and though the last thing I wanted was to be traded to another team, I would do it if she asked me to. It made no sense because it was way too early to be having this kind of conversation. The sex was good and the chemistry between us incredible, but was that enough to upend my life and career? Somewhere in the deep recesses of my soul, I must have thought so, or I never would have suggested such a thing.

She seemed startled too, because she hadn't yet responded.

I'd never believed in love at first sight, but that was what it felt like with Sloane.

We had something rare and special and all-encompassing.

I wanted to be with her.

I wanted our friends to know we were together.

I wanted to spend this vacation kissing and touching her every minute of every day.

I wanted us to be a couple.

It was crazy but life often was.

There was no other explanation.

“I know it is early,” I said after a moment. “And if you would prefer to keep things secret because you do not share my feelings, I will not be upset.” That was a lie, but I didn’t want to push her into something she wasn’t ready for just because I was. “I simply wanted you to know that the things you mentioned are not difficult in my mind. We can get past them. If you are interested.”

Her eyes were wide, glistening with tears that threatened to spill over any second now.

“I am sorry,” I said quickly, reaching up to brush away the single tear that escaped. “I will not pressure you. I thought—”

“I am. Yes. I want to. Fuck.” She dropped her head and took a deep breath. “You don’t know how hard this is for me. To allow myself to feel good. To live in the moment. To be happy. And that’s the problem. When I’m with you I feel so many things. Beautiful things. You make me want everything I didn’t believe I could have. Fun and laughter and sex that isn’t a chore.”

“A chore?” I interrupted. “Like...work?”

She slowly lifted her head, her voice steady when she spoke. “I was sexually abused starting when I was ten years old by the pastor of our church, who was in his forties. And then later, by boys he was grooming to be just like him. I was made to believe it was God’s will, that my only purpose as a

female was to submit to and satisfy my future husband. He convinced the innocent little girl I was that this was how you were trained to become a wife.

“I eventually realized that was bullshit, but there are parts of me that still wonder if God is going to punish me for not staying and doing my duty. For going through a promiscuous phase after I left in a misguided attempt to reclaim my sexuality. For a million other indiscretions. Or that God *is* punishing me by making me infertile. Unlovable.” She swallowed hard as more tears spilled. “All of that is irrational, intellectually I know that, but deep down I still hear those voices sometimes. And the only way to protect myself is to make sure I never, ever let anyone get close enough to prove them right.”

“*Sweetheart.*” I’d never used a term of endearment with her before, and it felt foreign to me in English, but everything inside of me told me that this was the right time. That she needed me to be a man who could show her love, even if it was early days for us as a couple.

I pulled her tight against my chest and held her close. “I am sorry. I am so, so sorry. I do not know what the future holds for us, love or friendship or something else, but I can promise I will never hurt you. I will always be your friend, no matter what happens.”

“I don’t know if I’m even capable of truly loving anyone.” Her voice broke, and I wanted to kill every single one of the men who’d ever hurt her.

“You are. You will. Maybe me, maybe someone else, but you are good inside, Sloane. You are *not* unlovable. Fuck anyone who ever made you feel this way.” I pressed soft kisses along her temple, the top of her head, the side of her face. “You are strong and beautiful and everything any man could ever want.”

“I don’t feel strong. I fake it well because I’m a survivor, but there are too many days I have to remind myself that I’m okay, that I don’t need anyone to protect me, that I am no longer a victim.”

“On those days, you hold on to me,” I whispered. “I will be there to give you strength when you do not have enough of your own.”

She lifted her tear-filled eyes to mine, and her lips parted.

Then she kissed me and a switch flipped.

Desire. Passion. Hunger.

Kissing, touching, ripping at each other’s clothes.

“Condom,” I rasped, as she clawed at my back.

“We don’t need them,” she whispered. “Please, Johan. I need you—now!”

“Fuck.” I had her against the wall again—this had become our favorite position—and I thrust deep.

I never went bare.

Never, ever.

Coaches and older players pounded it into our heads that it could be the end of your career or a very expensive five

minutes to take that kind of risk. But none of that applied here. What was the worst that could happen? She got pregnant?

I'd be okay with that.

Just thinking about it made me even harder, and I slammed into her, holding both of her hands in one of mine above her head. She hooked her heels together behind my back, and I made sure she felt every thrust, every slide of my cock through her slickness.

“Yes?” I panted.

“Yes.” Her lips sought mine hungrily, and I kissed her just like I was fucking her—hard and gruff with everything I had.

“Oh, god!” Her howl bounced off the walls, her sweet, wet sheath pulsing around me as she came. It was a tsunami of pleasure and the tingle racing down my spine exploded out and into her.

“Fuck!” I pounded into her a few more times until I was completely spent.

Then we didn't move.

We stood there, breathing hard, bodies still connected.

I wasn't sure what she was feeling, but I was coming down from a high I couldn't explain. This wasn't just sex. It couldn't be. Because it had never been like this with anyone else.

“Holy shit.” Her eyes were still closed, but she was smiling.

“You were very loud,” I murmured, touching light kisses onto her shoulder.

“You were very good.” She shrugged. “What’s a girl to do?”

“We are going to be late for dinner.”

“I know.” Her eyes fluttered open. “But I’d rather stay here with you.”

That was what I wanted too.

“Then we will stay,” I replied softly.



WE WERE UP EARLY the next morning with Sloane going back to her room to get a few things she would need to stay with me. I’d told her we didn’t have to tell anyone anything, and she could talk to her brother when she was comfortable. After the way she’d bared her soul to me yesterday, I had a better understanding of who she was. What she’d been through. How it impacted her now.

I didn’t need to know the details to imagine the horror of what had been done to her at such a young age. Sex hadn’t even been on my radar at ten. I’d been interested in nothing but hockey and my toy racecars. Girls were still weird and not a priority at that stage. I couldn’t wrap my head around a man capable of being so evil, and it made me want to hurt someone.

If Sloane needed more time to trust in me and what we had together, I would give it to her. She’d been through enough in her life. If I wanted a future with her, and it was starting to feel like I did, I had to give her the time and space to see the type

of man I was. To truly know in her heart that I would never do anything to hurt her. There was always the chance things wouldn't work out between us—that was part of life—but if that happened, it would be a decision we came to together. As adults who cared about each other.

I'd never been an asshole to any woman. Whether it was a one-night stand or something more, I treated women with respect and dignity because I expected the same in return. It had been a while since I'd been in love, but that just meant I was getting ready to take things to the next level. A level that afforded her everything I could offer; my heart, my body, my everything.

“About time,” Anders called to me. “You ready for some volleyball? They're choosing teams.”

“I'm in,” I replied, following him to an area where a net had been set up.

Sloane was already here, looking magnificent in the first of the four bikinis I'd bought her. I'd given them to her last night, and she'd modeled them for me.

This one was bright red, a halter style that crisscrossed in the front and had matching crisscross style straps on the sides of the bottoms. She looked amazing, and I wasn't the only one who'd noticed. A couple of men who were walking by did a doubletake, and even some of the hotel employees stopped to stare. Sloane was either oblivious or truly didn't care because she smiled and waved in my direction.

“Good morning,” she said as I got closer to her.

“Good morning.” I respected her wishes, but not being able to kiss her sucked.

“Play on our team,” she said, tugging my arm.

“Okay.”

“This time I’m playing on your team,” Decker said, joining us.

“I’m playing on the other team with Scarlett,” Eden announced, laughing as she crossed under the net.

“Then I’ll stay here with you guys.” Zoe looked at Slava. “Go on—you can play on the other team.”

He scowled. “Why can’t I play with you?”

“We’re splitting up couples.”

Well, *some* couples.

“I don’t like this game,” Slava said, pretending to pout.

Zoe leaned up and whispered something that made him brighten. “Okay. I go.” The tall Russian forward bounded over to the other side, and we all chuckled.

“She just promised him sexual favors,” Anders said, shaking his head. “This is so not fair to the rest of us.”

“You could’ve brought a date,” Decker pointed out.

“Nah.” He shrugged. “No one interesting in my life right now.”

“I am here!” Felix came bounding onto the sand, wide-brimmed hat on his head and his face covered in white sunscreen.

“Get on the other team,” Anders told him.

There was a lot of running back and forth as we got situated, and Sloane positioned herself in the back to serve.

“Show ‘em how it’s done, sis,” Decker yelled.

Sloane laughed, raised her right arm, and slammed the ball across the net. It landed in the sand just inside the line, and we all let out a cheer.

I could watch her all day, and by the time we were done, she was covered in a light sheen of sweat that made me want to lick her.

“I’m going for a swim,” she announced, giving me a look before running toward the water.

I was just about to follow when a hand clamped around my arm.

“I told you my sister was off-limits.” Decker’s voice was low, but there was a warning note that made me bristle.

“Your sister is an adult,” I responded quietly. “*If* something were to happen between us, I would respect her—and you—in every way.” I hated lying, but I’d told her I would leave it up to her to tell her brother, and I couldn’t go back on that now.

“And I’m telling you to stay away from her. I asked you guys not to go there. I don’t want her to not want to come visit because one of you broke her heart.”

“We are friends,” I said carefully. “I will not stop being her friend because you say so. This is ridiculous.”

“She’s not some puck bunny,” he snapped. “And I don’t want her to be another notch in your bedpost!”

“I told you I would not do that.”

“I see the way you look at her.”

“Every unmarried man on this beach looks at her that way.”

We glared at each other.

“You cross a line and we’re going to have a problem,” was all he said. Then he turned and stalked in the other direction.

Fuck.

*S*loane

I DRESSED for dinner in my own room since that was where most of my stuff was. The truth was I needed a little time alone to think. I was beyond annoyed at my brother since Johan had told me about their exchange on the beach, but unsure how to approach the subject of Johan and I...dating? We'd had a breakthrough last night, something I wanted to build on, but things like that took time. And time wasn't something I had an abundance of. With my brother involving himself, it seemed like I was being forced to make a decision I wasn't sure I was ready for.

Was I comfortable with going public so soon? Letting our inner circle know we were dating? That was hard to answer because I was leaving. The only question was when.

Impulsively, I called Harper.

"Hey!" She answered on the first ring.

"Hey."

"I saw on Instagram that you're in Cancun."

“Yes. Decker and Eden invited me to come along. Half the team is here, so it’s been fun so far.”

“You’re actually allowing yourself to have fun?” she breathed, a touch of sarcasm in her voice. “Be still my heart.” She knew better than almost anyone how hard I was on myself, though she didn’t know the details of what I’d gone through.

I laughed. “Stop it. I have fun.”

“Right.”

“That’s why I called,” I said after a moment, sliding the post of a diamond hoop earring into my lobe. “Do we have a timetable yet?”

“We don’t. I’m sorry. Until the next hearing, I don’t know when I can officially take over the team. I’ve made some moves behind the scenes, though.”

“I need to ask you a hypothetical question.”

“Oh boy.”

“If I was involved with someone on the team and wanted him to be traded to the Phantoms, could you make it happen?”

“If things go our way in court, sure. But we’re a long way from that, and it depends on who the guy is, his current contract, the salary he’d want... there are a lot of variables.” She paused. “Are you dating someone on the team? Johan?”

I bit my lip as I put the second earring in.

“Yes, but no one knows. And my brother is being a fucking Neanderthal. He told everyone I was off-limits when I

got here. And I guess he's seen that Johan and I are friends, so —”

“I have to look him up again because I can't picture his face.”

“That's because the only face you ever see is Gabe's.” Gabriel DeLugo was the back-up goalie for the Knights and Harper's ex-husband. She didn't talk about him much, but on the rare occasion his name came up there was always something in her voice that gave me pause.

“Gabe knows I plan to trade for him the minute I'm able. And he's not happy about it.”

“Really?”

“Yup. And that stays between us. You can't tell anyone. Not your brother, not Johan. There's a lot going on behind the scenes, and I have to be able to trust you with this stuff.”

“Of course. I won't say anything.” I hesitated. “I'm just curious why you would trade your ex to the Phantoms? Isn't that a form of self-inflicted torture?”

“It's complicated.”

I chuckled. “Isn't it always?”

“Anyway, Johan is gorgeous. If you decide that's what you want, and your ex ever stops suing me for the team, I can try to trade for him.” She paused. “But you know, Sloane, you don't *have* to move to L.A.”

“L.A. is the only place where I have a job,” I countered. “And I don't want to be in another position where I live off a

man. I'm twenty-eight years old and have nothing to put on a resume. It's embarrassing."

"I understand that, but for now, you can be my virtual assistant. It's not like I need you to sit in an office and answer my phone. And frankly, I'm starting to worry this fucking legal battle is never going to end. I don't want you to give up what might be a good thing for something that isn't guaranteed."

"Nothing is guaranteed. As far as Johan and me, we're... well, I don't know what we are. We talked last night, and I don't know what we decided, except that we like each other a lot and want to see where this goes. He knows I'm moving, and I gave him an overview of the abuse from when I was a kid, but it didn't scare him away. I even told him about my potential fertility issues, and he wasn't deterred. He's special, Harper. And that scares me. I'm not sure I'm ready for special."

"I don't think we're ever ready for special. Special just happens, and if you don't see it through, you may never forgive yourself and spend the rest of your life wondering about the what ifs."

"Was Gabe special?"

"We're not talking about Gabe," she said quietly. "But yes, I thought he was special. Turned out I was wrong. The team could use him, though. And that's all I care about."

"I don't think that's all you care about," I said softly. "But it's okay if you don't want to talk about it."

“The past is sometimes better left there. You of all people should know that.”

“I do, but sometimes you have to revisit the past to be able to move forward.”

“Are you revisiting the past?”

“Sometimes it feels like it with Decker back in my life. And today I’m going to see an old friend we grew up with. She was molested as well.”

“Oh, wow. Are you okay with that?”

“I think so. I’ll let you know.”

“Sloane?”

“Yes?”

“Take your time. You don’t need to be in L.A. any time soon. We can talk about your schedule, and what I need when the time comes. Just focus on what you need right now. If that happens to be a hot Slovak hockey player, don’t walk away because of a job. You’ll never forgive yourself.”

She probably had a point.

“Thanks, Harper.”

“Talk soon.”



AFTER MY CHAT WITH HARPER, I knew I had to talk to Decker, but it was hard to find the time. Once I went down to meet everyone for dinner, our childhood friend Kristy and her wife

Anja arrived, so there was no time for anything but food and wine and catching up. There was also dancing—both in groups and with Johan—and dirty looks from my brother.

“Decker.” Sometime after midnight, I finally caught him alone, on his way back from the restroom.

“Hey.” He stopped, and we looked at each other.

The wine had made me mellow, but I was still annoyed with him.

“Please do me a favor and don’t tell me whom I can be friends with.”

He sighed. “I wasn’t—”

“You were. You *are*. Stop it. I didn’t come find you because I want a dad or some kind of big brother. You’re the only family I have, but I don’t want or need someone running my life. I love and appreciate everything you’ve done since I got to Lauderdale. I really do. I love you and Eden, and spending time with all of you has been amazing. But warning off your teammates? That’s ridiculous. I’m not sixteen anymore. I can choose whom I want to spend time with.”

“I know these guys,” he insisted. “I know what they’re like because not that long ago I was one of them. Even some of the married ones do shit that’s sketchy. And I’ll be pissed if someone I know, someone I introduced you to, hurts you. I’m serious, Sloane. These guys go through women like underwear, and you’ve already had a lifetime of hurt. You don’t need anymore.”

“I don’t need you to protect me,” I snapped, beginning to lose my patience. “Seriously, just knock it off. You said yourself you used to be single and wild, but you’re not like that anymore now that you’re with Eden. Why are you the only one who can fall in love and change?” I didn’t want to have this conversation anymore because I was afraid I would say something to screw up our new relationship, so I turned and strode down the hall, back into the lounge area.

“Are you okay?” Johan looked concerned as I approached him.

Apparently, I looked as murderous as I felt.

“Do you want to take a walk?” I asked him. “I need air.”

“Sure.”

I turned and stalked toward the exit that led to the beach, only pausing to take off my high-heeled sandals.

“Sloane. Wait. What happened?” Johan finally caught up to me as we reached the sand.

“My brother,” I muttered.

“What did he say?” He laced his fingers through mine as we walked.

“That you’re all man-whores, and I shouldn’t get involved with any of you.”

“That is not correct. I have fun, yes, but I have never cheated on a woman and—”

“You don’t have to defend yourself,” I said softly, squeezing his hand. “I see the kind of man you are. Decker has

always been overprotective. When we were kids, he was always jumping to someone's defense. Mine. Our friend Kristy. Lots of other kids. But we're not children anymore."

"Don't worry about me," he said, pulling me closer and sliding an arm around my waist. "I can handle him."

"But you shouldn't have to."

"It's okay. You're worth it."

I leaned into his warmth and closed my eyes for a moment.

Between the moonlight, the breeze coming off the ocean, and Johan's warm body close to mine, the frustration I'd been feeling started to abate. Being with him was so easy. I couldn't remember ever spending time with a man who made me feel so relaxed. Eddie had always made me feel safe, but never relaxed. There had always been pressure to look perfect, dress according to what everyone else was wearing, be seen in the right places, have intelligent conversation, and even get pregnant on a schedule. I felt like I'd failed in so many ways, but all of that went away when I was with Johan.

He didn't demand anything from me.

"I will talk to him," he said softly, pulling me against his chest.

I looked up into his handsome face. "Just leave it alone. When we get back to Lauderdale, I'll sit down with him and tell him about us. The question is, what should I tell him?"

"What do you want to tell him?"

“I don’t want to tell him anything because I don’t want to put pressure on us.”

“There is no pressure. We are hanging out, spending time together. It has no label. No title. Just friendship. What we do in the bedroom is not his business.”

“I know, but—”

“Do not worry so much.” He leaned in, lightly brushing his lips across mine. “I will handle him if he has something to say.” His hands stroked down over the curve of my ass. “But tonight, I don’t want you to think about anything but me.”

That was easy to do when he angled his head and took my mouth with purpose. His tongue sought out mine hungrily, twirling and dueling as our bodies moved together. I wanted him all the time, this gorgeous hunk of a man, even right here on the beach. Maybe it was the alcohol making me more brazen than usual, or a subconscious way of telling my brother to stuff it, but I needed Johan.

Right. Fucking. Now.

Our kisses grew heated, and I moaned when he slid his hand beneath my dress and over my bare backside. I was wearing a thong and the intimate contact had me clenching with need.

“I want you inside me,” I breathed against his mouth. “Now. I can’t wait.”

He looked around, his hands never leaving my body. “There.” He motioned to an area of trees that had hammocks between them. We stumbled over to the closest one, and he

dropped into it first, tugging me on top of him. The hammock swung back and forth wildly, making us laugh and fumble as Johan steadied us.

“You are sure?” he asked, mumbling something in Slovak. I didn’t understand the words, but his tone made me giggle.

“Yes.” I leaned over and bit his lower lip. “Fuck me, Johan. Now.”

He growled, tugging my dress up while simultaneously unbuttoning his jeans. The hammock started to swing again, and we would have gone over the side if he hadn’t been strong enough to put one foot down to steady us. Without hesitation, he slid my short cocktail dress up, somehow unzipped his jeans, and moved my thong to the side.

And then he was inside of me.

Johan

WE DIDN'T HAVE a lot of room to move, but we didn't need to. Our mouths were fused together greedily, her warm, wet pussy clenched around me tightly, and we were nothing but a tangle of limbs and lips as the hammock swayed. We'd been together enough times that we knew each other's needs, and tonight it didn't seem to require a lot of effort. I moved inside of her with ease, gliding in and out with short but firm thrusts.

