



Claimed by

MR ICE

FLORA FERRARI

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CLAIMED BY MR. ICE

**AN AGE GAP, CURVY GIRL, SURPRISE PREGNANCY
ROMANCE**

A MAN WHO KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS, 331

FLORA FERRARI

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The following story contains mature themes, strong language and sexual situations. It is intended for mature readers.

CLAIMED BY MR. ICE

He's a hockey star so hot it's a shock he doesn't melt the ice, and my dad's best friend, and... I'm pregnant with his baby.

I've always wanted a family, but I never expected it to happen like this!

It's supposed to be a fun trip. Dad has been reconnecting with his childhood friend, Logan Ice. The man is tall, so steamy, and muscular. It's a wonder he can move so well on his skates.

I'm nineteen, a virgin, and on the curvy side. Not that *I'm* ashamed of that, but I never thought he'd want me.

It's pure steam, pure heat, but then Logan leaves. He ghosts me. He ghosts Dad.

But when I call to tell him I'm pregnant, everything changes. "I'm catching the next flight tonight. I'm not abandoning you. I'm not abandoning that baby."

What happens when Dad finds out? Why does Logan get a dark, mysterious look in his intense blue eyes when we talk about parenthood? Is he here just for the baby, or is there more?

** Claimed by Mr. Ice is an insta-everything standalone romance with a HEA, no cheating, and no cliffhanger.*

NEWSLETTER

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CHAPTER ONE

Emma

Montreal is so beautiful in the fall, the leaves turning such vibrant shades of red, yellow, and orange. I look out of the cab, not even a little peeved at the driver talking on his cell phone. It's pleasant to listen to the French in the unique Quebec accent. Dad sits across from me, looking out the window. His features are a little tight as he looks out upon the leaves.

I wonder if he's thinking of his sister, who died in the fall. This was before I was born, but it left a significant imprint on Dad. He's a shortish man with the kindest face, his brown hair fading like the leaves. He wears a puffy jacket that is two sizes too big for him and almost has me laughing every time I see him stuffed into it. That's what happens when you live in California.

He spots me watching and smiles. That's always his first reflex. "Are you excited about the game?"

"Are *you* excited to see your friend play?"

I'm not into hockey, really. I'm not big on any sports, though lately, I've thought I might try a little skating. Dad's been talking about his youth with Logan Ice, a man whose surname almost made him destined to become a hockey player. Then, Dad moved to the US, which was easier since my grandmother, his mother, was from California. Dad and Logan drifted apart, but they've been talking on video chat lately.

Dad chuckles. “You didn’t hear a single technical detail I so expertly described then, did you, Miss Head in the Clouds?”

“As nicknames go, Dad, that’s fairly cumbersome.”

“Cumbersome. I feel blessed to have a daughter who’s so clever that she uses big words like that.”

He’s teasing me, but lovingly, with a light in his eyes. It brings me back to my childhood when he used to do the same. We’d tease each other just for the heck of it, to make each other laugh, never overstepping the mark because I knew—*know*—he always wants the best for me, and me for him.

“We’ll be seeing Logan soon,” Dad says. “He can tell you all about it. I think you’ll like him.”

I look out the window again. I’ve already *seen* the unlikely named Logan Ice. Glimpses on the laptop when they’re video chatting with each other. One time, in particular, Logan was standing shirtless in the sun on a balcony with a lake in the background. It was casual. He wasn’t putting on a show.

But for me, it seemed like a show. As the sun rippled down his chest and over his abs, I stood just behind the couch and stared. It seemed like time lasted forever as I took in his spiky black-silver hair, as though he’d recently showered. Each muscle was massive, defined, and tempting to my hand. The glint in his eyes got me the most—the brightest, most captivating blue. I wanted—maybe I still want—to grab onto his enormous arms and stare into those dreamy eyes.

“Is that okay?” Dad asks, his voice low.

I laugh awkwardly, still looking out the window at the leaves. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

“Maybe you wanted to have a rest after the flight.”

“I’m fine. It was only five hours. I slept for most of it, anyway. I’d like a shower, though.”

He nods, drumming his fingers against his knee, looking out the window. He even starts humming a moment later. I try to keep his smile at the forefront of my mind. How hopeful he seems, like a little kid getting ready to see his buddy. Dad

works hard, owning a large contracting company. He and Mom have worked hard to raise me and my brother Eric. He deserves to enjoy this.