"Fuck, you feel good," I whispered against her mouth.

"I love when you're inside of me," she whispered back. "Like your cock was made just for me."

Whenever she said shit like that, my heart nearly exploded with how much I wanted her.

And I wasn't just talking about sex.

The bond between us started with the physical connection but somehow went deeper. The language barrier, the fact that we were still sneaking around, none of that seemed to matter.

The only thing that mattered was when we were together.

“Come for me,” I said, sucking on her lower lip. “Take what you need, and let me feel your pussy squeeze my cock.”

I had my hands on her ass, squeezing the firm round globes while helping to keep us balanced.

“Johan, baby, I need more,” she panted, tightening her knees around my hips.

I thrust up, bottoming out hard, and she arched into me, taking it all.

There tended to be an urgency to our lovemaking, as if she couldn't wait, couldn't get enough, couldn't stop. And I was right there with her.

With the waves crashing in the background, our bodies shot off in unison, and I covered her cries with my mouth. The hammock was swinging wildly by the time we were done, and I had to put my foot down again to steady us.

“You ever done it in a hammock before?” she asked, chuckling against my mouth.

“No. You?”

“No.” She rested against me. “I love being here with you, Johan.”

“I like it too.” I wrapped my arms around her, and we were quiet for a while.

It was relaxing out here. The breeze was warm, the sound of the waves crashing on the shore calming, and the lights of the hotel seemingly far away.

Right now, there was nothing else in the world but the two of us.

A faint buzzing told me my phone was either ringing or someone was texting me, but I couldn't reach it right now anyway. A moment later, I heard the muffled sound of Sloane's phone ringing in her purse. She shifted.

"Someone is looking for us."

"Probably your brother wants to kill me."

She chuckled. "Don't worry. I'll protect you."

I tightened my grip around her. "It's okay. I told you—I can handle Decker."

My phone started to buzz again.

"Fuck." I wiggled around until I could dig the phone out of my pocket.

Sure enough. There were a bunch of texts from Anders.

ANDERS: Dude—wherever you and Sloane are, you need to get back here. Everyone noticed that the two of you disappeared, so they're joking about it, and Decker does NOT look happy.

I sighed and showed Sloane the message.

"Oh, for fuck's sake." She squeezed her eyes shut. "Why is he like this?"

"He is worried. I understand. I would be worried too if it was my sister. But I would not behave this way. Hana would be very angry."

“Come on. We’re going to deal with this now. In front of everyone if necessary.”

“No.” I shook my head. “We must not embarrass him. Is not right. If we have this conversation, we do it in private.”

“Fine.” Sloane wiggled to get down without tipping us over, and I managed to get my dick back in my pants and my jeans buttoned before taking her hand.

“Let’s go in on the far side, so I can go to the bathroom first,” she said. “And I’m going to text Decker, ask him to meet me in the lobby.”

“Okay.” I wasn’t sure how this was going to go, but at this point, there was no choice but to move forward.

I kept my hand clamped around hers until we got to the restrooms and before she pulled away, I leaned over to lightly kiss her.

“I’ll make sure he understands that this is more than casual sex,” I said quietly. “That I would never disrespect either of you by making this something cheap.”

She nodded, a faint smile tugging at her lips. “I know.” She squeezed my hand before disappearing into the ladies’ room.

I took my time in the bathroom, taking care of business and then washing my face and hands. I smoothed back my hair and straightened my shirt and jeans, brushing a little sand off both. My appearance no longer reflected the look of a man who’d just been having sex with his girlfriend on the beach, and I hoped Decker saw what I saw. Or maybe it was just

wishful thinking. Either way, I wasn't going to let Decker derail whatever was happening between Sloane and me.

Sloane and I walked back out to the lobby at the same time, and I cocked my head.

“Did you text him?”

She nodded. “Just now—there they are. I actually texted Eden because I'm too annoyed with my brother to be civil.”

“Breathe,” I whispered. “It will be okay.”

The look on Decker's face was one of obvious anger, and I steeled myself for whatever was coming. This could go several different ways, and I wasn't hopeful he would suddenly change his stance on me dating his sister.

“Do *not* say a word,” Sloane said as Decker opened his mouth. “Me first.”

“Fine.” Decker gave me a dirty look but kept quiet.

“I understand that you don't want me to get into a situation where I might date one of your friends and then not want to come visit anymore because there's this awkward breakup or whatever. I get that. I really do. But you have to understand I'm not a child. I am a grown woman who happens to be capable of managing that kind of thing. If Johan and I decide this isn't working, the only thing that changes is my relationship with *him*. You're my brother. Nothing changes that.”

“You done?” he asked, scowling.

She folded her arms across her chest. “Yes.”

“I asked him, and all my teammates, not to do this because you’re fresh off a divorce and our relationship, as siblings, is really new. We’re still trying to work through the baggage of the past, and believe it or not, you’re not the only one traumatized from it.”

Sloane started to say something, but Decker held up a hand. “No, let me finish. I know you had it a thousand times worse, but I still had to watch. I may not have understood what was happening, but I knew *something* bad was going on. I was a little kid, so most of it didn’t make sense to me at first, but then my big sister disappeared. And now that I have her back, I don’t want her to disappear again.” Brother and sister were inches apart, facing each other, and Eden and I seemed to instinctively take a step back, letting them get whatever this was out of their systems.

“I’m not going anywhere except to Los Angeles for work,” Sloane responded, throwing up her hands in frustration. “Unless you keep trying to tell me who my friends are.”

“We both know you and Johan are more than friends.”

“Whether we are or aren’t is none of your business.”

They glared at each other for another few seconds before Decker turned to me. “I asked you, as a friend and teammate, not to do this.”

“I’m sorry,” I replied quietly. “It just happened. But she’s become important to me. Important enough to risk our friendship.”

There was no mistaking the surprise that registered on his face. “So you like her.”

“Very much.”

“You know what’s going to happen if you hurt her?”

“I will never hurt her. Not the way you are thinking.”

“You guys know I’m right here,” Sloane muttered, staring at the ceiling.

I bit back a laugh since this wasn’t the time for it.

“You can’t guarantee that,” Decker said to me, as if she hadn’t spoken.

“I cannot guarantee we will be together forever,” I responded calmly. “It has been less than a month. But that is the part that is none of your business. Respect, kindness, friendship—all of that is a given with any woman I date. You know the type of man I am. You insult me by thinking anything else.”

Decker narrowed his gaze. “This isn’t about you.”

“It cannot be about anyone else. You do not believe I am good enough for your sister.”

I said the words and immediately sensed I was right.

I didn’t need his approval, but I’d been hoping to get it.

And now I saw that I wouldn’t.

No matter what happened, or what agreement we came to, he didn’t want me with his sister.

It wasn't really about me hurting her; it was specifically about me.

Which made no sense because he and I had never had any issues.

"Come on, this is ridiculous," Sloane said, putting a hand on my arm. "Let's not do this, okay? Everything is okay. So I'm dating one of your friends. It's not—"

"Not my friend anymore." Decker shook his head.

"Decker!" Sloane and Eden spoke in unison, their voices sounding as shocked as mine would have had I been able to speak.

We were no longer friends because I was falling in love with his sister?

I was so confused about his attitude.

"She's an adult, so technically I can't stop her," Decker said, his jaw working. "But you and me? We're done. There's a bro code, and you just broke it."

"Decker, you're being ridiculous!" Sloane looked shocked.

"I know you don't understand," he said quietly. "But when you ask your teammates to leave a woman alone, for whatever reason, that's a line you don't cross. And he crossed it." He turned and stalked in the opposite direction with Eden muttering an apology before hurrying after him.

"I'm so sorry," Sloane said when they disappeared from view. "I don't even know what to say about all of that."

"Not your fault." I sighed.

“I feel terrible.”

“Don’t. He is being...” What was the English word for unreasonable? I said it in Slovak, and though she didn’t understand, she nodded.

“Whatever you said, yeah. He is.”

I truly hadn’t been expecting this.

My hope had been to talk to him alone, man-to-man. I’d planned to tell him how much I cared about his sister, how I was going to do everything in my power to get her to stay in Fort Lauderdale—which was something I knew he wanted as well. Instead, he’d forced this impromptu confrontation, and it had gone so much worse than I’d thought it would.

He genuinely didn’t want me to date his sister.

And I didn’t understand.

If I was honest, it hurt my feelings.

I wasn’t one of those guys who fucked a different woman in every city. Yes, I had one-night stands on occasion, but I also dated. Sometimes I went without sex or even companionship because I was so focused on hockey and the season. The idea that he thought so little of me he would end our friendship over this was unfathomable.

How the hell was I going to be with her if her brother hated me?

Sloane rubbed her temples with her fingers. “Can we just go to bed?” she asked. “I’m too emotionally drained for anything else.”

“Me too.” I reached for her hand, and we slowly walked towards the path that led to my bungalow.

There didn't seem to be anything else to say. Not tonight anyway.

*S*loane

THE NEXT DAY was spa day for us girls. Johan had been planning to go golfing with the guys, but he'd cancelled. He and Anders had rented jet skis instead, so at least he wasn't alone. I felt terrible about the way Decker had treated him, but I didn't know what to do about it. Decker had talked about some bullshit bro code I understood but didn't like in this circumstance. Women didn't do stuff like that. If one of my friends wanted to date my brother, I might tell her to watch how she treated him or something, depending on the situation, but I would never do what Decker had done.

I thought it was ludicrous and made sure everyone knew it once we were at the spa.

A small group of us were in the heated pool, what the resort called a hydro pool, and despite how hard I was trying to relax, it was difficult when I was so frustrated.

"I couldn't get Decker to talk to me last night either," Eden was saying. "I don't know what's going on in his head."

Honestly, I've never seen him like this."

"He keeps talking about not wanting his teammates to do anything to make me leave," I said, "but it's becoming *him* that's going to make me want to leave. I've lived my whole life running or letting other people tell me what to do. And I fucking refuse to do that anymore. He has to get over this obsession with protecting me or whatever it is that's going on."

"I don't understand why he's being this way," Scarlett said, frowning. "I get him wanting to protect you and all that, but at the end of the day, you're an adult. If Johan isn't in your life, someone else will be eventually, and broken hearts are just part of that. There's no way for him to keep you from ever getting hurt. Personally, professionally, whatever the case may be."

"I understand that he doesn't want it to be one of the guys on the team," Zoe said thoughtfully. "But it's too late for that. You're already dating Johan—and we need to get all the juicy details, by the way—so what's the point of Decker being pissed off?"

"Johan's a good guy," Scarlett said. "If I was going to let my daughter date a pro hockey player, it would be someone like him."

"Exactly," I said in exasperation. "Johan seemed so hurt by it too. And now there's going to be an issue between them. Because of me."

"No." Kristy shook her head. "Not because of you. Because of Decker. He's the one being unreasonable."

“I’m sorry if this makes you uncomfortable,” I said to Eden. “That’s not my intention, but I’m so frustrated right now.”

“It’s okay.” She smiled. “I can see both sides and everyone is right—it’s too late now. You guys are already involved. He needs to accept it. If Johan breaks your heart, then there’s a beatdown in his future, but otherwise, it’s not up to him.”

“And beyond that,” Zoe interjected. “What happens if they wind up getting married? Is Decker not going to have a relationship with his brother-in-law?”

“We’re nowhere near anything like marriage,” I said, laughing. “But that’s just it. If this somehow *does* become serious, is he going to keep this up? Because I’ll tell you right now, I’m not going to be forced to choose. If Johan and I stay together or get serious or whatever, is Decker going to cut all ties?”

Zoe grimaced, and Scarlett wrinkled her nose.

“I don’t think he will,” Eden said after a moment. “I think he’ll come around. There’s something bothering him, and whatever it is, he can’t seem to wrap his head around it enough to deal with it. He keeps saying once you guys break up, you’re not going to come visit anymore or you won’t want to stay. Stuff like that. I think that’s covering up something deeper.”

“And maybe he’s protecting himself a little,” Kristy suggested. “Like, he’s afraid he’s going to lose you again, so by being a jerk, he’s putting emotional distance between you to circumvent it.”

We all grew quiet for a few minutes, ruminating on that. It was the first thing that made any sense. I didn't like it, but if that was the case, we were going to have to find a way to work through it.

"Well, that sucks," I said finally. "I didn't come looking for him for us to have emotional distance after more than a decade of physical distance. Besides, I do enough of that with almost everyone else. I wanted my brother back, but now it feels like I'm losing him all over again."

"You two need to have some kind of heart-to-heart," Eden said.

"I've tried," I said.

"Maybe Tiff can help," Scarlett suggested. "She's a psychologist with a successful practice."

"That's Zakk's wife, right?" I asked. There were a lot of people and names to remember, and Tiff wasn't someone I'd spent much time with.

"Yes."

"Decker might not be comfortable talking to a teammate's wife," I said. "Even if it's in a professional capacity. Seeing a therapist together might be a good way to unburden the ghosts of the past, though."

"Therapy is important," Kristy acknowledged.

"I've been in therapy for years, so I'm a big fan."

"But Decker hasn't." Our eyes met, and his words from last night came back to me.

We're still trying to work through the baggage of the past, and believe it or not, you're not the only one traumatized from it.

“He said something to that effect last night,” I said. “Now I feel even worse.”

“The fact that Decker hasn't dealt with the past isn't your fault,” Kristy said gently.

“He and your other brother got into a fist fight last season after a game,” Eden said thoughtfully. “You're all obviously still dealing with a lot of pain from what happened growing up. I hadn't realized the extent of it until just now.”

“So what do we do?” Kristy asked softly.

Despite my annoyance, it warmed me to hear her say *we*. As if my being part of the fold, part of the family, was a foregone conclusion. I'd honestly had to wonder if I was going to lose my newfound family because of this rift between Decker and Johan and me.

“We're going to start with therapy,” I said finally. “If we can talk him into it.”

“We'll work on it,” Eden whispered. “Promise.”

“Thank you.”



ON OUR LAST night in Cancun, we went on a sunset horseback ride followed by a picnic dinner on the beach. I'd never been on a horse, but the tour leaders promised they were all tame

and gentle, used to inexperienced riders. It was crazy being on such a massive animal, but once I was settled in the saddle, it was kind of fun. As promised, the horse I was on was calm and uninterested in running or jumping, so we ambled along at a slow, comfortable pace.

Johan was riding his horse next to me and seemed completely at ease there.

“Have you ridden before?” I asked him.

He nodded. “Yes. My uncle in Slovakia had a farm. I rode often as a child.”

“That sounds fun.”

“This is your first time?”

“Yup. A total horse virgin.”

I realized how that sounded as soon as the words came out of my mouth and laughed as Anders, who wasn't far from us, snorted.

“I really didn't need to know that,” he quipped.

“You heard nothing,” Johan told him.

I laughed.

My gaze strayed to my brother, who was riding with Eden way ahead of us. There were twenty of us on this sunset adventure, and he hadn't said a word to me. Hell, we'd barely spoken since the other night when he and Johan had words, and I wanted to shake him. We'd both been so happy to reconnect and start rebuilding our relationship, but now

everything was going to shit and there was no guarantee he would be open to therapy.

Eden had suggested we not bring it up until we got home from Mexico, so there was a growing distance between us, and the iciness between him and Johan was unmistakable. Everyone had noticed, so I knew there had to be gossip going on behind the scenes. That bothered me more than what was going on with my brother. No matter what happened with Johan, whether Decker and I went to therapy, or anything else, now I was the subject of gossip. I hadn't done anything wrong, but his friends, teammates, and their significant others would all know I was the reason there was a rift between the two men.

Only a small portion of the team was here, but I wasn't naïve enough to think they wouldn't tell the others about it as soon as we got back. And hell, it would be hard to miss the animosity between them.

And it was my fault, no matter how hard the girls had tried to convince me otherwise.

I didn't want to be that girl, the one who caused trouble between friends.

On a professional hockey team, no less.

This was high school level drama, and that wasn't me.

Yet, the pull to be with Johan was stronger than I'd anticipated.

He'd assured me he was fine, that he could handle this bullshit with Decker, but it was easy to say that on vacation.

Once they got back to hockey, playing and traveling together every day, it would be different. Harder. More inconvenient.

Again, because of me.

Part of me couldn't help but wonder if I was worth it.

Johan could have almost anyone, so why would he choose the woman who came with the fuckton of baggage? Emotional, geographical, and now even personal. My presence in his life brought nothing but negativity, and had the roles been reversed, I would have dumped him in a hot minute.

Okay, maybe not.

I liked him.

A lot.

He was everything anyone could ask for. He ticked all my boxes and then some. That was part of the problem, though. Right now, we were hormonal and in the early stage of a relationship where everything felt important, exciting, and romantic. Six months from now, he would undoubtedly feel differently, potentially breaking my heart in the process. Which was exactly what Decker had warned me about.

The irony of the fact that Decker was the cause of most of the drama didn't escape me.

"You are very quiet tonight," Johan said as we settled on blankets in the sand.

"I don't want to go back," I admitted. "I'm afraid things are going to get worse before they get better."

“With your brother.” It wasn’t a question, merely a statement of fact.

“My brother. Hockey. With you.”

“With me?” He shook his head. “I am fine. I am only sorry to be the cause of this problem. I know your brother is important to you.”

“You’re important, too,” I whispered. “And I know how important hockey is to both of you.”

“Hockey is not a problem. I don’t want you to worry.” He reached for my hand. “As long as we are okay, I will handle everything else.”

“I don’t want the team to think badly of me, like I’m the reason you and Decker aren’t speaking.”

“We cannot control what others think. We can only control what we do. How we treat others. Until then, we live our lives.” He brought my hand to his lips and gently kissed it. “I want to be with you, Sloane, and this is our test. This will show us if the bond we have is strong enough.”

“Strong enough for what?” I asked softly.

“Everything that’s to come.”

Johan

TWO MORNINGS LATER, as I laced up my skates before practice, the buzzing around me told me the rumor mill was going full force. I hated it because I preferred to never get involved in drama, but I'd known this was coming and tried to mentally prepare myself. The situation had come to a head in Cancun, essentially in front of a good portion of the team, and I'd assumed the rest of the team would find out quickly.

“Bangin’ Decker’s sister, huh?” Based on his shit-eating grin, Jordan apparently found this hilarious. He’d kept his voice low, since he was obviously concerned with Decker hearing him, but he had no such hesitation with me.

“Watch your mouth,” I growled, giving him a look. “And do *not* make this worse.”

“My friend, it’s already worse. From what I can see?” He gazed over to where Decker had his back to me. “It’s beyond worse.”

“Don’t stir shit up,” Anders said, elbowing Jordan. “It’s not a joke.”

Jordan rolled his eyes. “You guys are way too serious, man. I mean, he warned you not to fuck—”

I put my finger an inch from his face. “Do not talk about her like that.”

“—around, fuck *around* with your teammate’s sister,” he said, swatting at my hand. “Everyone knows that. It’s bro code. You don’t do it. I mean, not without permission. Hey, Ryder, did you ask Peyton’s brother permission before you started dating her?”

Ryder Kingston didn’t even look up from his phone, merely lifting his middle finger in response. I didn’t know if that was a good thing or a bad thing.

I cut a look at Anders, silently pleading with him to shut Jordan up, and he gave me a quick nod.

“You feel like heading back to Atlanta, huh?” Anders said, grabbing Jordan in a headlock and tugging him in the opposite direction. “Coach will send your ass down if you stir shit up.”

“Get off me, fucker!” Jordan wiggled free, and the two of them exchanged swings and banter as they headed for the tunnel. I listened to their laughter, wondering if I’d ever have that with my teammates again now that I’d drawn some invisible line in the sand with Decker.

“It’s going to be okay,” Wolf said quietly. “Just focus on hockey. Let all the other shit go. They’ll be bored with it by tomorrow.”

“Decker won’t.” I watched as Decker and Slava headed out of the locker room talking quietly and sighed.

“You’re going to have to decide if she’s worth it.” Wolf met my gaze.

“It has been a month,” I grunted under my breath. “I am crazy for her, but it has only been a month.”

“I knew I loved Scarlett the first time I saw her,” he replied, shrugging. “At seventeen, we were too young to handle that kind of emotion, but at your age, you need to man the fuck up. There is no halfway with this. Either you want to be with her, in a serious relationship, or you don’t.”

It was way more complicated than that, and we both knew it.

“She has a job in Los Angeles,” I said. “My job is here. Her brother hates me. In the offseason, I am usually in Europe. There is much to navigate.”

He shrugged. “If you’re looking for easy, end it and get back to status quo.”

“I don’t *want* to end it.” That was what I’d been holding on to the last few days. The feelings I had for her, the fact that she wanted to try as much as I did. The short-term logistics were going to suck, but if we could make it through these early trials, maybe there was a future for us.

“You and Decker seriously need to talk.”

I snorted. “I have tried. Sloane has tried. Eden says she has tried. He doesn’t want to listen.”

“He’s not *ready* to listen. It’s not the same.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Love his sister. Show him how much you care about her. Do nice things for her. I’m not necessarily talking about presents and shit, either. I’m talking about showing her—and by extension him—the man you are.”

“I try to do this every day.”

“But you’ve been doing it behind closed doors. Now everyone knows you’re together. You need step up your game. Let him see the man you are to *her*.”

“It has been a long time since I’ve had a serious girlfriend,” I admitted. “Maybe I need ideas.”

“Romantic date nights. Gifts that have special meaning. Standing up for her when and if the guys try talking shit. Romantic stuff that doesn’t necessarily cost money.”

“You think romance will matter to Decker?”

“Maybe, maybe not, but they’ll matter to her.”

“What if it’s not enough?” I asked quietly. “What if nothing I do will make him okay with me dating his sister? I believe this is personal. I do not think he would be this way if it was you. Obviously, if you were single.”

Wolf frowned. “What makes you think that?”

“It’s hard to explain. The way he looked at me, I could feel in my gut that it was more because it was me, specifically, than because it was one of his teammates.”

“You guys have never had issues, have you?”

“Never. But I feel it. I don’t know how else to explain it.”

“Let me see if I can find out anything. In the meantime, up your boyfriend game. That’s the best advice I’ve got.”

“I appreciate it. Thanks.” I turned and headed for the ice. I could handle being a good boyfriend. Hockey, at least for the foreseeable future, would be harder.



I HADN’T TALKED to my grandmother in a couple of weeks, and though I wanted to call her, I wasn’t ready to tell her about Sloane. She would have questions I either couldn’t answer or wasn’t yet comfortable talking about, so it was easier to just tell her I was busy. I sent her a quick text telling her I loved her, but that I had meetings and would call soon. Hopefully that would appease her until I was ready to let her in on what was going on.

She’d be excited I had a girlfriend, though probably less so when she found out she was American. She wanted me to settle down, but she also hoped I would find a girl who would pull me home to Slovakia. In the summer, when I retired, forever. It probably had never occurred to her I might not want to.

I couldn’t even imagine her disappointment when she found that out.

I’d move her to the US if she wanted to come. I loved and cared about her enough to want her with me, but it would be a difficult change for her at her age. Plus, the language barrier,

lack of health insurance, and a million other details that would be difficult to navigate. I could afford to take care of her, but without health insurance, I could literally spend hundreds of thousands of dollars for something like a hip replacement. So it wasn't as black and white as what I could afford. She also had a life in Slovakia with friends and family. Here, it would just be me, and the family I might or might not have.

I drove straight home after practice since Sloane had been staying with me since we got back from Cancun. I didn't want her to go back to a hotel, but I wasn't sure how she would feel about living with me full-time. It wasn't like officially living together since she was technically going back to California at some point, but I needed her to know I wanted her with me.

"Hi." She looked up from her laptop when I walked in.

"Hi." I leaned over to kiss her.

"How was practice?"

"Okay." I pulled a bottle of water out of the refrigerator.

"How much of a dick was Decker?" she asked, following me as I walked toward the bedroom.

"Not speaking to me."

"Dammit."

"Don't worry. It's not a problem. We are professionals. We don't have to be friends to work well together."

"But you *were* friends." Her eyes met mine guiltily.

"We cannot control him or his actions. I prefer we focus on us." I reached out to pull her against me. "Speaking of us. I

would like to take you out on a date tonight.”

“A date?” She frowned, as if that confused her.

“We haven’t gone on many dates, so I think it is time.”

“Like, dinner and a movie?” She cocked her head.

“In general, yes, like that. But tonight, I have tickets to see the Heat. Have you been to a professional basketball game? Would you like to go?”

“I haven’t, and yes, I’d love to.” She grinned.

“So dinner and basketball?”

“Sounds amazing.”

“Tomorrow night we have a game, and then we are on the road for four days. I would like to take you out more often, but my schedule is difficult.”

“You don’t need to take me places. I’m happy just hanging out.”

“I *want* to take you out. I was thinking also maybe you come with me when we play in L.A. in a few weeks. Since you have friends there.”

She hesitated. “Is it going to be weird that I work for the other team?”

“Eventually it could be, but not now. When the court case is over, perhaps we talk about it again?”

“Sure.” She reached up to cup the side of my face. “I wish everything wasn’t so complicated.”

I turned my head to nibble her fingers. “The best things in life are not easy.”

“I haven’t had a lot of good things in my life.”

“I hope to change this.”

“You are definitely a good thing in my life. Right now, you’re the best thing in my life.”

“There are more good things, though, yes? Your job with Harper, your friendship with Scarlett and some of the others?”

“Yes, of course. I guess I’m still struggling to believe it’s real. Like it’s a wonderful dream I’m going to wake up from.”

“No.” I wrapped my arms around her. “This is real. Put your head to my chest and listen to the beat of my heart. Do you hear it?”

She hesitated for a moment but then pressed her ear to my chest. After a few seconds she lifted her head. “I do hear it. I feel it too.”

“See? I am real. You are real. And you are awake. We both are.”

“You’re a romantic, Mr. Hajek.”

“Is difficult in English, but I am trying.”

“You do an amazing job.” She chewed her lip. “I speak perfect English, but I suck at romance.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I guess I never learned how. I wasn’t allowed to date before I ran away, and Eddie wasn’t romantic.”

Technically, he's the only boyfriend or relationship I've ever had, so TV and movies are my only points of reference."

"I know how," I said quietly, "but is difficult in English. So maybe we learn together? I show you what to do, you show me how to describe them correctly in English?"

She leaned up and softly pressed her lips to mine. "That sounds like a wonderful idea."

"I have many. They are just all in Slovak."

She laughed, winding her arms around my neck. "Then maybe I need to learn Slovak."

"We can work on this." I lifted her, and her legs immediately closed around my waist, sending my dick into overdrive.

"I'd rather work on this," she whispered, kissing me again.

"Me, too." I carried her toward the bedroom.

S loane

SCARLETT WAS out of town again, so I stayed at their house to watch Naomi while the team was on the road. I'd been researching the steps to getting my GED and found an online program that would help me study and offered practice tests.

I was well-read and spoke fluent French, so I wasn't an idiot, but having the equivalent of a high school diploma felt important.

"Whatcha doin'?" Naomi asked, peering over my shoulder after eating dinner and finishing her homework.

"Looking for a GED program."

"What's that?"

I explained what general educational development was, and she looked thoughtful.

"So you quit high school?"

"I did. I was young and did some dumb things."

"Like running away from home?"

Boy, was that a loaded question.

Was it dumb to have run away from a world of molestation and abuse?

There was no universe where I could imagine having stayed. But there was also no way to explain the specifics of what I'd been through to an eleven-year-old.

“There were bad people at the church I went to growing up,” I said somberly. “And my parents didn't believe me when I tried to tell them how they treated me.”

“Abuse,” she said, nodding. “I understand.”

“You do?” I frowned.

“My mom was a drug addict. Her boyfriend was a drug dealer. They used to lock me in my room at night to keep me safe from the crazy people who came to the house. Wouldn't let me go to school so no one would see how skinny I was.” She looked away. “I kinda understand, but I think mine was a different kind of abuse, so I don't understand, but I also *do* because I used to want to run away too.”

Even with her talking in circles, I understood what she was trying to say.

“Do you still feel that way?” I asked carefully.

She quickly shook her head. “No! I love my new mom and dad. Even though they don't let me wear makeup.” She rolled her eyes and giggled.

I giggled too, relieved we'd dodged a conversation bullet.

“Wolf and Scarlett love you very much,” I assured her. “And that won’t change because of the baby. You know that, right?”

“I know.” She smiled sheepishly. “I’m getting used to the idea. I’m probably a little jealous.”

“You figure that out in therapy?” I asked with a wry grin.

“Yeah.”

“Therapy is good. I’m thinking of going back.”

“How come?”

“Well, I have a new boyfriend, and I want to make sure I’m the best version of myself. Both for him and for me.”

“Johan.” She giggled again. “He has *really* blue eyes. They’re pretty.”

“I think so, too.”

“I don’t know if I ever want a boyfriend.”

“You think you’d rather have a girlfriend?” I asked, making sure my voice was completely neutral.

She wrinkled her nose. “No, it’s not that. I just think boys are a lot of *work*. Mom is always doing stuff for Dad, the other ladies on the team have to do *everything* when the guys travel, and now you want to go back to therapy for Johan. My friend Amber at school, she has a boyfriend, and he makes her do his homework. I’m not doing anybody’s homework.” She pursed her lips and shook her head before hesitating. “Well, maybe if they pay me. “

I laughed.

Naomi cracked me up on a daily basis. Her views of the world were equal parts insightful and hilarious.

“I wouldn’t do anybody’s homework for free either,” I said solemnly.

“Not even Johan’s?”

I’d do Johan’s homework for free. Or maybe in exchange for sexual favors, but I couldn’t say that to Naomi. I knew the point she was making and, in general, I agreed.

“I might help him with his homework, assuming he had homework, because I care about him and that’s what you do when you’re in a relationship. But I wouldn’t do it for him. That doesn’t accomplish anything.”

“Yeah, I guess I would help. Like if he didn’t understand his math.”

“Exactly.”

“Can I watch TV until bed?” she asked after a moment. Apparently, she’d moved on from our conversation.

“Sure.” I watched her go into the family room, and I turned back to my computer just as a text message popped up on my phone.

HARPER: We’re having an emergency hearing! On the twenty-sixth.

SLOANE: Is this good or bad?

HARPER: Well, one way or another, I think the judge is going to make a decision. If he throws out the boys’ lawsuit, I can take over the team and start making shit happen!

For some reason, the idea of Harper taking over the team wasn't as exciting as it had been a month ago.

Because it meant I'd have to leave Florida.

Leave the life I'd started to build here.

Leave Johan.

HARPER: Can you fly out? I could really use the moral support.

Considering she'd started paying me to literally do nothing, there was zero chance I would say no. Especially since that was within a few days of the trip Johan had wanted me to go on. I could just stay in L.A. for a few extra days to be there for Harper, and maybe then the timing would be right for us to talk about what we were going to do going forward.

Which meant I had two weeks to figure out what I was going to do about Johan, Decker, and this life I'd started to build here in Fort Lauderdale.



I MISSED JOHAN, but things were a lot calmer when the guys were out of town. I could spend time with Eden without worrying about whether or not Decker and I were going to argue, and though I was staying with Naomi for a few days, it was nice to be on my own at Johan's. Not because he annoyed me or anything, but because I had a full kitchen where I could cook. There was a huge tub I could soak in. His Wi-Fi was amazing. Basically, I had all the comforts I'd lost when Eddie

and I divorced. Hotels were okay, but they weren't a good substitute for an actual home.

Something I currently didn't have.

I had so many things to do, think about, and figure out.

My entire life was up in the air right now. Everything from my job to my living situation to my relationship with my brother to the potential of a future with Johan. I'd spent the last two years trying to make my marriage work, and then going through the divorce. This was supposed to be the time for decompressing, connecting with who I'd always wanted to be, going back to school, stuff like that.

Falling in love hadn't been part of the plan.

Finding friends and family I adored in Fort Lauderdale had been surprising too.

I also hadn't expected my brother to be such a pain in my ass. I'd known there was a chance he'd grown up to be a zealot like our parents, but if that had been the case, I would have gone back to California without looking back. It never occurred to me my presence in his life would bring back his own childhood trauma. I felt bad about it, but his reluctance to communicate and do something about it was irritating. I'd mentioned therapy just before he'd left on his road trip, and he'd been noncommittal when he'd said he would think about it.

The one thing I knew for sure was going to happen was that I would be getting my GED. I'd signed up for the online course and had started looking over the materials. Zoe had

offered to help me if I needed it, and while some of the history was daunting, I'd already read most of the books mentioned. The math would take some practice, but it wasn't like they included advanced statistics or calculus or anything. I'd need to spend some time on it, but it felt good to be moving toward that goal.

I told Johan about it that night when he called.

"Did you sign up for the class?" he asked when I brought it up.

"I did! I already read the first study unit."

"How is it?"

"Not too bad. I think English will be easiest, and science hardest. I might need some practice with math, and the history is mostly just memorization."

"Sounds like this will keep you busy."

"Don't worry. I'll do my studying when you're at practice on or the road."

"I like the sound of this."

"Also, I heard from Harper. There's an emergency hearing or something—I'm not sure what's going on with the legal stuff—but she asked if I would fly out to L.A. for moral support. So I'll be there for the game. It's just a few days before."

"I am glad you can be there for her. She has been a good friend to you."

"She has."

“It will be nice to see you in the middle of a road trip.”

“Yes. I wish we had more time together in L.A., but I’m sure there will be other opportunities to visit. Especially if I’m living there.”

He was quiet for a beat too long.

“Johan?”

“I’m here.”

“You got quiet.”

“I was thinking how much I will dislike it when you move. I enjoy having you in my home. Waking up next to you. Making breakfast together.”

“I enjoy those things too. I guess we’re going to have to talk about what comes next.”

“For us or for you?”

“I don’t think we can separate them. Any decisions I make individually impacts us as a couple. So we have to think about what’s next. And a lot of it will depend on what happens at this emergency hearing at the end of the month.”

“You will move to L.A. permanently if Harper wins the lawsuit?”

I hesitated. “I have to, Johan. I have to work for a while, at least a few years, and figure out who I am, what I’m made of. I know that probably makes no sense to you, but it’s important to me. Just like getting my GED. I already have this job, and Harper doesn’t care whether or not I graduated from high school, but I hate admitting I’m a high school dropout. Hell,

I'm even considering college, depending on what happens. I missed out on so much while I was a runaway and then essentially hiding in France. And I'm gonna be thirty in a couple of years. I have things I want to accomplish."

"I want you to do all the things you want to do," he said softly. "I would never stop you from following your dreams. High school, college, whatever you need to do, I will support you."

He was such a good guy.

The question was, would he wait for me while I figured it all out and got my shit together?

"I'm trying to come up with a plan," I said.

"You will let me know when you do?"

"Of course."

"Then I will wait."

Johan

FEBRUARY ALWAYS TENDED to go by quickly. Not only was it a short month, but it usually started with the All-Star break, and by the time I got back into the swing of all things hockey, the month was over.

This year was no exception.

Between my travel schedule and having Sloane living with me, it was like I blinked, and we were days away from March.

Tonight was our last night at home before we both headed out of town. We'd see each other in L.A. in a few days, but I'd already discovered that I hated being away from her. She hadn't mentioned moving to a hotel, so I hadn't brought it up, and we'd fallen into a routine we both seemed to enjoy. We usually made breakfast together, whether it was a meal or just smoothies and fruit, and if I didn't have practice, we'd go do something that allowed us to be active. Sometimes it was just a walk, other times we'd go to the beach. I'd been thinking about buying her a bike since I had one I enjoyed riding, but I

didn't want to be presumptuous or make her feel like I wasn't supportive of the things she was doing.

I was walking a fine line between showing her how much I wanted to be with her and letting her spread her wings. I was a big fan of giving someone the freedom to do what they needed to do. If this thing between us was as serious as I hoped it was, she would always come home to me. If she didn't, then it wasn't meant to be in the first place. Somehow, I had to make her want to come back. To Florida and to me.

Weeks ago, I'd told her I would be willing to get traded to L.A. if that was where her life led us, and I'd meant it, but getting traded again would suck. I'd come to Florida after five years in Colorado, and Fort Lauderdale had just started to feel like home. Moving again would mean starting over, and while I would do it for her, I wondered if she was willing to make the same kind of sacrifice for me. Would she give up her job to stay in Florida?

I wanted her to follow her dreams, but there had to be a place for me within them. Her high school diploma, a college degree, and even getting a job were all things she could do here. It would also allow both of us the opportunity to work on the relationship with Decker. I didn't know what it would take to get him to accept me as part of his sister's life, but it definitely wouldn't happen if we moved across the country.

"When do you leave for New York?" she asked as she packed a large suitcase. It was spread out on the floor of the walk-in closet, and she'd been pulling things from different places for the last hour.

I gave her a few pertinent upcoming travel dates, leaning against the closet door, and watching as she put another pair of shoes in her carry-on.

“And how long will you be gone?”

“A week.” I paused. “Why?”

“I don’t know how long I’ll be in L.A., but if you’re only going to be home for three days before leaving again, I might stay there if Harper needs me.”

“Okay.”

She kept putting clothes in the bigger suitcase. “You think I’ll need a suit for court? That would be professional, right?” She turned to the portion of the rack where she’d hung some of her things. “White makes me look too virginal. What do you think of this slate gray one?” She pulled a hanger with a skirt and jacket on it off the rack and held it in front of her. Personally, I didn’t think the color did anything for her.

“Drab,” I responded. “But if you want to look serious, this works.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to be flashy in the courtroom. Especially with my ex there.” She made a face.

“You will talk to him?”

“Not if I can help it, but he might come over to say hello. I don’t know.”

“Will you be upset?”

“If he talks to me?” She glanced up, shaking her head. “Not at all. I don’t miss him if that’s what you’re asking.”

“No, but maybe you miss... I don’t know how to say it... The beginning? What you had when you were first together? The reason you married him?”

She put down the clothes in her hands and came over to me. “I married him because he was rich and offered me an escape. I could change my name and move far away where my family and the people who hurt me would never find me. I loved him, and we were lovers, but I was never *in love* with him. Now that it’s over, I can clearly see that what we had wasn’t the kind of love you should have when you plan to spend the rest of your life with someone. Not even close.”

I ran my hands down her arms. “I wanted to be sure.”

“Are you jealous?” she whispered, a playful smile on her face.

“No. Only concerned you’ll be okay when you see him. If you are not over him, maybe this would be painful for you. Or stressful. Or something else.”

“None of that. As far as I’m concerned, Eddie never existed. The only man I think about anymore is you.”

I smiled. “That’s nice to hear. In fact, I bought you something I hope will remind you of me when we are not together.”

“Oh?” She looked surprised.

I pulled the small box from where I’d hidden it and handed it to her.

She opened it slowly and her eyes widened.

“Oh. Johan. It’s beautiful.”