That means I have to swallow whatever this feeling is. If I was writing one of my stories, I might think of it like a tiny flickering candle flame growing larger the closer we get to seeing Logan. Soon, the hissing heat will expand in my belly, flow like energy through my whole body until there's nothing else I can even think about. Not even Dad. Not even the right thing to do.

Anyway, it's not like anything's going to happen. I'm nineteen. I'm a virgin. So what? I'm not ashamed of it because it's not like I've been trying. Deep down, I think, even if I *did* try, I'd have some problems. But I never did, content in the library, not caring I was a cliché, the curvy, quiet girl. I was—I *am*—happy in my role... until Logan came along.

My mind should be a stage for the characters in my stories. Never mind that those characters are always written for children, and when I read the story aloud, I always think of *my* children. Before Logan, I never knew who the father would be.

And I don't know now. I can't afford to know, deep down, as though my bones are pulsating to give me a signal. I can't afford to sermonize melodramatically about the almighty steamy-as-hell Logan Ice. He's so hot that it's a shock he doesn't melt his own last name.

I'm burning for him. That's the truth. Sweating, literal beads flowing down my body, but I don't let my mind go there. "Will Logan's girlfriend be there?"

Dad tilts his head at me. "I don't think he has one right now. Why?"

"Oh... just..." Why *did* I ask that? "I don't want to be underdressed in front of another woman."

Hmm, what was that? It seemed like a lie. A white lie, maybe, or a justifiable one, but I don't usually lie to my dad.

"You're beautiful, Em," Dad says, reaching over and touching my hand. "You don't need to worry about things like that." I

swallow, create a box inside me, and lock away all the Logan stuff. “We’re meeting Logan in our suite. I think he’s coming alone. Well, with some security, I’d imagine.”

“The *suite*?” I say. “I thought we were getting connecting rooms.”

“They are connected via a corridor, a living room, and a small kitchen. It’s been a good few years, Em. I’ve managed to pivot at just the right moments. It’s been like dancing on lily pads, but you’re in college, and maybe Eric will get there, too. Or do anything else he likes.”

“You deserve this, Dad,” I tell him, seeing how excited he is. “You work so hard. The suite sounds amazing.”

Dad squeezed my hand. “Come on, Francesca Fitzgerald, you can do better than that.”

I roll my eyes. Dad used to call me that because, for a while, my favorite writer was F. Scott Fitzgerald of *The Great Gatsby* fame, though I enjoyed some of his other works more. “Fine, Dad, since this is your dream trip, the hotel suite sounds amazing.”

Dad chuckles at my deadpan delivery. “You’re not a performing monkey. Okay, I get it.”

But he’s wrong. The moment Logan Ice walks into our hotel suite, I’ll have to perform for Dad and myself. I need to trick myself into believing I didn’t pleasure myself thinking of Logan last night, my dad’s oldest friend and maybe his new *best* friend.

I didn’t twist around in bed, rolling over, trying to sleep, until the need became too strong. I didn’t groan in frustration, then moan in satisfaction, as I slipped my hand between my legs and started rubbing with steamy visions of Logan.

He was on top, leaning back so I could see his broad chest, shoulders, and hair wet like it was on video chat. He was thrusting, and I was rocking with him, my hands buried in his shoulders, feeling his hardness, his power. I was so wet I almost started moaning in my bedroom. I had to bite the pillow.

“This is a surprise,” Dad says when the cab comes to a stop.

I jolt back to reality, reminding myself to *stop thinking about Logan Ice!* How many times am I going to tell myself that?

I look out the front of the cab and see what Dad’s indicating. A large, dark jeep is parked in the valet slot. Logan Ice is stepping out, wearing a stylish winter coat, zipped up to his chin where the light coating of silver facial hair begins. He’s signing an autograph.

“Should I get out and say hello?” Dad says, suddenly a nervous kid.

“Sure. I’ll settle the cab fare. Go on, Dad, you’ve earned this.”

More people are moving toward Logan, some with their phones aimed at him. Then, one lady does something that almost makes me snap, jump from the car, and slap the pen out of her hand. She’s unzipping her winter coat, presenting her chest to him, waving a pen, and telling him to sign.

CHAPTER TWO

Logan

I look at the woman with distaste. She reminds me of the women my teammates sometimes sleep with. Bright-eyed, overly enthusiastic, and willing to give herself to me right here if I asked. “I don’t sign people’s breasts,” I tell her in French.

She tuts, shaking her head. “Are you trying to humiliate me?”

I swallow. Cameras are aimed at me. It’s always the case, especially when there’s a big game on. I always have to think about the fact I’m being watched. I’m sure there’s some irony there, but my mind is always on the ice. On the stick. The puck. The mechanics. And then what? What after? Am I going to have a family?

“I’m sorry, everybody,” I tell the assembled gawkers.

As I leave the crowd, I sign the autographs for those who waited patiently and then take a couple of photos.

I’m about to enter the hotel when I spot Michael. That brings a smile to my face. Some would call it a rare occurrence, but there’s an issue where my old best friend is concerned. It involves his daughter, and I’d rather not think about it. I’m going to have to see her soon. That’s going to be hard enough.

I wave at Michael, gesturing into the hotel. He follows me. Behind us, I know my security team is climbing from the car, blocking the door. The hotel won’t admit anybody who isn’t staying here, but it still makes me feel low. I didn’t take photos

with everybody who deserved it, but staying out there longer would mean giving myself up to others.

Michael seems nervous, wringing his hands. I pat him on the arm. "It's good to see you."

"And you, Logan," Michael says, glancing outside at my four security guards talking with the woman who wanted me to sign her tits. Jesus. It's forty-six degrees out there. "You said your daughter was coming, too? My security team can escort her in if you like."

Michael nods. "Yeah, sure. Thanks. She's getting out of that cab." He gestures.

I don't look, not out the window, not at Emma. I know that she's studying creative writing at college. I know that she's nineteen. I've seen her in the background of the video calls, those wide hips. Once, she was in a tank top with no bra, and I could see those juicy nipples.

Taking out my phone, I shoot a quick text to my security. Two of my men turn from the crowd and walk toward the cab. Still, I don't look. I can't look.

"I know I'm early," I tell Michael. "I wish I could say I could wait for you, but we've got some pregame stuff to sort later. I feel like I'm big timing you."

"Coming from anybody else, that would seem like a subtle putdown, but look at you, Logan. You're still that kid. Remember the time we played for six hours straight? They had to carry us inside."

The memory comes to me with stunning clarity. Michael doesn't know it, but his friendship meant so much to me as a child. For years, he was the one bright spot. I was so scared of going home. I don't say that out loud, but it's the truth. "I haven't thought about that for years. Now that you mention it, it's like it was yesterday."

"It's crazy out there!"

The female voice almost breaks me. I've heard it raised in the background of video chats. "*Dad, where's my bag?*" That's something I have to remember keenly. She's literally half my

age. I'm thirty-six. I've got gray in my hair now. She's still living at home, asking her dad where her book bag is.

"Emma, this is Logan. Logan... Emma."

I'm forced to look up. Or stare at the floor like a rude prick. She tied her hair up as if to draw attention to the flush in her cheeks, but I don't think it's intentional. Her lips are beautiful when they curve into a shy smile. I can't let myself look below the neck at her breasts, subtly shaping the fabric of her coat, or at her wide hips and thick thighs.

"It's nice to meet you," I say, offering my hand, then regretting it. I could've simply nodded and said hello. There's no reason for us to touch.

She hasn't looked me in the eye yet. As she raises her hand, she looks off to the side. I touch her, feel her warmth, and imagine it on my body. I imagine her hand wrapping around my manhood, rubbing, slowly at first, faster, maybe at the same pace I'm touching her between her legs.

"It's nice to meet you too," she says, quickly letting my hand go.

She almost snatches her hand back. Did she sense what I was thinking? Hockey has taught me to bury my feelings. The results matter. Set an objective and attack, even if it means you must attack parts of yourself. Switch off doubt. Switch off fear. Now, my goal is not to obsess over this woman. Like yesterday, when I was daydreaming about *Emma* being the woman I'd settle down with after retirement. Not just because I chose her but because I *need* her.

"Why don't I check in, and then we'll head to the room?" Michael says.

"Sure," Emma and I say simultaneously, with the same quickness.

She seems nervous, too. Not like her dad is. He's a little unsure about the dynamics. Maybe he thinks I'm going to play the alpha celebrity. Emma is different. I don't think that gorgeous red flush in her cheeks is just from the cold. Am *I* making her nervous somehow?

Michael walks over to the desk. “Dad, wait,” Emma says. “I forgot the bags.”

I nod over to the entrance. “My team has taken care of that.”