She lifted the gold chain and locket out of the velvet-lined case and let them dangle from her fingers. The locket had been custom-made in the shape of a hockey puck, with a diamond-encrusted hockey stick going along the front. When you opened it, I’d put a picture of myself as a child on one side and left the other empty for her to decide what to put in it. I hoped by giving her something from my childhood, it would gently indicate the future I wanted. It might not have been completely rational, but it had felt right when I’d planned it.

“Do you like it?” I asked.

She nodded, her eyes filling with tears. “I love it. Will you put it on me?” She turned her back, holding the edges of the chain on either side of her neck.

I hooked them together, and when she turned it sparkled against her skin. “Almost as beautiful as you,” I said, loving the way it nestled between her breasts.

“Thank you.” She threw herself into my arms. “I don’t know if I’ll ever take it off.”

I liked the sound of that.



THE FLIGHT to San Jose was brutal. Not only was it long, but the distance between Decker and I had caused our teammates to inadvertently take sides. It was a subtle thing—the way half of our friend group sat near him, and the other half sat closer to me. There was a group of older veteran players who simply

ignored the whole thing, but there was no doubt there was a growing rift in the locker room. Worse than that, it had begun to show in our effectiveness on the ice. We'd lost the last three games in a row, which wasn't like us, and Coach Petrov wasn't happy.

It was hard to tell whether or not he was aware of what was going on, but chances were he knew. His wife was friendly with many of the wives and girlfriends, and if she'd heard something about Decker and me not getting along, she would tell him.

I'd never been in a situation like this before where I had a serious issue with a teammate. I tended to be pretty laid back, a team player who went out of his way to get along with everyone. Even guys I didn't particularly like. Hell, almost no one liked Jordan Palmer, yet he and I got along fine most of the time. This thing with Decker irritated me, and the longer it went on, the more I wanted to get in his face, demand we work it out. One way or another. Whether it was with words or fists, I was down for either. But that probably wouldn't help anything in the long run.

"You can go play poker with the others," I told Anders, who seemed to be my constant companion on the road.

"Nah. I'm good." He leaned back in the seat and closed his eyes.

I appreciated his friendship and loyalty, but it wasn't necessary for him to miss out on all the fun just because I was uncomfortable hanging out with Decker's inner circle of friends.

I nudged Anders. “Don’t sleep. You’ll be up all night.”

He arched one blond eyebrow. “I can sleep any time, any place, for any length of time. I fucking love to sleep.”

I chuckled. “Okay. Do what you want.”

“You think this thing with you two is going to go on forever?” he asked, his eyes closed again.

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I thought maybe he would want to talk but...” I shrugged. “Nothing I can do.”

“You could man up and confront him. Make him talk it out.”

“We tried that in Cancun. Did not work.”

“The ladies were present. I’m talking about something a little... rougher.”

“There will be nothing rougher.” Coach Petrov leaned back in his seat and eyed us both. “I don’t know what’s going on, and I don’t care, but it better not be on the ice tomorrow or you’re going to owe me laps.”

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but decided it wasn’t worth it. “Sorry, Coach.”

“If they don’t talk or fight it out of their systems, it’s not going away.” Anders dug in.

“They can do that in the off-season. Right now, we need to think about the playoff spot we’re not going to get if we keep losing. I don’t give a fuck about anything else.” He turned around and put his headphones back on.

“Shut up,” I told Anders, scowling. “Pissing off Coach doesn’t help.”

“Nothing is going to help until you force the issue.”

He was right, but he was also wrong.

That was why I hadn’t done anything.

Yet.

I was biding my time because Sloane wasn’t ready for that kind of confrontation.

There was more going on here than just Decker being traumatized by what had gone on in their childhood. I didn’t know what it was, but until it was dealt with, this was going to continue to simmer beneath the surface. Eventually, something was going to blow. Whatever was bothering Decker was impacting his relationship with Sloane too, and my gut told me she had to be the one to confront him. Until they solved whatever it was, he and I wouldn’t get anywhere no matter how much we talked.

“Hey, you want to get to the rink early tomorrow for some extra practice?” Wolf was sitting across the aisle from me. He and I hadn’t been super close before this started, but he hadn’t even tried to hide his irritation with Decker and was firmly in my corner. It made sense since Sloane was close to both Scarlett and Naomi, but I still didn’t like that the team felt taking sides was necessary.

“We can go in early?” I asked. We didn’t usually have a lot of practice time when we were on the road.

He nodded. “Coach just sent an email.”

“Yes, I would like to run some drills. I need it.”

“Me, too. We’ve been all over the place out there.”

“Do you think about getting traded now that you have a family?” I asked quietly.

He arched his brows. “You worried about that?”

“No, but now that there is someone in my life... I guess I think about how it could change things.”

“You can’t be with a woman who isn’t prepared for that.”

“I know.”

“Is she?”

“I don’t know.” She didn’t know where she was going to be in two weeks, much less what she would do if I got traded to some random city like Winnipeg or Nashville or something.

“You need to figure it out, my friend.”

I was starting to get depressed.

As much as I wanted to be with Sloane, I was starting to worry about the longevity of our relationship. There were so many moving parts, and most of them leaned toward pulling her away from me. Would she choose me over her brother, and even if she would, I hated the idea she might have to. I would never let a woman interfere with my relationship with Hana. Of course, Hana would never behave the way Decker had been behaving lately, so it wasn’t a fair comparison.

At the end of the day, it boiled down to one thing: How many crises and obstacles could we withstand before everything began to fall apart?

*S*loane

I'D MISSED the weather in L.A., but I in no way had missed the traffic.

It took two hours to get from LAX to Harper's house in the Valley.

On the plus side, it was a gorgeous sunny day. Harper had the top down in her convertible Mercedes, and we'd had the opportunity to catch up. Mostly, I'd had the time to tell her about Johan and what was going on with Decker.

"It sounds like he's mad at you," she said thoughtfully. "But he can't take it out on you, so he's going after Johan instead. It's safer for him to be mad at another man, you know?"

"But what is there to be mad about?" I asked.

"I'm not sure. Running away and leaving him to think you might be dead? Leaving him feeling guilty he couldn't protect you? He was fourteen, which is a rough, hormonal time under

the best of circumstances. There were probably emotions he was in no way capable of handling back then.”

“You think?”

“It would make sense.”

“And it doesn’t occur to him to deal with them now that I’m back?”

“I think he is. Not in the healthiest way, but this appears to be how the trauma is manifesting itself. What makes it worse is that he cares about you, so he can’t do anything that would make you want to end the relationship.”

“Does he not see that his behavior is what’s making me want to stop seeing him?” I demanded.

“Probably not. For one thing, a lot of men don’t think that way. For another, he’s way too wrapped up in his own shit to see what it’s doing to you.”

“Well, as much as I love my life in Florida, it’s nice to get away from it all for a few days so I don’t have to constantly think about it.”

“If we win in court tomorrow, we’re going to have a fuck-ton of work to do, so you won’t have time to think about anything but the Phantoms.”

“Does something automatically change if we win tomorrow? Like, what makes everything ramp up? Wouldn’t you want to wait until the off-season to make changes?”

“The trade deadline is Thursday at three. I need to get Gabe out here ASAP. I don’t want to wait until summer for

that.”

“Why?”

“You want to hear all the complicated hockey reasons or my personal reasons?”

I laughed. “Whatever you want to tell me.”

“The personal reasons are easier. Despite the shitty end of our marriage, I know Gabe, and he would never let the guys in the locker room talk shit about me. He’s a womanizer, but he’s very private and even more protective of the people in his life, past or present. No matter how mad he is at me for this trade, he’ll still make sure the locker room gives me a chance.”

“Didn’t he cheat on you?”

Her hands tightened on the steering wheel. “I always thought so.”

“But?”

“The last time I saw him, we made a deal. He’d come to L.A. without fighting me on the trade if I got one of his other ex-wives to back off. She was suing him for half of everything.”

“Really.” That was an interesting tidbit I hadn’t been aware of.

“When I met with her, she admitted the only reason she was doing it was because he’d spent their entire marriage missing me. Talking about me. Comparing her to me. Apparently, it was all about me. When I told her that was ridiculous, that he’d cheated on me and fallen out of love with

me, she said he hadn't. He'd admitted it to her one night when he got drunk. Also, that letting me believe he'd cheated was the biggest mistake he'd ever made."

"Oh, shit."

"So, anyway, I don't know anymore. But that's not the point. The point is that I know there are still feelings there, and I need that as much as I need his skill on the ice and his leadership in the locker room."

"You sure you haven't bitten off more than you can chew?"

"Oh, I absolutely have. But what can I do? I'm in too deep. I promised Edward on his deathbed I'd abide by the will even though I didn't know exactly what was in it, and I've spent the last year making a nuisance of myself to the team, the league, and every hockey player I personally know."

I chuckled. "Well, at least you're self-aware."

"Yeah. I guess." She slowed down and pulled into her garage.

"Are you ready for tomorrow?" I asked as we got my things out of the trunk.

"I'll probably be up all night, but sure, let's say I'm ready."

"I'm not looking forward to seeing Eddie," I admitted.

She closed the door of the garage as we walked into her house. "He'll be his quiet, mousey self, letting Tim do all the blustering and posturing."

"Is he still letting his brother walk all over him?"

“It’s gotten way worse. I don’t understand how someone as wonderful as Edward raised two schmucks like Tim and Eddie.”

She probably didn’t understand how I’d married one of them either.

Or maybe she did.

She knew my history, I’m sure she understood why a scared eighteen-year-old with literally nothing had been completely mesmerized by a twenty-year-old with enough money to help her escape not just her parents, but everything about the life she’d run away from.

“You’re welcome to stay in the guest room in the house, or if you want more privacy, there’s the in-law suite out back.”

“I don’t have a need for privacy,” I said, chuckling. “And I like spending time with you.”

“Me, too.” She led me down the hall to a beautiful guest room with an en suite.

“Oh, this is lovely,” I said, pushing my large suitcase against the wall.

“Let’s make dinner,” she suggested. “And you can unpack after.”

“Sounds good.” I kicked off my shoes, put my purse down, and moved my carry-on bag next to the bigger suitcase. My phone was in my pocket, so I padded after her, happy to be here with her but also missing Johan.

I didn't miss the drama currently surrounding our relationship, but I did miss him.

Harper pulled a bowl of something out of the fridge.

"What is that?" I asked.

"My homemade Bolognese sauce," she said. "All I have to do is boil the pasta, throw together a salad, and heat up the sauce. You can grind some fresh parmesan if you want."

"Sure."

She told me where everything was, and we worked together in companionable silence for a few minutes.

"I think I'm falling in love," I blurted out.

She chuckled. "I could have told you that."

"No, I'm serious. It was just sex. Then it was like, why can't I enjoy myself while I'm here in Lauderdale? Now, I think about him all the time. I hate that Decker is essentially being mean to him. And I can't wait for him to get here for the game so I can see him. Introduce you to him."

She smiled, peering at me from across the island. "Does this mean you want me to try to trade him to L.A.?"

"I..." God, that was hard to answer. Did I want that? And more importantly, did he want it? He'd said he would do it, back when we'd first started sleeping together, but I wasn't sure if he meant it. He loved his life in Florida, and I couldn't be positive he would want to make such a major change for me.

“You don’t know if that’s what he wants,” she said after a moment, reading my mind.

“Exactly.”

“I think you’re going to have to talk to him.”

“It feels too soon. It’s been less than two months. How do you ask someone to upend their life after such a short time?”

“If it’s enough time to fall in love, it’s enough time to upend your life.”



THE HEARING WAS STRESSFUL. Sitting in the row behind Harper and Madeline, her attorney, gave me a bird’s eye view of everything going on, and it was a little scary. Tim and Eddie had hired a slew of lawyers, and they took up the table in front as well as the entire row behind them. Meanwhile, Madeline had only brought one of her associates with her, a friendly brunette named Lindsay Killorn, who seemed to know what Madeline needed before she needed it.

As expected, Tim blustered and motioned angrily with his hands, whispering furiously to one of the attorneys, while Eddie just sat there, staring straight ahead, as if he were completely checked out. It was kind of odd. He hadn’t been the best husband, but he’d been a kind, caring guy when we’d first met. I didn’t recognize the man he’d become, and I was eternally grateful to be away from him.

My thoughts turned to Johan, and there was truly no comparison. Eddie was handsome in a slick, corporate way,

but Johan was a thousand times hotter. To me anyway. Just thinking about the way his blue eyes glittered when he looked at me made me squirm in my seat. It had only been two days since he'd touched me, and I missed it. Hell, I'd ached for him last night in bed. To the point I'd had to get myself off thinking about him, and that had never happened before.

But it was more than that.

There was so much more to him than sex.

I felt safe with him, but I also felt good.

That was something else that was a rarity for me.

I'd spent all of my adult life feeling like I wasn't good enough. Not smart enough, educated enough, rich enough, anything enough. But none of that mattered to Johan. He liked me the way I was, something I subconsciously struggled to understand because I came with so much baggage. Sure, I looked good on the outside, but the woman beneath the pretty façade was the proverbial hot mess. Yet, he knew all my shortcomings and wanted to be with me anyway. That said something.

And it meant everything.

“Gentlemen.” The judge's loud voice and the thump of his gavel against his desk made me jump.

Uh oh.

I'd been so lost in thought I'd missed something.

“This has been going on for over a year, and yet, I have been presented with zero evidence that anything was amiss. I

have...” He paused, looking down at stacks of papers and files in front of him. “Signed affidavits and statements from your father’s attorney, the notary, and witnesses who signed the will, and his lifelong butler. All of which say that your father wanted his wife, Mrs. Harper Barrowman, to inherit his hockey team. Not to mention, the two hours of video I watched, as the elder Mr. Barrowman discussed his wishes with his attorneys.”

Tim started to say something and was half out of his seat when the judge gave him a look. “*Sit down, Mr. Barrowman.*”

Tim sat down.

“I also have sworn statements from your father’s oncologist and primary care physician indicating that the cancer in no way impaired him mentally. Frankly, I don’t see a legal issue here. The two of you inherited close to a *billion* dollars in cash, investments, and assets. Your stepmother inherited a failing hockey team and some pricey but minimal in quantity gifts. The evidence shows your father wanted her to take ownership of the Phantoms. Thus, as of today, I am denying your motion and affirming the will. I am ordering the hockey team ownership be transferred to your stepmother, Harper Barrowman, within thirty days.”

Tim’s face had turned a deep shade of red, but his lawyer was whispering furiously to him. Eddie continued to appear stoic while their team of lawyers were slowly but surely packing up.

It was over.

Holy shit.

We'd won.

I was happy for Harper.

She deserved this.

She'd worked hard to educate herself about the business side of hockey and had a plan to bring the team to the next level. They were lucky to have her at the helm, no matter how much they might dislike having a woman as the owner. She had a long road ahead of her, there was no doubt about that, but I was proud to be her friend.

The only question now was whether or not I was the right person to work at her side. She was going to need someone as hyper-focused on the job ahead as she was, and the enormity of it was suddenly overwhelming because I had no idea how to be the executive assistant to the owner of a professional sports team. On top of that, I had a man waiting for me over three thousand miles away. And this new development potentially meant having to choose.

I absently fingered the locket dangling from my neck.

Moving to L.A. to work with Harper meant leaving Johan in Fort Lauderdale or asking him to make a sacrifice he might not want to make. It also meant potentially putting my plans to get my GED on hold because I wouldn't have time to study. Or think about what I might want to study in college. Or spend time mending fences with my brother.

Fuck.

I had a huge decision to make and not a lot of time to make it.

It wouldn't be today though.

“Is it really over?” Harper turned to me, her eyes wide with what could only be described as disbelief.

Madeline squeezed her arm and smiled. “It is. You've got your team, Harper.”

“Oh my god.” She burst into tears, and I wanted to cry too.

Except mine weren't happy tears.

Johan

WE OUTPLAYED, outscored, and essentially wiped the floor with the Phantoms, which we needed for morale, but I hoped that wouldn't negatively impact Sloane since she worked for the team now. She'd sounded excited when she'd told me about the results of the hearing, but we hadn't talked much since that night. Harper's name had been all over the sports news, and Sloane had been helping her navigate the overwhelming response to the judge's decision to abide by the terms of her late husband's will.

It was news in our locker room as well, since everyone knew I was dating her, and that she was Decker's sister, but most hadn't realized she worked for Harper until yesterday. They'd asked me a dozen questions I couldn't answer, and many of them were pertinent. Things I'd been thinking about too. Things I hadn't yet dared to ask her outright.

Would she stay in L.A.?

And if she did, would she want me to get traded or would she just move on and forget about me? I wanted to think she wouldn't, that our bond was stronger than that, but things had been difficult lately. More so than I'd anticipated. I'd been the one telling her we could weather the storms ahead, but now that we were in the midst of them, I was struggling.

A lot of it had to do with the fact that we were physically apart, and as of now, there was no plan for when we'd be together again. I'd see her tonight, but after this, everything was up in the air. I wanted to be supportive. I really did. I just needed some kind of light at the end of the tunnel.

I didn't think that was too much to ask.

We were going to have to have a conversation about that.

Sooner rather than later.

Maybe even when she got here tonight.

I hurried to open the door when I heard her knock. We'd agreed she would come to my hotel room instead of meeting me at the arena since it had been chaotic after the game.

"Hi." She looked incredible in tight jeans and a T-shirt that hugged her curves.

"Hi." She came in and immediately threw her arms around my neck. "I need you so bad, Johan. Four days has felt like four months."

Before I knew what was happening, she was on her knees in front of me, sliding down my sweatpants.

“Sloane.” Her name was nothing but a groan as she sucked me deep. All thoughts of the conversation we needed to have fled. Along with my sweats, boxers, and socks.

We knew each other’s bodies incredibly well by now, and I closed my eyes as she sucked and licked. My cock, my balls, even the insides of my thighs, where she’d discovered I was extremely sensitive. Her hands worked in tandem with her mouth, bringing me over the edge much more quickly than I would have liked, and then we were on the bed, going for round two.

It was impossible to think when I was inside of her.

When it came to sex, we were completely in tune with each other. She knew what I liked, and I seemed to give her what she needed. Ninety-nine-point-nine percent of the time, it was heaven. Tonight, it felt like a distraction. A pleasurable, mind-blowing distraction, but a distraction, nonetheless. As if she knew I wanted to talk and was doing everything in her power to prevent it.

By the time we finished the fourth round, I was too spent to consider a serious conversation, and we wound up nestled in each other’s arms after we’d showered.

“What time do you have to leave in the morning?” she whispered in the darkness.

“Breakfast at seven, the bus leaves at eight.”

She sighed. “So early.”

“You can sleep,” I told her. It wasn’t like I was going to wake her up at six in the morning after less than five hours’

sleep to have the proverbial relationship talk.

“The last few days have been a whirlwind,” she murmured.

“It’s okay.” I stroked her hair. I didn’t want an overly serious conversation at this point in the evening, but I did have one question that needed to be answered. “Sloane?”

“Hmm?” She sounded like she was half-asleep.

“When are you coming home?”

She stiffened for a moment. “To Fort Lauderdale, you mean?”

“Yes.”

“I dunno. There’s a lot going on with work.”

“Are you going to... stay here then?”

“I’m...not sure? Harper needs me.”

“I need you too.”

She didn’t respond right away, and the silence stretched out until it turned into something uncomfortable. Something that scared me a little. I’d trusted that things would work out because we seemed to be on the same page. She’d been honest about the job in L.A. but had made it seem like we would be able to work around it. Now she was being cagey, as if something had changed.