“Oh.” She laughs shakily. “That’s good.”

Michael walks to the desk, and Emma and I drift to the seating area so we’re not in anybody’s way. I’m aware that people are probably recording us, aiming their phones through the large windows of the hotel lobby. For once, it’s a good thing. It will force me to behave.

She sits opposite me, folding her legs. My gaze snaps to the movement. I can so easily imagine—no, I can *feel*—my hand squeezing between her thighs, her warmth, as I slide higher and higher between her legs. “Are you enjoying the start of the season?” Emma asks, looking at the ornate coffee table almost stubbornly.

“No broken bones yet. That’s always a plus.”

“Does that happen?”

I smirk. “You must not watch a lot of hockey.”

“Obviously, it happens,” she says, flustered. “Meat vehicles moving at speed on the ice. Of course, people get hurt.”

“No need to beat yourself up about it, but I like that. *Meat vehicles.*”

She finally looks at me. A few strands of her hair have come loose. I think what a fine thing it would be to be the man to smooth them into place and kiss her forehead. Hold her on a cold winter’s day, warm her up, then take her to bed, and... *Ah*, there it is. I can’t help myself with her. “I’m sorry.”

“Why are you apologizing?”

She laughs and shakes her head. “I don’t know. What position do you play?”

“I’m a defenseman. It’s my job to stop the puck from going into the goal, but I score sometimes, too. Depends on the circumstances.”

She nods and bites her lip.

“Don’t worry,” I smirk again. “It’s okay if you’re not even the tiniest bit interested in hockey. Around here, it’s refreshing.”

She laughs again, but not awkwardly this time. It’s a laugh I’d like to hear as often as possible. “I’m interested. I just don’t know anything about it. I even bought some inline skates. I figured that would be better in California. Lots of concrete, not much ice.”

“The skills are transferrable,” I tell her. *I could give you a few pointers.*

Those words are almost out of my mouth, but then Michael returns, holding a room key. My security is behind him, with two hotel staff members carrying the bags. As weird as it might seem to somebody else, that conversation with Emma is the closest I’ve felt to a woman in years.

The truth is, I keep myself at a distance on purpose, but now I’m realizing something. I’ve never had to try before. The fight has been easy. Before I saw Emma in the background of a video chat, I thought I was damn near a robot. I thought maybe something was wrong with me, a technical mind that worked well in hockey, turning my body into a machine, but never made for romance. But as Emma and I stand, I know the truth. I’m all fire, melting the ice I’ve built around myself. I’ve spent my entire career defending, but I can’t defend against this.

This is low, man. This is really weak of me. I pretend my phone has just vibrated, take it out, and pretend to take a call. “I’m sorry, Michael,” I say, hanging up. “Some last-minute game stuff. I’m sorry.”

I never apologize this desperately, but he deserves it. I’ve never left a hotel so fast, but it’s my only choice. Either leave or go upstairs, be alone with her, kiss her lips, and taste her fertile young body.

CHAPTER THREE

E mma

Dad and I sit at the bar in our private VIP booth. The bar overlooks the ice. I can tell Dad's been fretting all day about how Logan suddenly took off, like some wild cat, surging across the savannah. I probably made a dork of myself when we spoke, but nerves were strangling me, making just talking seem challenging.

It was worse because I felt so cruddy, too, appearance-wise. Maybe I'm the she-frog who kisses the prince and becomes a princess or something, but that's not how my stories go. In my stories, a lot of the characters are like me. Freaking out because I probably stink, and my crush is sitting opposite me, smirking, sometimes seeming interested, other times ice-cold.

The arena is slowly filling up. Dad seemed to be in a mood after Logan left, a dark cloud hanging over his optimism, but then he and Logan spoke on the phone. I can tell this is a difficult situation for Dad, not wanting to seem like he's some hanger-on from the past. All the attention and the glamor are the exact opposite of his regular boots-and-mud life. He wears a shirt to work reluctantly, after all.

"As a player," Dad says, his eyes a little out of focus from the champagne, "Logan is elite. Men his size don't normally move as fast as he does."

If I didn't have one, I might jokingly comment, *Dad, it sounds like you've got a crush*. It would be lame and juvenile,

anyway, but I couldn't ever say anything like that.

I was so relieved when Logan blanked that woman who wanted him to sign his chest. As I entered the hotel, I walked past her, and she still had her coat halfway down, as if she thought he was going to rush back to her, demanding to sign. This jealousy isn't normal. It's a writhing army of snakes that won't stop hissing.