“Sloane?”

“I don’t know.” She slowly pulled away and turned onto her back, staring up at the ceiling. “Harper’s overwhelmed with everything at the moment, I can’t just bail on her. She’s

been paying me the last month or so while I've done nothing. I feel like I owe her this, at least to get her through this initial transition."

"I understand that. But what about us?"

"You knew I was moving back to L.A. at some point."

"Yes, but we never discussed timing. Only possibilities."

"The timing is still up in the air." She finally looked at me. "I have to stay for a couple of weeks, and then I'll have a better idea of what I'm going to do. I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"About?"

"Things I'm not ready to talk about at—" She reached for her phone. "One thirty in the morning when we both have long days ahead of us in the morning."

"What does this mean?"

"It means I need a little time before I can give you an answer."

"I did not ask a question other than when I will see you again."

"It feels like we've reached the point where we need to talk about the future." She reached for one of my hands. "Can you give me a little time to think about what I need? And what it looks like for me, for you, and for us? I can't imagine my life without you in it, but I also have to find my own way. I can't go from my husband taking care of me to either you or my brother taking care of me. I'm working on discovering

who I am as an adult, attaining a level of independence I've never had before, and maybe even tackling some of the aspects of my past trauma I haven't dealt with yet. That might not make sense to someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"Successful, at the height of your career... For example, do you worry about how you'll pay your bills if we break up? I have about fifty grand to my name. Sure, that's a nice little nest egg, but not enough to live on long-term. Once I find a place to live, buy a car, move, most of it will be gone. Then what?"

I understood her point.

I hated it, but I understood.

"No." I squeezed her hand. "I do understand, Sloane. I don't want to be the type of man who holds you back from your dreams."

"That's the problem," she said. "I don't even *have* any dreams. I've been in survival mode for so long, it's hard to see beyond that. For the first two years of my marriage I would wake up and whisper, *you're safe. They can't find you here. No one is going to hurt you.* Then I got into therapy to work on the sexual trauma. To come to terms with the idea that what happened to me wasn't my fault. And that took years. I've only just recently, in the last year, gotten to a place where I can think about my future. Who I am and what I want. But between the divorce and wanting to find my brother—and then meeting you—there hasn't been time to really focus on me."

“What does this mean for us?”

“It means I can’t be good for you if I’m not good for me.”

I sighed, unsure what she wanted or where her personal agenda would lead us as a couple.

I honestly hadn’t meant to start this conversation at this late hour, but now that we were into it, there was no direction to go but forward.

“Are we breaking up?”

“Not unless that’s what you want.”

“No, but this is difficult for me, Sloane. I don’t know what to do or what you expect. You must give me direction.”

“Can you give me a few weeks? I need to help Harper as she moves into her office at the arena and gets some of the formalities sorted out. Once she’s settled, and I’ve had a chance to talk about her expectations and needs from me, then I can make some decisions of my own. We’ll talk about everything. Promise.” She turned and then climbed on top of me, straddling my sides with her thighs as she rested her hands on my chest.

My hands drifted to her hips.

We were both naked, and my cock was much more excited about this shift in position than the rest of me. This wasn’t the worst news she could have given me, but it wasn’t great either. She hadn’t said she loved me or brought up me being traded to L.A. And the truth was, I was too afraid to bring those topics up. All she’d promised was that we would talk in a few weeks.

Whether I liked it or not, I was going to have to be satisfied unless I wanted to end things. And I didn't.

She might be unsure of her feelings, but I was not.

I was in love with her.

I wanted us to be together.

All I needed was a green light from her.

Instead, she'd given me yellow.

And I didn't know what to do about it. Telling her I loved her at this point felt almost manipulative, like I was trying to sway her decision. She had to want to be with me despite everything going on.

Right?

I was so confused. It was hard to determine whether this was the right decision because I desperately wanted to tell her how I felt. I just didn't know if this was the time.

So now everything had to wait.

"Are you mad at me?" she whispered, her eyes meeting mine worriedly.

"No." I shook my head. "You have never lied about your desire to work for Harper or move back to L.A."

"I know you've put up with a lot for me," she said. "Especially this bullshit with my brother. I'm going to take care of that. He and I are going to have a heart-to-heart soon, even if it has to be on the phone. He's being a jerk, and I'm going to get to the bottom of why. No matter what, I'm going to fix things between the two of you."

“I don’t want you to do that,” I said carefully. “Fix *your* relationship with him. This is important. But the way he has treated me? It feels very personal, so it is not up to you to fix it. Only he can do that. Please. Don’t interfere with Decker and me.”

She frowned but nodded. “Okay. But either way, I’m going to dig into what’s truly bothering him. What’s at the root of this issue. I’m sure it’s related to when I ran away and what went on before, but he has to articulate it. Acknowledge it. Come to terms with the knowledge that none of it was his fault. And maybe forgive me for leaving him behind.”

Damn, that was a lot of deep-rooted trauma.

Trauma I didn’t understand and couldn’t help with.

Except to let her know I was there for her.

We stared at each other, our eyes locking as our bodies came alive.

Even in the midst of this awkward non-breakup, we wanted each other.

I was so hard it hurt, and I could feel her slickness when my cock moved between her folds.

“Yes,” she whispered, dropping her mouth to mine. “Please.”

And because I loved her, I did as she asked.

Even though it broke my heart a little knowing she wanted my body but wasn’t ready to commit to my soul.

*S*loane

I WAS in a shitty mood when I got back to Harper's the next morning. Johan had left early without waking me, and my stomach churned with guilt and worry and indecision. No matter what I'd tried to tell myself, I'd fallen for him hard and fast. Just like I'd done with Eddie. Not that there was any comparison between the two men, but I couldn't help second-guessing myself. Yes, I was older, wiser, and a lot more mature than I'd been at eighteen, so I trusted myself more, but I also had very little dating experience.

When I'd first run away, I'd been promiscuous.

There was no other way to put it.

I'd hooked up with anyone and everyone I took a liking to as a way of re-establishing control. Of my life, my sexuality, and my body. I wanted to have sex on my terms after so many years of being forced to do things I hadn't wanted to do, and it had manifested itself in sleeping around. That lasted until I met Eddie. I'd never been in love before, so I'd fallen for him

almost blindly. We'd moved in together and gotten married within a year, even though deep down I'd known he wasn't the man for me.

I hadn't trusted my gut back then, so I'd done it anyway, prioritizing money and safety over love and compatibility.

And it had worked for a while.

Until I'd started to heal.

Until I'd started to realize I was living in a gilded cage.

Until I'd started wanting to spread my wings.

Eddie hadn't liked that.

He preferred the status quo, where I stayed at our home in the South of France, looking pretty on his arm when we made the rounds to parties and casinos and beaches and yachts. And worked on trying to produce an heir. What he didn't understand was that I wasn't fulfilled. Not intellectually, emotionally, or even physically anymore. Our sex life had died a slow, miserable death as our infertility issues came to the surface, and once that was gone, there was very little left to build a marriage on.

Leaving me completely lost.

Filing for divorce had been one of the hardest things I'd ever had to do.

Even now that it was final, it didn't always feel real.

Hell, I'd barely been able to look at him during the trial. He'd become a veritable stranger, someone I didn't recognize, and he hadn't looked at me either.

As if we hadn't spent a decade together.

Was that indicative of something wrong with me? Or was it more about him?

There was no way to know the answer to that.

Luckily, there was plenty of work to keep me from obsessing over the past.

Or my future.

I sipped my coffee as I sorted through Harper's email, letting her know what was important and deleting all the junk mail. She'd look at everything else when she had time, but she'd been on the phone nonstop since I'd gotten home, and I was glad to have something to do other than think about my late-night conversation with Johan.

"Hey, do you want to get lunch?" Harper asked at one thirty.

"You want me to order something?"

"I think we have stuff to make sandwiches."

"Let's do that then." I followed her into the kitchen, and I got out plates and cutlery while she pulled out the food.

"So, New York," she said as we ate.

"Do you get a date for the meeting with the league?" I asked.

"March third."

I frowned, pulling out my phone and opening the calendar. The Knights were playing at Madison Square Garden on that

day.

“What?” she asked when I didn’t respond right away.

“The Knights play there that night.”

She smiled. “So you’ll want to stay.”

I hesitated. “Johan and I had... a talk last night.”

“That doesn’t sound good.” She took a bite of her turkey sandwich. “What happened?”

I gave her the Reader’s Digest version.

“What’s the hesitation to giving him some kind of commitment?” she asked. “And you better not say me or this job.”

I shook my head. “No. It’s more than that. So much more.”

“Tell me.”

“I want to work.”

“Okay.”

“I want to get my GED and maybe go to college.”

“Does he have a problem with those things?”

“No, but...” I chewed my lip. I had to be honest with her, or I was going to make an even bigger mess of my life. “How am I going to do everything? Work for you, go to school, and give the most amazing man I’ve ever met the time and attention he deserves? Not to mention rebuilding my relationship with my annoying little brother, getting to know my future sister-in-law, going back to therapy because I think I

need it, and doing all the grown-up things I've never done, like buy a car and—”

“Okay, wait. Slow down.” Harper shook her head. “Listen to me. First and foremost, you don't have to do *all* those things immediately. Sit down and make a list. What are your priorities? I know getting your GED is high on that list, but what else? Is Decker more important than Johan? Is having this job more important than the man you just mentioned, whom I happen to know you're in love with.”

I groaned. “That's the problem! It hasn't been that long, but fine. Let's take the length of time we've been together out of the equation. How can I work on me and be in a serious relationship at the same time?”

“I think we're all a work in progress,” Harper said. “As a couple, you need to work and grow together.”

“But what if I grow into someone he doesn't like? Just like Eddie and me. We totally outgrew each other and look at us now.”

“That was different. You were eighteen and twenty, and you were a runaway who desperately needed someone to take care of her. That's not the issue anymore.”

“Isn't it? Look at me. If it weren't for you, I'd be waiting tables somewhere.”

“And you'd be taking care of business. There's nothing wrong with waiting tables. Lots of people survive that way, and you're a survivor, Sloane. I know you don't like to think

or talk about it, but you are. Frankly, it might be time to talk about that stuff. All of it. The ugly details.”

I grimaced. “Why would I do that? I went through it in therapy.”

“Yes, and it’s helped you immensely. I wonder how much it would help if you unburdened yourself to the man you’re having so many intense feelings for. So he can understand you and be there for you as you find your footing.”

I pushed my plate aside and rested my chin in my hands, elbows on the counter, as I gazed over at her. “It feels like therapy was safe. Talking about it there was how I got past the trauma and became human again. Talking about it to anyone else feels raw. Like it will rip the scabs off and send me back to square one.”

“No. That’s not going to happen. You’ve come too far. And if it does, you’ve already decided to go back to therapy, so he or she will help you navigate that kind of backslide.”

“And what if it grosses him out?”

“Grosses him out? In what way?” She made a face. “You were how old when the abuse began? Ten?”

I nodded tightly.

“He’s going to be grossed out, for sure. Just thinking about a thirty- or forty-year-old man doing that to a fucking child.” Her eyebrows knit together almost dangerously. “But he won’t be grossed out by you. I mean, why?”

“I’m damaged.” I chewed the inside of my cheek. “And I don’t think I can have kids.”

“You don’t know that. You and Eddie had physicals and you saw an ob-gyn, but neither of you had actual fertility testing.”

“And what happens if we get together, and then he wants kids, and we find out I can’t?”

“I can’t answer that. You have to talk to him.”

“Well, I’m scared to talk to him about any of that.”

There.

I’d said it.

“Of course, you are.” She smiled. “That’s how I know you’re in love with him. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t be this concerned about everything.”

“Great.” I sighed dramatically.

“What do you want, Sloane?”

“If I knew that, we wouldn’t be having this conversation.”

“No, that’s not true. In your heart of hearts, you know. You just don’t want to say it.”

“I want it all,” I said, throwing up my hands. “I want to have this amazing job working for the owner of a professional hockey team. I want to go to college and get a degree. I want to be married and have babies. I want to be in love with this gorgeous Slovak hunk who may or may not be mad at me right now. And I want my brother to stop being an overprotective ass!”

Harper threw back her head and laughed.

“That’s not helpful,” I muttered.

“I’m sorry.” She delicately wiped her mouth with a napkin and took a sip of water. “Okay, look. I’m going to be real with you. I don’t know if you can have it all, but you can try. Some of that is out of your control. Whatever’s going on with Decker isn’t up to you. That’s on him. You can talk to him, you can maybe take him to therapy with you, there are options, but in the end, it’s on him. Period.”

“I guess that’s true.”

“You can have a job, get your degree, get married, and have babies. Lots of women do. Hell, I desperately want a baby, and I just took over a pro hockey team. I’m also thirty-five, so my clock is ticking, and I’m a freakin’ widow. But I’m not giving up hope. I might even adopt. But this isn’t about me. If you and Johan decide to be together and there are fertility issues, you can adopt. You can have someone donate eggs. You can see the best specialists. There are a million options that will make you parents. As long as he’s okay with them. You won’t know that until you talk to him though.”

“But the job I want is here,” I whispered. “And honestly, it’s overwhelming to think about doing what you need me to do *and* go to college *and* be a mom *and* be involved with a guy who plays for another team.”

“I can try to trade for him, but it won’t be this season.”

“I don’t know if he wants to come here. We briefly talked about it, very early on, in a general way, but he loves his life in Florida.”

“I can find another assistant,” she said softly.

I winced.

“I know,” she said. “But you’re more than just an assistant to me. That’s work. Our relationship transcends the work relationship. We’re friends. Family. *Sisters*.” She paused. “Legalities aside, I’m way too young to be your mom.”

We both chuckled.

“Long-term, you can absolutely have it all. Short-term, you have to be realistic and prioritize because yes, it will be rough to work for me, be with Johan, and go to college. Throwing kids in the mix would be overwhelming. Right now, you have to pick the two things you want most. Johan and college? The job and Johan? The job and college? No one can decide that but you.”

“I feel like the first thing I have to do is settle things with my brother,” I said slowly. “If he doesn’t want to be in my life, I’ll be disappointed, but I’m okay with it. Because things have been off since we he found out about Johan.”

“You know what I’m going to say,” Harper said, chuckling.

“Yes, ma’am. We have to talk.”

“Yes, you do.”

“It seems like all I do lately is talk. It’s exhausting.”

“But it’ll feel good once you’ve cleared the air. With Decker, with Johan, and anyone else you have unfinished business with.”

Ugh.

Just thinking about confronting Decker was daunting.

But I had to.

Even if Johan didn't want me to fix things between them, I was positive it would happen organically once Decker and I worked through whatever was going on with us. But before I could have a heart-to-heart with Decker, I had to figure out what I wanted with Johan.

And that was even more daunting.

J ohan

AFTER WEEKS of dodging my grandmother, I answered the phone when she called. I was on my way home from practice and figured this was as good a time for us to talk as any.

“Finally, you answer,” she said by way of greeting.

“Sorry,” I replied, biting back a chuckle. “I have been busy.”

“Me, too. And I have a surprise for you.”

Great.

Probably another woman she wanted me to meet.

“Oh?” I asked politely.

“We are coming to America!”

I nearly swerved off the road.

“What? When?”

“Next week. The church has organized a tour, and we are going to be in New York for your game.”

Holy fuck.

That sounded like chaos.

And the last thing I needed right now was more chaos.

Dealing with Decker was all the stress I could handle on game days, so this was going to add a level I hadn't been counting on.

“Did you already get tickets, or do I need to take care of that?”

“I was assuming you would.” She sounded a little uncertain all of a sudden, and I felt terrible. I adored my grandmother and loved when she came to games.

I just wished she hadn't blindsided me with this.

“How many tickets will you need?” I asked. “It's not our home arena, so it's a little more complicated.”

“Oh, well, the tour will be more than thirty of us, but only four will be coming to the game on the third of March.”

I absently rubbed my forehead, wondering how many of the people on that tour were potential future wives she would be throwing at me.

“I won't be able to spend much time with you after the game,” I said carefully. “There are strict rules about—”

“Don't bullshit me,” she interrupted. “I know there are rules at the arena, but once you go back to the hotel you can do anything you want. Except during the playoffs. And we're not there yet.”

I chuckled.

She knew me too damn well.

“I don’t have the hotel information handy,” I said. “But I’ll get it to you tomorrow. If you send me your itinerary, I’ll make sure to squeeze in as much time with you as possible. Will you be coming to Florida too?”

“Of course.” She gave me a list of dates and times and places I wasn’t going to remember, but I let her talk since I could sense her excitement. She hadn’t been to visit me since I’d moved to Fort Lauderdale, and she’d never gone on a tour like this before, so I couldn’t help but be suspicious of her motivations.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were coming?” I asked, though I had a feeling I knew.

“Because you’re busy, and I don’t have time to wait for you to call me back.” She paused. “Your father and Zelda are coming too.”

Now I knew the real reason she hadn’t told me.

My father and I got along okay, but since I didn’t particularly like Zelda I wouldn’t have gone out of my way to spend time with them.

“Why didn’t you lead with that?” I asked.

She laughed. “Because you would have been upset, and I don’t get to talk to you often enough to upset you right away.”

“I’m sorry.”

“What’s wrong?” she asked after a moment. “You sound strange.”

“Just a lot on my mind,” I hedged. I needed to tell her about Sloane, but there was nothing to tell. If we were going to break up in a few weeks, once she figured out what she wanted to do, what was the point of getting my grandmother’s hopes up? She would want to meet her, and I wasn’t prepared to do that unless we decided we were going to take the relationship to the next level.

“You’re lying.”

“There’s just something going on with one of my teammates. It will be okay.”

“Did you argue?”

“Kind of. It’s complicated.”

“You used to be able to tell me your problems.”

“And I still can, but I have a dentist appointment in a little while, so I don’t have time to get into it.” That was a lie, but my grandmother was like a dog with a bone when she wanted information. And if I told her about Decker, I’d have to tell her about Sloane. I might tell her when I saw her in person, but not in front of my father.

“All right. Just remember, whatever it is, you can work it out if you talk to him.”

“I’m going to try.” That was another lie because right now Decker was on my shit list.

“So I will see you in a few days.”

“Don’t forget to send me your itinerary. If we don’t talk before then, your name will be at the Will Call window at the

venue. I'll make sure my phone is with me until I have to dress for the game. Okay?"

"Yes, yes. We'll be fine. I'm just looking forward to seeing you, my love. I've missed you."

"I've missed you too."

"Try to be nice to your father, okay? He loves you, even if he's married to a witch."

I snorted. "I'll be nice as long as she's nice."

"Good luck with that. She doesn't know how to be nice."

"Is Hana coming?"

"No, she has work."

"I'd rather she come instead of Zelda."

"Me too."

We laughed together.

"I have to go, but I guess I'll see you next week."

"Whatever it is that's troubling you, remember to follow your heart. You are a good man, with a good head on your shoulders. Do what your gut tells you and everything will be okay."

"Thank you," I said softly. "See you soon."



I WAS UP EARLY the next morning, heading to our practice facility to get in a short workout before our nine o'clock team

meeting. There were some charity and PR events coming up we had to sign up for along with some other announcements. Gabe DeLugo had been traded to the Phantoms, and our back-up goalie in Atlanta had joined the team yesterday. This wasn't a huge change since Gabe wasn't our starter, but the gossip mill was going again.

"So Gabe's ex-wife traded him to the team she now owns?" Anders asked as he jumped on the treadmill next to mine.

"I wonder what that's about," Felix mused. "You think they are together again?"