"He's extremely agile on his skates. I was quick in my day, too, but it didn't make sense with him. He'd practice from sunup to sundown. He'd use his inline hockey skates if the ice thawed. He'd practice shooting and defending against his own shadow. Even as a kid, he was possessed."

If this were a different world, if Dad weren't *my* dad, I'd think about this trait of Logan's transferring to our future children—this same drive. They would do so well in the world having Logan as a father—not the money, but *him*, those glinting eyes beaming with support.

"I guess that's why he made it to the big time," I say, which is pretty much a non-comment. I'm finding it difficult to speak to Dad while sitting on this Logan-shaped landmine.

By the way, Dad, I think I'm in love with your best friend. Obviously, I'm not *in love*. That's so over the top. I'm just a little love drunk, a crush. It's my first crush. Okay, so I'm a late bloomer. I can deal with that. That isn't so bad. That's just what I'll have to keep telling myself.

Dad leans forward, taking another eager sip of champagne, eyes fixed on the ice. "It's going to be one hell of a game. A season opener, fine, but look at this *arena*. You know why they come here, Em? It's to see him."

"He's clearly *your* favorite player."

I mean for this to come out in a joking tone, playful and mischievous, but it comes out so bitter. I sound exactly like what I am—jealous and angry and pathetically desperate to stop hearing Logan's name. At least then, I might have a chance to fight this feeling.

Dad sighs. "I know. I'm going on."

“You’re not, Dad. I promise. I meant it as a joke.”

“It’s just...” Dad gets a faraway look in his eyes. “When we were kids, I left when I was sixteen, and he was eleven. He was big for his age. Nobody ever believed he was eleven, but he was. Five years... That’s a big difference when you’re that age.”

I say nothing, cautious of breaking whatever spell has come over Dad. He talks in a careful tone, as though he’s avoiding a few landmines of his own.

“He never spoke about what was going on at home. Our town, Em, was small. People didn’t talk about what happened behind closed doors. Sometimes, I don’t know. Sometimes, he’d get this look in his eyes.”

Dad’s getting choked up. I reach over and place my hand on his arm, offering whatever comfort I can, so moved it almost hurts. Dad’s usually the strong, silent type, and just for this, I’m glad I came on this trip despite everything else. So he can show this side of himself.

“It was like he was terrified and ready to fight all at once. He’d get a wild look like he hated the world and hated himself. It’s the look he gets sometimes when he plays. That’s why he got the nickname ‘The Ice Demon’ a few years ago. I saw it when we were kids. I regret not doing anything.”

“But Dad, you didn’t *know* anything,” I say.

Dad turns to me, eyes bleak. “Something was happening. It was just him and his mom in that house next to the lake.” Dad suddenly stops, looking at his glass of champagne. “I shouldn’t be talking about this.”

“It’s okay, Dad.”

“That’s why I’m so happy to see him doing well. I just wish he’d settle down. Find a woman. Start a family.”

I swallow. It’s like—and this is next-level, skipped several grades, early graduation level of crazy—my womb is pulsing inside me. I know that’s nonsense, but something is aching and calling out for this man like a howl across a tundra. “Maybe he doesn’t want that.”

“He used to talk about it.”

“When he was *eleven*?”

Dad chuckles, winking, looking like he’s fighting his dark mood. “*You* had an entire set of dolls when you were hardly a baby yourself. Used to feed them and everything.”

“Yeah, well, I can’t wait to be a mom one day. Sue me.”

“Logan was the same, but...” Dad waves a hand. “Let’s stop gossiping.”

“Okay, macho man, but just so you know, sharing your feelings isn’t gossiping.”

Dad takes my hand and squeezes it. “Love you, kiddo.”

“I love you too, Dad.”

“It’s going to be one hell of a game.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Logan

I pound the locker with my stick. It's already dented from where another player must've beaten it before. I hit it again, almost cave in the metal, then drop onto the bench and stick my skates out. My teeth are clenched, and I'm breathing hard.

"Logan, relax, my man." Chuck sits opposite me, his mop of red hair slick with sweat when he pulls his helmet off. "Long season ahead of us. No need to freak."

"I know I'm throwing a tantrum," I growl, slowing my breathing. I rest my helmet against the locker I just caved in. "But I made nine rudimentary errors back there, Chuck. Fucking *nine*. Five of them were basic skating errors. *Skating*. I can't remember a time when I couldn't skate."

Before I even found hockey, I found some old ice skates several sizes too big. I wedged my feet into them with layers and layers of socks and glided across the ice, losing myself in the simplicity of it. The challenge. The logic. The world makes sense on the ice, but not tonight.

"We'll get them next time," Chuck says.

I tune out the locker room and mentally reassess the moments I failed. I go over the patterns and the player's speed, but it's all useless. It's not like it usually is. This time, it had far less to do with the tactics and far *more* with the fact I couldn't stop thinking about Emma.

A few times, I looked up and saw her or thought I did. It's difficult to know during the game, and that's the point. I shouldn't even be thinking about that, about *anything* else during the goddamn game. Just the logic of it. The ice.

"Let's hit the town," Chuck says.

"I've got a friend up from California," I tell him. "Next time."

"Yeah, yeah, *next time*. You don't drink, Ice."

"No, you're always out on the town, Chuck, and me, a teetotaler. Look what it's gotten me—nine goddamn rudimentary errors."

Chuck pats me on the arm. He's a year younger than me. We're known as the *old men* to some since many players would be retired by now, but not us. "We *will* get them next time. You'll see."

All around us, my teammates are undressing. I stand and strip off my gear, thinking of seeing Michael and Emma. I feel ashamed after my performance, after all those basic errors. I let the other team dance around me like I've never set a skate to ice.



I meet them in the booth. The windows are tinted dark now, blocking out the rink and turning it into more of a function room. There's no bartender, only three of us. There's a fridge, though, stocked with all kinds of alcohol. If the way Michael is leaning against the bar is any indication, he's had a few. Not that I'm judging. I'd join him if it weren't for my career, though I wouldn't want to get this drunk.

I can hear Emma rustling in the fridge on the other side of the room. I wonder if she's been drinking, too. She's only nineteen. It's legal here, but not in Cali.

"You okay, Michael?" I ask, sitting beside him.

He turns, cheek resting against his fist, a not-really-there smile spreading across his face. "That was one hell of a game,

Logan.”

We lost, but Michael’s clearly had a good evening. Whatever else, my old friend has enjoyed himself. He was more of an older brother figure for the few years we spent together, though we were the same height. I’m doing everything in my power not to turn and watch as Emma walks over.

“Thank you,” I say, and then I can’t fight it anymore.

She’s a diamond at the periphery of my vision. When I turn, I see it’s because she’s wearing a dress in a glittery material. It hugs her body as though it was shaped for her, but not in an obvious way. I don’t think she did it intentionally, but the effect is the same. Her hair is wavy down past her shoulders, and she’s still got that flush in her cheek. She hasn’t hidden it with makeup.

“Here, Dad.” She places an open bottle of water on the bar.

Michael takes it, sips it, then places it down. “Ah, thank you, Em. I’m not much of a drinker, Logan, but when in Rome...”

I laugh. It’s a genuine laugh, but I still have to force it. Maybe that’s a contradiction. It’s just that everything is more difficult with Emma standing right there. I didn’t look at her long enough to tell if she had any cleavage on display. I can’t do it now. “I get it. Don’t worry about it. Want a ride to the hotel?”

“A *ride*?” Michael stands, gripping the bar with one hand and clapping me on the arm with the other. “I remember when you were a little kid, *mon frère*. Please come up to the suite. Spend awhile. We’ll talk about old times. Maybe I can even tempt you to have a drink.”

How could I say no to this? I was the one to reach out to Michael, finding his email online through his contracting business. I thought he might see me as desperate. Maybe, on some level, I was—desperate for a real friend. It’s my fault. I lock people out like Chuck. I haven’t gone for a drink with him in years, using the booze as an excuse, but really, it’s just me.

Dammit. The loss, Michael... It’s got me thinking of old times. Or maybe it’s Emma breaking me open.

“I don’t want to impose,” I say.

Michael looks at Emma. I turn, too, even if I know I shouldn’t. Her dress is high cut, not showing cleavage, just the shape of her breasts. She looks me in the eye bravely this time, far more confident than she was earlier today. “I don’t mind.”

I swallow, knowing I should somehow stop this. This is my chance to make another excuse. Fake another phone call, but I don’t. Instead, we all walk toward the exit together.

“He... was... *obsessed*.” Michael waves his hand. “Hours and hours, until the blades fell off his skates, and then he’d glue them back on and *keep going*.”