"He took two bunnies back to the hotel the other night in San Jose," Jordan said, joining the conversation. "So if he's back with the ex, I'm thinking it won't last long."

"I thought he was going to retire," Anders said. "He's like thirty-six, isn't he?"

"Something like that," Jordan said, nodding.

"Is not our business," I said, picking up speed. "He is no longer with the team, so who cares?"

"Coming from the guy whose girlfriend works for the Phantoms," Anders said. "I mean, how's that going to work going forward?"

"He's gonna get traded to L.A.," Jordan said, laughing. "What else could possibly happen?"

"That true?" Anders turned to stare at me. "Are you going to get traded to L.A. to be with Sloane?"

“No,” I snapped, slowing down and glaring at Jordan. “This has not been discussed, and you should stop with gossip.” I grabbed a towel, jumped off the treadmill, and stalked into the hallway, running right into Decker, who’d apparently been listening at the door.

“Are you moving to L.A.?” he demanded.

I threw up my hands. “If you were listening, I already said I was not.”

I’d been doing a lot of lying lately, but it felt necessary in this situation.

Sloane and I had discussed a trade possibility, and I supposed it was still on the table. The issue was that we hadn’t had a real conversation since I’d left her in L.A., and I had no idea what the future held for us as a couple. Until that was sorted out, I couldn’t think about something as huge as getting traded. And I sure as fuck wasn’t going to tell Decker any of that.

“Is she moving back to L.A.?”

“You should ask her,” I snipped.

“I would if she wasn’t pissed at me.”

“You did that to yourself,” I said.

“Because of you.”

“No. Do not put it on me.” I shook my head, tired of this situation. “You won’t even give me a chance to tell you how I feel about your sister, instead assuming bad things about me. You know the man I am, but you still do not want me with

your sister. I am offended and insulted because I thought we were friends. I would never hurt her.” I turned, taking a step in the other direction when he gripped my arm, stopping me.

“What?” I snapped, turning around.

He didn’t say anything at first, but he slowly released my arm.

“She’s my sister,” he said at last.

“She is twenty-eight.”

His jaw worked, irritation on his face. “I don’t want this life for her. Not after what she went through as a kid. She needs stability. Someone who’ll come home to her every night, not someone who’s gone half the year.”

“Is not your decision.”

“I’ll be fucking pissed if you hurt her.”

Since I couldn’t tell him the only person potentially getting hurt right now was me, I didn’t say anything.

“She’s been through a lot.”

“I know.” I gritted my teeth, wishing he would say something new. Or even remotely useful.

“I asked you not to.”

“I didn’t plan it,” I responded in frustration. “We talked. We had connection. It happened. I didn’t know how to tell you.” I wouldn’t tell him Sloane had asked me not to since I didn’t want to make things worse between them.

“You went behind my back. Do you see how wrong that is?”

“I apologize for that part of it,” I said, hoping I sounded sincere. “But once we were together, there was no going back. And anyway, she was very clear that she is moving back to L.A. for her new job. We have not discussed the future, only the present.”

“Which is exactly what I’m afraid of.”

“This makes no sense,” I said. “If anyone leaves, it’s her. Not me.”

He scowled, and I scowled right back.

“I don’t want to continue the animosity,” I said after taking a moment to remember the word *animosity* in English. “If you can’t accept that Sloane and I are dating, then we don’t have to be friends, but we have to be able to work together.”

Decker sighed, shaking his head. “Hockey isn’t going to be a problem.”

“Then what?”

“If you hurt her, in any way, shape, or form, we will definitely have a problem.”

“That is never going to happen.”

“Famous last words.”

“You have to trust me.”

“Not with her.”

“Then I guess we have nothing else to say.”

“I guess not.” He turned and walked into the workout room.

I stared after him and then headed into the opposite direction.

I’d done all I could do to make things right between us, or at least to apologize for keeping our relationship from him. I couldn’t say anything else without divulging personal things about the current state of things with Sloane, so the best option had been to let it go.

It occurred to me it might be time to let Sloane go too.

She had a decade of her life that she was trying to make up for, with a plethora of plans that didn’t seem to include me. I loved her, but I also didn’t want to hold her back. If she needed to be free to do all the things she’d missed out on while she’d essentially been in hiding, it might be better all around if I let her do them without worrying about me. Even though it would break my heart into a million pieces.

*S*loane

THE FLIGHT to New York was long, but it was a great opportunity to get some work done. Harper and I both had our laptops open, each taking care of different things, so I didn't see the text from Naomi at first. When she texted for the third time, I finally opened the text app.

NAOMI: Where are you? I've been trying to call.

NAOMI: Hello? Where are you? You promised to help me with my France project.

NAOMI: It's due next week. Are you going to be able to help me?

Shit!

I'd forgotten all about promising to help Naomi with her social studies project. It was a big part of her grade this semester and included a written report, an oral presentation, and some type of visual representation. We'd discussed creating a diorama or maybe a slide show with pictures from all over the country I was going to give her.

And I'd forgotten.

I was an asshole sometimes.

SLOANE: Hey, kiddo! I'm so sorry. I had to be in Los Angeles for work and now I'm on my way to New York. What have you gotten done so far, and how can I help?

NAOMI: I have most of the report written, but I don't have any of the pictures for the slide show. It's too late to do the diorama unless you're coming home soon?

Home.

Was Fort Lauderdale home?

It kind of was.

Somehow, it had become more my home after less than two months than Los Angeles was, and that made no sense.

Well, it made a little sense.

I had friends in Fort Lauderdale.

He was being difficult right now, but I had my brother and future sister-in-law.

And I had Johan.

Not to mention Naomi, who'd become like a little sister.

SLOANE: I won't be back for about a week, so that's probably too late. But I can send you all the pictures you need. In fact, if you send me your report, I can take a look at it and highlight parts of it we can use for the slide show. I'll even get it set up on PowerPoint for you.

NAOMI: I have to write the conclusion, but I'm going to do that tonight, and then I can send it. Is that okay?

SLOANE: Absolutely. And if I get busy at work, don't feel bad about texting me and reminding me.

NAOMI: You're the best! Thank you!

SLOANE: You're welcome.

NAOMI: Love you!

I hesitated.

She loved me?

Already?

SLOANE: Love you too.

I put down my phone and looked at Harper. "I totally forgot I promised Naomi I'd help her with her social studies project on France. I feel like a jerk."

Harper glanced up. "Is she upset?"

"No, but I promised to set up her PowerPoint for her, which I really shouldn't have done, but I feel guilty."

She chuckled. "As long as she knows how to do it herself, it should be okay."

"I feel bad though. We talked about this project for weeks, and I totally spaced."

"You've got a lot on your plate."

"Yeah, but Naomi's just a kid. She doesn't understand all that."

“I think kids understand more than we think, but certainly not to the extent of what’s going on right now.”

“Yeah, but I still hate disappointing her.”

“Looks like your life is calling,” Harper said softly, motioning to where a text had just popped up from Eden.

EDEN: We need to go bridesmaid dress shopping, and it looks like next Friday works for everyone else. Can you be here?

“I’m supposed to go bridesmaid dress shopping with Eden,” I murmured, staring at the screen. “And I really hate shopping for that kind of thing online. There’s so much to do, and I was supposed to help her.”

“When’s the wedding?”

“First week of August in Vegas.”

“That’s only five months away. Wedding planning takes a lot of time.”

“I know. There are a million details we’re supposed to go over, but I’ve been in L.A. and then that nonsense with my brother kept me from hanging out with them too much.”

“Like I said, your life is calling, and you need to answer.”

I frowned. “What does that mean?”

“I don’t know why you refuse to see what’s literally right in front of you. You *know* what you want. Maybe not the timing or the details, but if you do a little honest soul-searching the answers are right there, brimming just beneath the surface.”

“Can we not talk in circles?”

“You’ve been running around like a chicken with your head cut off the last couple of days, focusing on what I need so you don’t have to think about what you need. And I think it’s because you’re afraid.”

“Of course, I’m afraid! I told you that. I’ve never been on my own as an adult and—”

“You don’t have to be.”

“I don’t have to be what?”

“On your own. You have me, your brother, and a guy who sounds like he’s crazy about you. Why do you have to do it on your own?”

“Because I never have.”

“So? Is there some kind of prize for struggling? For making yourself crazy as you work and pay bills and go to school and do all the things? Fuck that, Sloane. Seriously. Fuck. That.”

I stared at her in surprise. “You’re busting your ass to prove something even though you don’t have to. What’s the difference?”

“The difference is that I *want* to do this. I’m only thirty-five, and I need more than shopping and lunch with the ladies to occupy my time. This team meant the world to Edward, so it’s important to me to continue his legacy in a meaningful way.”

“Nothing on my plate is meaningful like that,” I replied softly.

“You don’t think being with Johan is meaningful?”

I hesitated.

I did think that.

He was the greatest man I’d ever known and being with him made me happier than I’d ever been. It was still new, but at the same time, it didn’t feel that way when we were together.

“Being with him means I might have to quit.”

“Of course. But if you can give me through the summer, so I have time to find a replacement and get my shit together for next season, that’s all I need. Then I want you to go be happy. With Johan. In L.A. or Florida or wherever else you two need to be. If it winds up being L.A., that would be epic, but I want you happy. More than I need you to be my assistant. I’ve told you that before, and I meant it. Go find yourself, Sloane.”

“I didn’t tell him we were heading to Manhattan.”

“Why?”

“I was trying to decide if I wanted to surprise him or not see him at all.”

“And now?”

“Now I’m going to show up at his hotel in a thong and a lacy bra.”

She laughed. “As long as you don’t show up to my meeting with the league like that it sounds like a plan.”



I DIDN'T HAVE time to think about Johan or my future over the next twenty-four hours because the meeting with the league was intense. Harper had a four-hundred-page document prepared that included her vision for the team and a bunch of details I didn't completely understand. Even though the team was legally hers now, there were rules in place that had to do with ownership. Almost as if she had to prove herself.

Luckily, she'd hired a badass New York attorney who specialized in this kind of thing, and with him at her side, things ended on a positive note. The meeting had gone long, though, well into dinnertime, so we jumped into the car she'd hired when it was over.

"You want me to drop you at the MSG?" she asked, referring to the arena where the game was.

"Yes, thank you. I'll probably just buy a ticket from a scalper since I didn't want to reach out to Johan or my brother."

"Don't be ridiculous." She pulled what looked like a ticket out of her purse. "I got this for you today."

"Harper." I reached over and hugged her. "Thank you. You're the best boss ever."

"I want you to be happy, but I don't plan to make it easy for you to leave me."

I chuckled. "Nothing about leaving you will be easy."

“I’m just glad we got past today. Now I can focus on next season.”

“What about the rest of this season?”

“I don’t know that we’re going to make the playoffs, so my energy is going to the things I can control. If I mess with the team too much now, it’s going to upset the apple cart even more than I already have by trading for Gabe. I’m trying to save the big overhaul for the off-season.”

“Well, whatever you need, just let me know.”

“What I need is for you to go get your man and make up with your brother. The personal is so much more important than the professional.”

“But the professional is important to you.”

“It is because this is where I am in life. That doesn’t mean it has to be the most important thing in *your* life. Now, go enjoy the game and talk to Decker and Johan. I’ll be at the hotel soaking in a hot bath.”

“Thank you.” I reached over and kissed her cheek as the car pulled to stop. “I’ll text you later.”

“Or tomorrow.” She grinned and waved.

I got out of the car and hurried to the entrance.

The crowd was loud as I entered the building, and I grimaced when I saw the score.

New York was winning 5-1.

And it was only the second period.

Since I wanted to surprise Johan, and he didn't have his phone on him anyway, I texted my brother.

SLOANE: I know you won't see this until the game is over, but I'm here at MSG to surprise Johan. Can you arrange for me to come back to the locker room?

I put my phone in my back pocket and made my way to the concourse to find something to eat. Then I'd get a glass of wine, enjoy the rest of the game, and think about what I was going to say to Johan.

I had to explain all my fears and insecurities, along with my hopes and dreams for the future. He knew some of them already, but not all of it.

And maybe it was time to open up about my past.

For us to move forward, I had to close the door on the past, and I didn't think I could do that without telling him everything. He needed to know every ugly detail, so when the inevitable nightmares came he would be prepared. So that when the time came to talk about having a family, he understood my reality. And more than that, Johan needed to know who I was becoming was directly linked to who I'd been. He had to understand the past before we could look toward a future.

Johan

THE GAME WAS A SHIT SHOW.

New York made us look like a pee-wee team who'd never played together before. Passes went wild, Cam couldn't seem to stop anything, and our defense was tripping over their own skates. It was an absolute mess, and I'd never seen Coach Petrov's face so red.

Losing was bad enough, but knowing my family was here to see it in person sucked even more, and I wasn't in the best mood as we moved to the dressing room to put on our street clothes. My father and I got along, but my difficult relationship with Zelda had put a strain on ours, so this could go in several different directions. I hadn't seen them since last summer and wanted to spend a little time with them, it would just be easier once they joined me in Fort Lauderdale. Seeing them at another team's arena was complicated and exhausting.

"I can't wait to meet your grandmother," Anders told me as we got ready to go.

I laughed. “She’s fun. You will like her.”

“Too bad your sister couldn’t come,” he said. “She’s hot.”

I rolled my eyes. This had been a running joke between us since he’d seen pictures of her from our holiday in Spain. “Don’t say that to her—she will cut you.”

“She won’t. She’ll like me. I’m a good guy.”

“Hana prefers the bad boys,” I said. “You are too nice for her.”

“I can be bad.”

“I do not want to hear about this,” I told him, closing the locker.

“Come on—you’d be okay if I wanted to date Hana.” He paused. “Wouldn’t you?”

“It’s not up to me,” I replied. “That is up to her. But if she was happy, then yes, of course.” I glanced over to where Decker was busy typing on his phone. “I want what is best for Hana. That’s all.”

“That could be me,” Anders mused.

“You have said you are not interested in settling down before you’re thirty.”

“That’s only three years. And it would take that long for us to get to know each other. You know, with her living in Slovakia and all.”

“You have many plans for a woman you have not even met yet.”

“I know, right? Why hasn’t she come to visit?”

“She has a job and a life,” I said, laughing. “She can come any time. She knows this.”

“I could also go to Slovakia with you in the off-season so I can meet her.” He wiggled his eyebrows.

“I don’t know if I will go to Slovakia this summer,” I admitted.

“Because of Sloane?” he asked, his face sobering. “You think you’ll go to L.A. with her?”

“I don’t know.” I shrugged. “Things are very up in the air.”

“Why didn’t you fly her out for this game so she could meet your family?”

“She’s busy with work, but also, it would be easier once we’re both back in Florida. I haven’t told my family about her yet.”

He looked surprised. “How come?”

I looked over to where Decker had been a moment ago, but he was gone, so I could speak more freely.

“She’s moving back to L.A., and I don’t know where that leaves me.”

“Have you asked?”

“We had started to talk about it before everything happened with Decker. Then it felt like everything became complicated. We’re supposed to talk when we both get back to Lauderdale, but I don’t know when that will be. She didn’t

know her schedule yet, and I haven't heard from her for two days."

"Is that normal? To go so long without talking?"

I shook my head. "No."

"So why didn't you call and ask what was up? Even I know communication is important."

"Because..." I let my voice trail because I hated what I was going to say.

"Because?"

"Because maybe it is better to let her go." I stuffed my hands in my pockets. "Maybe better for her to not have pressure from a man who lives three thousand miles away after what she has been through. Maybe I should not be the cause of trouble between her and her brother."

"That's a lot of maybes."

"I know. I think I love her, but it may not be enough. For her or for me."

"Are you trying to convince me or yourself?"

"Both?" I shrugged.

"I don't know a lot about serious relationships, but you gotta talk and say those things. Ask all the questions. How else will you know how she feels?"

"I plan to. In Florida."

"And if she can't get away for a while?"

I shrugged. “I guess we will see. Anyway, we have to go. My family is probably waiting at the hotel.”

“Hey, Johan!” One of our assistant coaches came around the corner. “You have a surprise visitor—your grandmother’s here.”

I stared at the man in confusion, and Anders started to laugh.

I ignored him as I followed the coach toward the hallway.

“Johan!” There she was, all five-foot-nothing of her.

Wearing a peasant skirt, boots, and a Knights jersey.

She looked ridiculous in a sweet, silly way, and I couldn’t help but hug her.

“I thought we were going to meet at the hotel?” I asked.

“I couldn’t wait!” She hugged me a second time, kissing both of my cheeks and then lightly slapping them.

“We’re about to get on the bus,” I protested. “I have to go.”

“We can take a taxi together, no?”

I sighed. “Where are Dad and Zelda?”

“They left. They assumed you would be mad I came looking for you, but I have no such hesitation.”

“I’m not mad. I just have to—” I stopped when I saw Coach Petrov. “Coach!”

Coach approached us looking harried. “Johan. Ma’am.” He nodded at my grandmother politely.

“Coach, this is my grandmother. Skoli Hajek. Grandmama, this is Anatoli Petrov.”

“I know who he is.” She spoke to me in Slovak before smiling at him. Then she switched to English. “I watch you play many years.”

“Thank you.” Coach smiled back.

“Coach, can I walk my grandmother to the hotel?” I asked him. “The others left without her, and I don’t want her to go alone.”

Coach hesitated but then nodded. “Yes, of course. I’ll see you back at the hotel.”

“You are good boy.” My grandmother squeezed his arm.

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.” Coach chuckled as he walked away.

“Let me take care of something,” I told her. “Don’t go anywhere.”

She just smiled and nodded.

I found Anders and asked him to get my bag to the hotel, and then found my grandmother talking to Wolf.

“Skoli’s a trip,” he told me, his eyes twinkling.

“We take selfie,” Grandma said proudly, holding up her phone. “Thank you, Mr. Wolf!”

“You’re welcome, Mrs. Hajek.”

“Skoli,” she corrected him.

“Yes, ma’am, Skoli.”

“Let’s go,” I told her.

The hotel wasn’t far but there was a chance I’d be recognized walking out of the arena, so I made sure to stay aware of our surroundings. My grandmother took my arm as we got onto the street, and I covered her hand with mine.

“Is everything okay?” I asked her.

“Of course. Why?”

“Why are you really here?” I asked. “I know you too well to think you just decided to make an impromptu trip to America without even telling me.”

“I missed you,” she replied.

“And?”

“Your father misses you.”

“He can call. It’s not like we’re not speaking.”

“You don’t like Zelda, so you don’t come around so often.”

“It’s hockey season,” I protested. “I wouldn’t be around this time of year regardless.”

“You came home only two weeks last summer. He wonders if you will come at all this year.”

“He wonders or you wonder?”

She shrugged. “Maybe both.”

“I’ll always come to visit,” I said quietly. “But my life is here now. You know that.”

“If you don’t make the playoffs, you could be home by the end of April. But when this has happened in past years, you

don't come until July or August.”

“I go on vacation. See friends. Take care of things I was too busy for during the season. And frankly, I like having my own space. My apartment, my extra-large bed, my cleaning lady...”

“I clean for you,” she responded, glaring up at me.

“Yes, but you're old now. You shouldn't have to. And that single bed isn't so comfortable for someone my size.”

“We can buy new bed.”

“I'll try to stay longer,” I promised, even though I wasn't sure I would.

“If you would find a wife, maybe have a few babies, you would want to stay with family when you're not working.”

“I know that's what you want for me, but you have to stop with the matchmaking,” I said after a moment. “It makes me uncomfortable, and that's a big part of the reason I don't come home for long periods of time.”