The hotel suite has a small balcony area with a fire. It flickers in the grate, the warm light dancing on Michael’s liquor bottle, my glass of juice, and Emma’s flushed cheeks. She’s tied her hair up, closing her eyes to let the warmth bathe her, but it’s like she’s tempting me. I’m hungry for her. It’s so bad, but I can hardly focus on what Michael’s saying.

“He sounds it,” Emma says, looking at her dad. “Sorry, *you* sound like you were obsessed.”

I nod. “It’s where I learned how to approach problems. Every stride on my skates was a lesson. There was feedback in every twitch of my muscle. It was a clean and simple world.”

Emma watches me. Every so often, her eyes flit, but mostly, they’re on mine, those bright, interested eyes. She’s so much younger than me, but it’s not like I’ve got huge amounts of experience. By choice. Am I already making excuses?

“If you wanted simple and clean, why not take up math or something?”

I smirk. “I needed to exercise my body, too. I needed to be as tired as any person could. That’s why I always pushed myself, every day, *past* failure. Sometimes, I’d have to claw my way across the ice. I could’ve died a few times, falling asleep in the snow.”

My voice has become dark. I've gone into too much detail about the past. It's Emma's acceptance, Michael's presence.

"It's funny, this stuff," I say. "I've gone years without thinking about it. Even on the video chats, Michael."

"Different in person, isn't it?" Michael says.

"Don't go falling asleep in the snow again, 'kay?" Emma says.

Michael laughs, and I can't help but join in.

"Let me ask you something, *old friend*," Michael says, standing, weaving from side to side. He raises his hands. He looks like one of those men on a street corner, selling or preaching. "Why, after, let's say... at a reasonable estimate, ten hours of video chats, are you not calling me *Michel*?"

I grin and say in French, "I thought you might have forgotten your French in America."

Michael narrows his eyes at me. "If *Amélie* were still here, she would hate me for being unable to answer that. Whatever you said." He laughs wildly, then sits down. "I'm sorry. I think I'm very drunk." I remember his sister, Amélie, and all the pain there.

"You're on vacation," I say. "Don't sweat it. We can grab some lunch tomorrow."

"Won't you be busy?" Michael asks.

"*Michel*, not too busy for you."

Michael nods and covers his mouth as if to conceal a burp. He waves a shaky hand at Emma. "Don't you dare tell your mother about this."

"Oh, I'll tell her you were *so* drunk, Dad."

He wags his finger at her as he walks around the table, clapping my arm like he used to. I want to grab hold of him and beg him not to leave me alone with his daughter. With the fire making her cheeks glow. She's too beautiful for him to leave us alone together.

"I'm holding you to that offer of lunch, Logan. Text me tomorrow. I might be up earlier."

“See you tomorrow,” I say.

“Do you need any help, Dad?”

“Oh, no. Just some sleep. I’ll dream of hockey.”

I almost wince with each footstep he takes away from us. When he opens the glass door, the *scraping* noise feels like it’s tearing across my mind. When he shuts it, I look up at the dark sky.

“What are you thinking about?” Emma asks after a pause.

I feel rude sitting here, not looking at her. She’s got her chin resting on her hands. The light dances in her eyes. There’s also something unsure about her, maybe the way she opens and closes her mouth. “The game. The mistakes I made.”

“It was a close game, Logan. Only three points.”

“I could’ve prevented several of their points. I was off my game.”

“Was it... seeing Dad, maybe?” she says softly.

I lean forward. My heart is beating far too hard, way harder than during the game. The fact I’m even *noticing* it means it’s pounding with absurd force. My muscles feel tight, too, pumped up like after a strength and conditioning workout.

“Why would you ask that?” I say.

She shrugs, causing her breasts to shift in that sparkling dress. “It’s the only thing that’s different. You’ve played here before.”

“I’ve had bad games here before, too.”

She raises her eyebrows, making her look playful and alert. As far as I know, she’s sober. This is just her natural magnetism.

“Are you always *this* grumpy when you lose?”

“Yeah,” I tell her gruffly, “but the difference is, the mistakes are usually far more complicated—a higher level than the ones I made tonight. These were basic.”

“Like what?” she asks.

I know it's wrong, but I do it anyway. I shuffle around the fire so we're sitting closer together. "It feels weird sitting over there, talking to you through the fire."

She nods. It's still civilized. I don't know if she wants me like I want her. My manhood is getting hard, the base stiffening, the head tickling. There's pressure in my balls. I'm hot as fuck for her. I need to step away and end this now.