“You don't meet women here,” she replied primly. “Someone has to step in. For your own good.”

Shit.

I needed to tell her about Sloane, but it was difficult to know where to start. Especially given our current situation.

“I have to tell you something,” I said as we approached the entrance to the hotel.

“Okay.” She glanced up at me curiously.

“I’ve been dating someone.”

“What?” She looked more startled than pleased or curious.

“She’s American.”

“American.” She stopped walking. “It’s serious? Who is she? Have I heard about her before?”

“I don’t know if it’s—” I was cut off abruptly when I heard someone calling my name.

“Johan! Skoli!” A tall, willowy brunette with legs for days and a Knights jersey came toward me with a big smile on her face. I’d never seen her before in my life and glanced down at my grandmother, suddenly suspicious.

“Who is that?” I murmured under my breath.

“This is Irena,” my grandmother said quietly.

Irena?

Irena!

Jesus fucking Christ.

I’d forgotten all about her, and our plan to potentially meet in New York.

Why hadn’t she reached out to tell me she was coming?

Because my grandmother was in town.

Now it made more sense.

This had been a setup, and Grandmama had come to the arena early to confess whatever it was she’d done. I’d derailed the conversation by starting to tell her about Sloane, and now

Irena was coming toward us flanked by two more women I didn't know.

“Johan, it's so good to see you.” Irena took the last two steps in my direction before throwing her arms around me and planting her mouth on mine.

I was momentarily startled, caught off guard by the kiss, and it took a few seconds for me to come to my senses.

I started to pull away just as a pair of familiar blue eyes came into view.

Two pairs.

Sloane and Decker were standing just inside the doors staring at us.

“You son of a bitch!” Decker came roaring out of the hotel, and I managed to push Irena out of the way just before the first punch landed, catching me in the jaw.

Irena gasped, my grandmother started to yell, and my teammates surrounded us.

“This is not—” I began, but he hauled off and hit me again, this time in the eye.

“I told you it wouldn't end well with us if you hurt her,” he snarled. “I fucking warned you!”

“I didn't do—” I tried again, but this time I was prepared when he pulled his fist back and managed to duck it. “Stop it! This isn't—”

“Shut the hell up.” Decker looked furious, but before he could say anything else, Coach Petrov was there, standing

between us.

I didn't have time for this.

Sloane had just seen me kissing another woman, and I looked around wildly for her.

"Sloane!" I couldn't see her, but she couldn't have gotten far.

"You stay the hell away from her," Decker yelled, shoving me back when I tried to go inside.

"Jesus fucking Christ." Coach came off the bus looking furious.

"This isn't what it looked like," I told Coach.

"I don't care what it looks like, you don't do this in public." Coach looked pissed. "Both of you will be skating laps for me as soon as I get an arena for you to do it in. In the meantime, you both have a curfew. Get up to your rooms and stay there until breakfast. If I catch you out, it's a ten thousand dollar fine."

"I have to find Sloane," I said, looking around.

"That ship has sailed," Decker grunted. "Just stay the fuck away from her."

*S*loane

SEEING Johan kiss that gorgeous brunette had been jarring.

Technically, we didn't have any kind of commitment, but it stung to think he would cheat on me the moment our relationship got difficult. It didn't bode well for our future, and all I could think to do was what I always did: run.

Harper and I had been staying at a hotel in Times Square, which wasn't overly far, but it felt like it was on the other side of the planet as I headed in that direction.

Everything was a haze of sadness, disbelief, and a touch of anger.

I shouldn't have walked away when they started to fight, but that was always my gut instinct. Self-preservation. Safety. Getting away from any kind of trouble. Especially when it was my fault. That was how the abuse had started. I'd gotten into trouble and my parents had decided I needed to spend more time at church and with our pastor. When the sexual abuse

started, my parents hadn't believed me, thinking I was just being a rebellious pre-teen.

This was different, of course, but my reaction had been the same.

My phone was buzzing in my pocket, and I pulled it out, intent on simply turning it off.

DECKER: Where are you? Are you okay? Would you please just check in?

JOHAN: I have to talk to you. What you saw was not real. She kissed me. I did not kiss her back.

DECKER: Where are you, dammit?

EDEN: Is everything okay? I just got the craziest text from Decker.

JOHAN: I cannot leave the hotel—I'm in trouble with Coach—but please come back so I can explain.

I stopped walking and stared at the phone.

Was there an explanation for what I'd seen?

And how could I move forward if I continued to run away every time I faced conflict?

It wasn't healthy, and frankly, I had a lot to say to the two important men in my life. I was salty as hell about this entire situation, but it was time to stop running and take control. If it turned out I had to cut both of them out of my life, I'd hate it but I would be okay. I'd come too far to let something like this derail my future.

And this time I needed closure.

My legs were moving almost as fast as my racing thoughts, and there were still a lot of people in the lobby when I got there. No sign of Johan or my brother though, so I texted Johan.

SLOANE: What room are you in?

JOHAN: 1135.

SLOANE: I'll be right up. We have to talk.

I stuck the phone in my pocket and got in the elevator.

My nerves were shot, my stomach felt funny, and my chest was tight.

I truly hated confrontation, but Johan was important to me.

Important enough to at least listen to what he had to say.

If he was seeing other women then that would be the end for us, but if he said it wasn't what it looked like, he deserved the chance to explain. Then I'd deal with my brother.

"Hi." Johan was standing outside of his room, the door held part way open by his foot.

"Hi." I stood a few feet away from him.

"I didn't kiss her," he said immediately. "My grandmother set it up, but the kiss was Irena's idea."

I took a step closer.

"I have trust issues," I said quietly.

"I know. But I would never cheat on you."

"Is it cheating if we're not officially in a committed relationship?"

“It is to me. We are together until we decide otherwise. And to be fair, I had not told my grandmother about you, so she didn’t know I had someone in my life.”

“I was afraid you’d already moved on.”

“Without even a conversation?” He shook his head. “No. We were supposed to talk first.”

“That’s why I came to surprise you,” I whispered after a moment.

“I’m sorry.” He reached for me. “Things have been uncertain between us, but I would never be with another woman until we made the decision to end it.”

I gazed up at him. “Is that what you want?”

“No. But you haven’t told me what you want.”

“I don’t know exactly,” I admitted. “I just know I want you to be part of it.”

“You are already part of me,” he said softly. “And I would like for you to meet my family.”

“Really?” I hadn’t been expecting that.

“We have many things to discuss, but I have only a short time with my family since I have to leave with the team tomorrow.”

“Are they here?” I asked in surprise. “In your room?”

He nodded and then held out his hand. “You’ll come to meet them?”

“Yes. But first I have to know how you feel.” I slid my hand into his, and he leaned over to brush his lips across my forehead.

“I started to fall in love with you the first time I saw you,” he said. “I think about you all day. I miss you when we are apart. I cannot sleep for shit unless you are beside me. I’m willing to do what it takes to make you happy, but only if this is what you want too.”

“It is.” I moved closer to him. “As long as you can be patient while I figure out what I want to be when I grow up.”

He smiled. “I am a patient man.”

“Jesus fucking Christ, Sloane.” A door opened across the hall, and Decker was standing there glaring.

I felt Johan stiffen beside me, but I squeezed his arm to keep him from saying anything.

“No more fighting, Decker.” I gave him a look. “Do you understand me?”

“Did you not see him kissing another woman half an hour ago?” he demanded. “What am I missing, Sloane?”

“What you’re missing is that his grandmother set that up. And he didn’t kiss her back.”

Decker snorted. “Yeah, right.”

“I trust him,” I said firmly.

And for the first time in a long time, I realized I meant it.

Johan wouldn’t cheat on me.

He just wouldn't.

"Then you're more naïve than I thought."

"That's enough," I snapped, irritated. "You and me? We're going to talk." I motioned to his room. "You want to go in there or do it out here? I don't care either way."

Decker didn't move, his eyes boring into mine as we stared each other down.

"Fine." He turned and opened his door.

"I'll be back," I whispered to Johan. "Give me a few minutes."

"I'll be waiting," he whispered back, lightly kissing my lips.

I walked over to Decker's room and stepped inside, letting the door close behind me.

"What is your problem with Johan?" I asked, folding my arms across my chest. "Let's take what you saw tonight off the table because you were pissed off the first time he looked at me. Now you need to tell me why."

"Because I know hockey players."

"That's not why." I began tapping my foot. "I want the truth, or we aren't going to be able to have a relationship. I'm serious."

He remained quiet, looking at everything but me.

"*Alan.*" I used the name I knew him by to get his attention, and it worked. "Please talk to me. What is it? Do you not want me back in your life?"

His voice was gruff when he finally spoke. “Do you have any idea how hard it was on me when you disappeared? As time went on, I believed you were dead. I fucking mourned you, *Harper*.”

My birth name sounded weird to my ears, but it was also familiar coming from him.

“I’m sorry,” I said quietly. “But I had to go. I couldn’t take another day living that way. You have to understand how awful my life was.”

“That’s just it!” He threw up his hands. “I have this vague, cloudy set of memories with no way for me to fill in the blanks. I assume you were abused like Kristy was, but I don’t know by whom, what they did, or how it went down. All I really know is that you ran, and we never saw or heard from you again.” He paused. “And that you left me behind.”

“You were too young for me to take you with me, and you were already on that travel hockey team, which was the biggest thing in your life. Not to mention, I was sixteen and could barely take care of myself. How would I have taken care of you?”

“I don’t know, but you disappeared without a trace and then you magically reappear one day more than a decade later. Your trauma was undoubtedly greater than mine, but that doesn’t negate my pain. My fears. Or what I went through when you left.”

“So tell me about it. I’m right here.”

“I’ve tried, but you never want to talk about the past.”

“What do you want to know?” I demanded, starting to get irritated again. “You want to hear the details of how Pastor Connor coerced me into having sex with him from the time I was ten years old until I got my period? And then how he passed me to his disciples because he liked his girls young, and I’d gotten too mature for him? Or how about the way he taught those boys to fuck me in the ass so I wouldn’t get pregnant? Are those the details you want to know?”

His face softened, eyes filled with myriad emotions.

“Jesus. I’m so sorry, Harper.”

“Sloane,” I corrected him angrily. “I’m fucking Sloane now. Harper is gone. Just like Alan is gone. That’s not who we are anymore. We’re Sloane and Decker. Alan and Harper were sad, scared little kids caught in a nightmare. Sloane and Decker are adults trying to move on. At least, I am.”

“Yeah.” He dropped his head, letting his chin hit his chest.

“I’m trying so hard to leave the past behind, but part of that means being with Johan. I’m in love with him, Decker. And he’s a good guy. Deep down, you know that. So what’s the problem? Tell me.”

“I just got you back,” he said, though he didn’t look at me. “And I haven’t had a chance to spend time with you or had the opportunity to try to make up for what happened.”

“There’s nothing for you to make up for,” I said in confusion. “Nothing that happened to me was your fault.”

“But I should have tried to help! I should have known they were doing to you what they were doing to Kristy and worked

harder to expose them. Tell someone at school. Call the authorities. *Something.*”

“You were eight when it started. None of that is on you.”

“But it still boils down to not being there for you.”

“That’s why you want to be here for me now.” This was beginning to make sense. “But I don’t need you to protect me anymore, Decker. I just need you to be my brother. And that does not include trying to vet my boyfriends.”

“He’s going to hold you back, Sloane. You’ll have to sacrifice a lot of your hopes and dreams to follow his hockey career.”

“Maybe. But that’s my choice to make, not yours.”

“I don’t want you to move to fucking Slovakia when he retires,” he blurted out.

“There are no plans for anything like that,” I said gently. “But what’s the difference if I move to L.A. or Slovakia or anywhere else that isn’t Fort Lauderdale? My life is pretty fluid right now. If I don’t know where I’m going to be, how can you possibly know?”

“I don’t, I guess.”

“Johan loves me,” I said. “And if we’re going to be together, hockey could take us to a lot of different places.”

“So you’re giving up on school and work and all that?” he asked.

“I’m not giving up anything yet. You came into the hallway and interrupted us, talking out your ass again, so we

didn't have a chance to get into the details.”

“I'm sorry.” He sank onto the edge of the bed, his shoulders hunching down a little. “I guess I've been an ass. I don't know what's wrong with me.”

“Are you... *jealous*?” I asked slowly, the idea popping into my head as I went over to sit next to him. “Like I'm spending more time with him than you?”

“I dunno.”

Bingo.

“Decker. Listen to me. You're my brother. My *family*. I love you. Our relationship is separate than what I have with Johan.”

“He's the kind of guy you'll marry,” he said after a moment.

“You're getting married,” I reminded him gently.

“It's different.”

“Because you're a guy and I'm a girl?”

“Because I don't want him to take you away before I have a chance to get to know you again.”

Before I could respond, someone knocked on the door.

Johan

I WAS TOO nervous to wait for Sloane to come back to my room, so I gave them a few minutes before knocking on the door. If Sloane and I were going to be together, I needed to be part of whatever conversation they were having. Decker and I couldn't continue to be at odds, we had to work through this.

"Come in." Decker opened the door and motioned me inside, even though he didn't make eye contact.

"Hey." Sloane smiled at me.

"Is everything okay?" I asked, looking from one to the other.

"We're getting there," she said. "But I have a question."

"Okay."

"Are we moving to Slovakia after you retire?"

I stared at her in confusion. "What? No. That is not my plan, although I don't think too much about retirement. I am only twenty-eight."

“You love going home,” Decker said, looking at me.

“I like seeing my family,” I countered. “But I get bored as fuck when I go home. And I have no plans to retire there. Maybe when I am very old. Is that what the problem is? The fear that Sloane and I would move out of the country?”

“Or that I’ll walk into a hotel lobby to find you kissing another woman, and I have to kick your ass.”

“I did not kiss her—she kissed me. This was something my grandmother arranged because she didn’t know I was involved with someone. She is very sorry. As am I. But I’ve already told you I would not hurt Sloane. *Never.*”

“But you did.”

“Briefly, only because of a miscommunication.”

“You’re in a relationship with my sister but haven’t told your family about her?” Decker looked skeptical. “That’s not at all sketchy.”

“Decker.” Sloane’s voice held a warning.

“It is a fair question,” I said quickly. “I didn’t tell my family because Sloane asked me to give her time to make some decisions. I didn’t think it was appropriate until we had the chance to talk. With her job in L.A. things have been very up in the air.”

“So your grandmother just randomly showed up with some hot Slovak girl to set you up with?”

“It appears this way, yes. But I have told her about Sloane now, so this will not happen again.”

“Then for lack of a better phrase, what are your intentions with my sister?”

Sloane rolled her eyes, but I wasn't intimidated by Decker or his questions.

“Whatever she wants,” I said firmly. “I'm in love with her, all I care about is making her happy.”

“Johan.” Sloane's voice was soft as she came to stand behind me, wrapping her arms around my waist and resting her head between my shoulder blades. I rested my hands on hers but kept my eyes on Decker.

“Do you think he can make you happy?” Decker asked quietly, even though Sloane was still behind me.

“I wouldn't be here if I didn't think so. The question is whether or not you can be happy for us.”

Decker took a long time before answering.

“Decker?” Sloane's voice held a touch of hurt, and I hated it for her, but they had to work through this without me getting involved.

“I want to be happy for you,” Decker said. “It's just going to take some time. There's a part of me that's mad at both of you, and until I can get over it, I'm going to struggle.”

“I know why you're mad at Johan, but why are you mad at me?” Sloane asked.

“Because when you left I mourned as if you'd died. Because it took you more than a decade to come find me, and you couldn't even be bothered to let me know you were okay.

Because you just came back into my life, and you're already leaving. And finally, because I couldn't protect you then, and I feel like I won't be able to protect you now."

"But I don't *need* protecting," Sloane said. "I just want my brother in my life. You're the only biological family I have."

"I'm aware what I'm feeling is irrational, but I can't seem to help it."

"I understand that, but you have to understand I'm not leaving *you*. I'm just considering different job options."

"We both know if you leave Lauderdale, we'll only see each other in the off-season."

"If I hadn't met Johan, I probably would have already been gone. You should be thanking him for keeping me in Lauderdale longer than I intended."

Decker nodded. "Yeah, I guess there's that."

"Would you both like to come across the hall to meet my family?" I looked at Decker. "We are all going to be family soon."

"We are?" Sloane turned to me with a playful smile. "Is that the plan?"

"Long-term plan," I deadpanned. "Short-term plan is less clear."

She reached for my hand. "I'd love to meet your family." Then she turned to Decker. "What about you? You going to start behaving, or do you need me to kick your ass?"

Decker reluctantly got up. "I guess I could go say hello."

His response wasn't exactly enthusiastic, but I would take this as a win. If nothing else, it felt like we'd made progress.



MY GRANDMOTHER WAS beyond contrite about what had happened with Irena tonight, and she apologized profusely. To both Sloane and Decker. Zelda appeared to be on her best behavior, speaking politely to Sloane and Decker in her broken English. My father was his usual mostly stoic self, though I did catch him talking to Sloane a few times.

Decker was quiet too, and at one point I stood next to him.

“You okay?”

“Yeah.” He was staring at something out the window. “I owe you an apology.”

“You do.” I wouldn't have demanded one, but I definitely deserved it.

“I should have given you the benefit of the doubt and explained what was bothering me to Sloane. Instead of bottling it all up. I guess I'm dealing with my own shit, stuff I didn't realize was still bothering me. So, I'm sorry.” He held out his hand.

I quickly shook it. “Apology accepted.”

“Please don't fucking hurt her.”

“I love her. Hurting her is not the goal.”

“I feel like she's ready to run again. I think that's part of what scares me, seeing how skittish she is.”

“She does not trust easily, but I’m working on it.”

“We’re good as long as you treat her well. But you will. Deep down, I’ve always known that. I guess I was hoping she would need me once she came back, so I could take care of her to make up for not being able to when we were kids. When that didn’t happen, the only person I could take out my frustration on was you. And that was a dick move. It wasn’t personal.”

“It felt *very* personal,” I replied.

“I really am sorry.”

“We will be okay.”

We had to be.

He was going to be my brother as soon as I could make that happen.

“I know we will.” Decker nodded. “Thanks for being patient.”

“Is very late.” My grandmother stood up and gathered her purse. “We must go.”

“Yeah, me too.” Decker said goodbye to everyone and disappeared out the door while everyone hugged and kissed.

“We will see you next week in Florida,” my father said.

“Yes.” I nodded.

There was another round of hugs and kisses, and finally, Sloane and I were alone. She was sitting on one of the chairs by the windows, and I moved behind her, rubbing her shoulders. Her head fell forward, and she moaned.

“God, that feels good.”

“Relax,” I whispered. “Your shoulders are very tight.”

“It’s been a stressful couple of days.”

I continued kneading and massaging her shoulders, digging my thumbs into the soft spots at the base of her skull. She moaned, not moving as I continued to work on the knots I found.

“Would be better without your bra,” I said softly.

She chuckled. “I’m sure.”

“Get undressed,” I whispered. “Then you can stretch out on the bed, and I’ll rub you properly.”

“Don’t you have to get up early tomorrow?”

“I’ll be fine. You are more important. It’s a travel day, no game, so I’ll just go to sleep early tomorrow night.”

She didn’t respond, but merely stood up and meticulously pulled off the skirt and blouse she’d been wearing.

“Everything,” I told her as I started unbuttoning my dress shirt.

When she was naked, she sprawled out on the bed.

“On your stomach,” I said as I kicked off my slacks and rolled my socks off.

She’d already turned over, so I crawled onto the bed, putting my legs on either side of her thighs. I ran my fingers up over the bumps of her spine and then splayed them over her shoulder blades, dragging my thumbs up toward her neck.

“Jesus, Johan, where did you learn to do that?” She moaned.

“This is what our team trainer does,” he said. “When we are tight in the neck and shoulders.”

“That day in court was stressful. I tensed up the whole time, and I think I subconsciously haven’t stopped.”

“Just relax.”

“It’s hard with so much going on and so much to do in the near future.”

“Will you work in the off-season?” I asked softly.

“Some of it. Don’t tell anyone, but Harper is going to clean house. A lot of people in the Phantoms’ back office will be losing their jobs.”

“She wants to bring in her own people,” I said. “This makes sense.”

“Yeah.”

“And the team? They will be traded too?”

“I don’t know. Some guys, but not everyone. I think she wants new management. And then I’m going to help her find a replacement for me.”

“For you?” My hands froze. “What do you mean?”

“Well, we can’t be together if I live in L.A., and you live in Florida. It would be okay short-term, but it’s not sustainable.”

“I thought you loved this job, working for the Phantoms and for Harper.”

“I do, but I’m pretty sure I love you more.”

I leaned down to press light kisses along her spine and then up along her side.

“You realize this is the first time you have used those words?” I asked.

“I told you—I’m not the romantic type. I struggle to show emotion. I’m trying to be better, for you, but it’s not easy for me.”

“Is okay. I am romantic enough for both of us.” I brushed her hair off her shoulders so I could put my lips there. I trailed fingers down her arms, up her sides again, and over the curve of her hips, all while continuing to put soft kisses anywhere I could reach. Goose flesh broke out on her skin, and a soft sigh escaped her.

“Good?” I asked.

“Yes.” She nestled deeper into the mattress. “I love the way it feels when you touch me.”

“I like the way it feels too.” My mouth was a fraction of an inch from her ear, and I used the opportunity to nibble on her lobe. “I like everything about you.”

“Even how unromantic I am?”

“Everything. You can learn romance, but the way it feels when we’re together—that is special magic that cannot be taught or learned. It simply exists the moment we’re in the same room.”

“You definitely win the romantic talk award,” she murmured.

“There is more to come. Much, much more.”

*S*loane

JOHAN'S HANDS on my back felt heavenly.

His kisses were tender, and the movement of his torso over mine felt deliciously heavy. He anchored me in more ways than one. The kind, gentle soul beneath the smokin' hot body made him the whole damn package. He made me feel safe on every level, something I'd never had before.

And he was mine.

More than anything, I wanted to show him how I felt, how much he meant to me.

I rolled to my back, looking up at his gorgeous face.

His mouth was made for pleasure, and I leaned up to kiss him.

"Make love to me, Johan," I whispered.

His thick erection pushed against my slick folds, and he stretched me wide open when he slid in. The sensation of having him inside of me never got old, no matter how many

times we did it. He knew exactly how I liked it, hitting the same spot that made me tingle every time he bottomed out.

“Like that?” he asked, his broad chest hovering over me.

“Yes. There.” I shuddered slightly as he rubbed up against the spot I loved. Unable to do anything else, I arched my hips to take every inch of him. Over and over. In and out. And best of all, those gorgeous blue eyes were laser-focused on mine the whole time.

“You’re beautiful,” he rasped against my mouth. “Your pussy is perfect for my cock.” Then he mumbled a bunch of sexy-sounding words in Slovak. It didn’t matter, though. I understood what he was trying to say because I felt it too.

Magic.

That was an accurate description of how it felt when we were together.

Especially when we were tangled up in each other like this.

“Johan... fuck!” I cried out as the tightening low in my belly told me my orgasm would happen soon.

Then the bastard stopped moving.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I asked, trying to focus on his face.

“Slowing down. This is not a race. I want to look at you. Enjoy being inside of you. Hear you calling my name when you get off.”

I groaned, tilting up my hips, trying to pull him deeper.

He pulled out to the tip and then ever-so-slowly glided back in until he was fully seated.

“Johan!” I dug my nails into his arms.

“Shhh.” He nipped at my lips. “You have control when we fuck. But when we make love, you leave control to me.”

He started to move with easy, rhythmic thrusts, hitting all those lovely spots inside of me that tilted my world in the best possible way.

“Johan...” I moaned out his name. “I’m so close.”

And he stopped again.

My whimper was one of sheer frustration, and I wrapped my legs around his hips, desperate to keep him closer.

“I love you,” he whispered, putting one hand on the side of my face. “From the first time I saw you, I knew there was something there.”

“I felt it too.”

He thrust deep and then paused again. “Say it,” he said softly.

Our eyes locked.

“I won’t let you come until you say it.”

“I already did.”

“You said you were pretty sure. Now I need you to say it directly. To me. When I’m inside of you.”

Frustration ripped through me because I truly wasn’t good at baring my soul.

Especially not at being emotionally intimate.

And that was what he wanted.

“Do you love me, Sloane?” He pulsed inside of me, telling me he was close and hanging on so I could go first.

“You know I do,” I responded, tears filling my eyes.

“Say the words.” He all but breathed the sentence into my mouth. “I love you, Sloane.”

“I...love...you...too.” My voice sounded choppy and weird, but he’d crashed his mouth to mine, making me forget everything but him.

He picked up speed, slamming into me hard, and my world splintered.

“Johan!” I shrieked his name as the first waves of my orgasm hit me.

Our bodies jerked as he pounded into me hard enough to bang the headboard against the wall.

“That was beautiful,” he said when the aftershocks finally stopped. “Almost as beautiful as you.”

“Thank you,” I said softly.

“For?” He was still on top of me, still inside of me, still watching my face.

“For showing me how to make love with you.”

“The pleasure was mine.” He kissed me lightly.

“I didn’t think I could do it,” I admitted.

“You didn’t think you could do what?”

“Fall in love. Deeply, truly in love. I thought maybe I was broken.”

“You are not broken. Maybe a little damaged, but nothing that cannot be fixed. With me at your side, you will heal. In fact, I think you have already begun.”

“When I’m with you, I feel strong and confident and beautiful.”

“I love hearing that.”

“It’s ironic because somewhere deep down, I think that scared me at first. I didn’t want to need anyone, especially not a man, but it’s different with you. I don’t feel smothered or manipulated. I just feel safe and happy and loved.”

He kissed me again, his lips soft against mine.

“We have so many things to talk about,” I said after a few minutes.

“When you’re ready.”

“I’m ready for some of it. Like, where I’m going to live while I study for my GED.”

“You don’t want to live with me?” he asked slowly.

“I do, but I didn’t want to assume it was okay with you.”

“It’s very okay. I love waking up and finding you sleeping beside me.”

“I love working for Harper, but the time isn’t right. I need to figure out school first. I need to get my degree before I focus on a career.”

“This is a good plan.”

“I’ll get something because I have to be able to contribute, even if it’s not a fifty-fifty split. That part is important to me.”

“I can afford to support us,” he said. “But I understand you need some independence. What if I pay for college and you buy groceries?”

I frowned. “That doesn’t sound very fair to you. I mean, college is expensive.”

“You forget how much I eat.”

“Oh. Well, there’s that.”

“Do we have to decide money things tonight?”

“No.”

He finally pulled out and rolled to his side, taking me with him. “I have to get up early. We leave for Pittsburgh right after breakfast. Will you be okay getting home?”

“Yes. I’m going back to L.A. with Harper for a few days, but I’ll meet you at home on Monday.”

“You’ll come to Florida so soon?”

“Unless there’s some kind of emergency, yes. I have to buy a car and start studying for my GED. I’d like to take the tests this summer so I can get it over with.”

“Whatever you need, you have my support. Always.”

“I really do love you, Johan. So much.” I squeezed him tight, basking in the love and warmth that emanated from him.

“This is good. If you do not, I will have to marry someone my grandmother chooses, and this would be sad.”

I giggled against his chest. “No arranged marriages, mister. You’re off the market.”

“Off the market?” He sounded confused.

“It means you’re not available. You’re no longer single.”

“Off the market.” He repeated it softly. “Yes. I am definitely off the market.”

EPILOGUE

Johan

Six months later

MOVING into a new house in late August in South Florida hadn't been my brightest idea.

There simply hadn't been any other time. Between spending a month in Slovakia, then alternating between Las Vegas and L.A. for different wedding and work-related events, this was the first chance we'd had to close on the house we'd found online. We'd bought it without even visiting in person, though Scarlett and Wolf had toured it and sent us videos.

I wasn't sure why, but buying a house, a place to call our own, had felt important. So we'd done it, and now I was second-guessing many of my life choices. My father, Zelda, grandmother, and Hana were all here in town, ostensibly to help us move in and get settled, but it was more about checking out the new house and spending time with Sloane. I was happy they didn't just like her but had welcomed her into the family with open arms. The issue was that they

monopolized all of her time when they were around, so I'd barely seen her beyond when we went to bed at night.

Decker and Eden had just returned from their honeymoon and came over every chance they got.

As did Wolf and Scarlett.

The six of us, and occasionally Slava and Zoe, had begun to spend a lot of time together and I was grateful Decker and I had worked through our differences. Everything was falling into place, both personally and professionally, and it made me incredibly happy to watch Sloane integrate herself into every part of my life. I just wished I had a little more one-on-one time with her. Hockey season was starting in a few weeks, and we'd be back to traveling and being apart more often than I would have liked.

Sloane and Harper had decided she could commute for now, working remotely, but traveling to L.A. when I was on the road with the team. It wasn't a perfect solution, but Harper was amenable to it, and they would reassess if it didn't work. Of course, my gut told me that would happen sooner rather than later.

I believed there were going to be big changes in our lives soon.

And the ring I had hidden in my underwear drawer was only part of it.

"Where is she?" Hana demanded at three o'clock that afternoon.

Sloane had taken time out of unpacking to go take the test for her GED. She'd been gone all afternoon, and we were anxious to find out the results.

"You should call her," my grandmother said firmly. "Maybe there was an accident."

I shook my head. "I'm sure she's fine. The test is given in parts, and she has to take them all. She'll be here when she's done."

I'd no sooner said the words than I heard the garage door opening.

"She's here," Hana yelled, hurrying into the kitchen.

"She passed," Naomi said firmly. "I know it."

Everyone moved toward the kitchen, and I mentally groaned.

If things hadn't gone well, Sloane would be overwhelmed and embarrassed, and while I knew our friends and family meant well, I felt the need to protect her.

Especially now that things were going so well.

"Give her a minute to breathe," I grumbled, pushing past them and opening the door to the garage before anyone else had a chance.

"Hi." Sloane was just getting out of the new SUV we'd recently bought. I'd given her the down payment, but she would be making the monthly payments for the balance on her own.

There was a faint smile on her face when our eyes met, as if she were happy but exhausted, and I moved quickly, wrapping her in my arms.

“How did it go?” I whispered.

“I passed,” she whispered back, resting against me.

“I am very proud of you.” I barely had time to press my lips to hers before Naomi came bounding into the garage.

“Well?” she demanded.

“I did it!” Sloane turned just as Naomi lifted her hand for them to high five.

We were surrounded by everyone the moment we walked back inside with all of them congratulating Sloane and making a big fuss over her. It was nice so many of the people we cared about could be here for this, and I’d made dinner reservations for tonight because I’d known she would pass, but I hadn’t told anyone just in case.

“We will celebrate with dinner tonight,” I said when everyone settled down. “I reserved a table at Benito’s.” Benito’s was a trendy new steakhouse everyone was talking about, and reservations were almost impossible to get.

Unless you were a professional hockey player whose girlfriend had something big to celebrate.

“I definitely need a shower before we go anywhere,” Sloane said, covering a yawn.

“You need a nap,” I told her softly. “You’ve been working very hard. Your job, studying, and moving into the house. It’s

been a lot.”

“I feel like I could nap,” she admitted. “Maybe just thirty minutes.”

“Go.” Grandmama shooed us toward the stairs. “I will finish the kitchen.” We’d been putting away dishes and glasses just before Sloane had gotten home.

“We’re going to go home and get cleaned up,” Decker said, pulling out his keys.

“Us too.” Wolf called out.

“Text us where and when for dinner,” Eden said.

Everyone dispersed rather quickly, and I laced my fingers through Sloane’s as we went up to the primary bedroom.

This room had been one of the reasons we’d bought the house. It was big, with large windows and lots of light. There was a small sitting area off to the side with a recessed electric fireplace built into the wall that made the room cozy and romantic. And the bathroom was a dream. The shower spanned one wall, close to eight feet long, with a dozen different shower heads and faucets that made it more like a spa than a shower. Not to mention the massive, custom-made bathtub we could both fit in, double vanities, and floor-to-ceiling cabinets.

The entire house was a decorator’s dream, and Sloane and I had a lot of plans for it.

But today, there was something much more important on my mind.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” she said as I ran a bath for her. “I’m so tired.”

“You have been... burning the candle all the time.”

She smiled. “Burning the candle at both ends.”

“Yes. This.” I opened a bag I’d hidden beneath some towels while she’d been out. “But that is not why you are tired.”

“What do you mean?” She frowned at me.

I handed her the bag. “This is why you are tired.”

She opened the bag and pulled out the box.

It took a few seconds for what it was to register before her eyes snapped to mine.

“Johan, what—”

“Go.” I gently pushed her toward the toilet. “Then join me in the tub.”

“But—”

“Do this for me. Please.” I brushed my fingers across her cheek in the most loving way I knew how.



Sloane

CLUTCHING the box in my hand, I hurriedly undressed and then did my business on the toilet.

I didn't know what Johan had been thinking, buying a pregnancy test.

There was no way I was pregnant.

Was there?

We hadn't used protection since that first time we'd gone without all those months ago.

I'd been busy and hadn't really thought about seeing a fertility specialist since we'd decided to just wait and see what happened for a while.

It never occurred to me that the fatigue I'd been feeling lately was related to anything other than how busy I was. International travel, studying for the GED, the chaos of Decker and Eden's double wedding with their friends Daisy and Van, my job, and of course, buying this amazing house sight unseen.

Could I be pregnant?

I'd stopped hoping for that a long time ago.

But Johan had obviously seen something I hadn't, and my hands shook a little as I put the cap back on the test and wrapped it in some toilet paper before going out to join him in the tub. The jacuzzi jets were going and the aroma of essential oils hit my nostrils as I approached.

"All done," I whispered quietly.

He held out his hand to me, and I slowly stepped into the tub, settling in front of him between his legs.

“What makes you think I’m pregnant?” I asked, leaning back against his warm, solid chest.

He slid his hands up my torso and gently cupped my breasts. “These are bigger,” he said softly.

“They are?” I looked down, studying them as if I’d never seen them before.

“And you are so tired.” He pressed a light kiss on the side of my face, using his thumbs to make gentle circles around my nipples, which instantly began to arouse me.

“But we’ve been on the go non-stop since May,” I protested. “It makes sense that I’m exhausted. Especially with all the late-night studying.”

“You are eating much more.” His voice was gentle as he dropped one hand down to my belly.

I’d put on five or six pounds, but I’d thought it was because of all the traveling we’d done, and how little exercise I’d been getting.

Now I was mortified he’d noticed.

“You are not fat,” he whispered before I could say anything. “I know what you are thinking. But you are not fat. You are going to have my baby. I think maybe five or six months from now.”

“Johan, I don’t think so,” I said, suddenly overwhelmed with emotion. “You know I’ve never been able to get pregnant before, and I don’t want you to get your hopes up and then...” My voice broke.

“Shhh.” He wrapped one arm tightly around my waist as he reached for the test I’d set on the edge of the tub.

“Wait.” I gripped his wrist, tears sliding down my face as I twisted to be able to look at him. I wasn’t ready for bad news. “I don’t think I can stand it if I’m not.”

“My love.” He smiled, those gorgeous blue eyes finding mine. “You *are*. Trust me on this. I’ve known for weeks. I was waiting only for you to figure it out. When did you last have a period?”

A weird feeling of shame and embarrassment washed over me.

How had I not noticed?

I genuinely couldn’t remember the last time I’d had a period.

My periods had always been a bit inconsistent, but I’d never gone... three months without one?

Holy shit.

Before I could protest, he unwrapped the toilet paper and held the test out in front of us.

There were two very pink lines.

“*Johan.*”

He put the test down as I burst into tears.

“Shhh.” He held me tightly, stroking my hair as he whispered Slovak endearments in my ear, which he knew I loved.

“How did this happen?” I whispered in between sniffles.

He chuckled. “If you do not know, maybe we must practice more.”

“I think we’ve practiced more than enough.” I lifted my head and stared at him, blinking rapidly in an attempt to stop more tears from falling. “We’re going to have a *baby*.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “Are you happy?”

“Are you?”

“So happy.”

“Me too.” I threw myself against his chest, despite the awkward positioning in the tub, and held on for dear life.

I was pregnant.

We were going to have a baby.

I’d been imagining this moment for years and had all but given up.

We’d talked about adoption, fertility treatments, all the possibilities, but had decided to give it a year or so while we settled into our new lives and talked about getting married at some point. If I was honest, Johan made me so happy I’d convinced myself I didn’t need babies when I had him. Because he was truly my everything.

When I was with him, it felt like I already had it all.

And now my sweet, sexy, Slovak hunk had gone above and beyond.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you more.” He splayed his hand across the tiny swell of my belly.

“We can’t tell anyone until I’ve seen a doctor.”

“Of course.”

“I can’t believe you figured it out before I did.”

“My number one priority is to make sure you are happy and loved and safe. What kind of man would I be if I did not notice so many changes? I promised to always take care of you—and that is what I plan to do.”

I fingered the locket at my neck.

I hadn’t yet put a picture on the other side, but now I knew what would go there.

Our first child’s baby picture.

Right next to his.

Where both of them would nestle close to my heart.

Thank you for reading Sloane and Johan’s story. If you could leave a review at the retailer of your choice, that would mean so much to me.

The next book in the series is *HOLIDAY SHOT*, a sexy, feel-good holiday novella featuring a sexy older man and a hockey-playing younger woman. Get ready to fall in love with Henrik and Autumn.

Turn the page for more info!

HOLIDAY SHOT (A LAUDERDALE KNIGHTS HOLIDAY NOVELLA)

Divorced at forty was never in my game plan. Neither was being a long-distance dad. But when the chance to coach the Lauderdale Knights hockey team came knocking, I couldn't resist.

I was so focused on the major changes right in front of me, I never saw Autumn Nicholls coming. Blindsided by a whirlwind romance with a woman much younger than me, I'm torn between making her mine and letting her go.

She's young, beautiful, and just starting out in life, she doesn't need me or my baggage. But that doesn't stop her from taking her shot.

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View Kat's entire collection of books at www.KatMizera.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

USA Today Bestselling author Kat Mizera was born in Miami Beach with a healthy dose of wanderlust. She's lived from coast to coast, and everywhere in between, but home is wherever her family is.

A devoted mom and wife to her wonderful and supportive husband (Kevin) and two amazing boys (Nick and Max), Kat loves to travel the globe with her adventurous, hockey loving family. Greece is at the top of that list. She hopes to one day retire there, spending her days writing books on the beach.

Kat is former freelance sports writer who now writes steamy hockey romance about her favorite fictional teams, the Las Vegas Sidewinders and the Alaska Blizzard. The library of novels she's penned also include sexy contemporary stories about baseball stars, alpha sex club owners, special forces heroes, rock stars and royalty. Regardless of genre, her books about bad boys with hearts of gold will steal your breath, rock your world and melt your heart.

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