"A player was rushing me. He went one way. Normally, I'd read his body language and realize it was a feint, a trick, but I fell for it twice."

"You can't beat yourself up about it," she says, a callback to what I said earlier in the hotel lobby.

"Let's forget about me. What about you? How's college?"

I sit back, purposefully putting some distance between us. This also brings me to my full height, letting me look down at her. She's so pretty from this angle, especially when she looks up, as if she's on her knees with her mouth open, just for me.

"It's going well in terms of my marks. However, my professor doesn't like my idea for my end-of-semester project."

"No? Why?"

She rolls her eyes playfully, and suddenly, I imagine a toddler rolling their eyes in the same way. Before, when I thought about a family, I never had a person to think of. A mother. My woman. With her, it's so easy to imagine making a family. I don't want to rush ahead to the future. I want to savor every moment with Emma, every breath. I also want to be there, in that new, shiny place, with the laughter of our children all around us.

"He thinks children's stories aren't *real* creative writing. I'm changing professors next semester if I can."

"Is that what you want to write?" I ask.

She nods, biting her lip and squeezing the table's edge. Her eyes dart inside as if she's getting tired of talking to her dad's friend. That's probably all this is for her, a conversation with an older man, never one she could imagine *being* with.

“I do write it now, but yeah, that’s what I want to write, too.”

“You seem passionate about it.”

She laughs with a mixture of surprise and delight. Every time she laughs, I think about making her do it again. It feels earned, true. It’s not how some people laugh at what I say just because I’m Logan Ice. “Do I?”

I grin and move closer. “Definitely. It’s the way you light up. So, are we talking picture books, or...”

“No, novels. Well, *short* novels for middle school, some a little younger. Whenever I imagine reading them, it’s always...”

She trails off, but I have to know. Her voice has become far too passionate for me to stop now. “What, Emma?” I say fiercely.

She flinches like my change of tone has shocked her, but I can’t stop myself. “Just... I imagine reading them to my children when I have any. I imagine them, you know, reacting to the story.”

Her voice becomes breathy at the end. Maybe it’s because I’m leaning close to her in the fire’s light. If Michael returns, he’ll see us. He’ll see me leaning closer and closer to his daughter. Hungry for her lips. Her everything. Her entire future. Her life. Her body. Her love. Her loyalty. Her respect.

She. Is. Mine.

My cock is pushing so hard against my pants. My tip is swollen, aching with lust, with *more* than lust.

“Logan,” she whispers, my lips hovering over hers. “What are you doing?”

“Do you want me to stop?” I growl, not sure which one I want more. For her to say yes, protect the friendship, maintain my status as *not* a piece of shit, or *no*, don’t stop. Kiss her and claim her. Never stop making her mine.

She sighs, then shivers when I move my hand to her thigh. I feel her tights, her warm skin beneath them. My cock is fully hard now, flooded with desire.

“Answer me, Emma.”

CHAPTER FIVE

Emma

He presses harder on my leg, sending pleasure shooting up my thigh and tickling my core. Everything is so much more intense in the fire's light, the flames dancing in his intense blues. The tall glass doors behind him show the living room and the corridor. Dad could appear any second. We have to stop.

He's given me an out. I could tell him *yes, stop*, but no, I can't. I don't want to. That's the truth. Every instinct in me is screaming to give myself to him.

"No," I whisper.

The moment I say it, he presses his lips against mine. I gasp, wondering if I fell asleep during one of my Logan fantasies, and soon, I'll wake up with the sheets all tangled around me. The warm roughness of his lips is real. The pressure in his hand as he moves higher and higher, teasing closer to my core, is real.

Our kiss deepens. With him, it feels so effortless. There's none of the anxiety or nerves I'd assume I would have with a man. It's just *instinct*, passion. It's because he's *my* man.

I put my hands on his arms. He's wearing a long-sleeved shirt, the fabric thin, letting me feel his muscles. His body feels as if it's expanding with each breath, his muscles getting harder and bigger. He grunts and pushes his tongue against mine.

I move my tongue, too, chasing the feeling. Then he pushes right up against my sex through my tights and underwear. I might as well be naked. My clit is on fire, not a candle flame, an inferno, as he begins to rub me.

“Oh, oh,” I whimper, then bite down.

“You’re wet for me,” he groans. “You’re soaked for me, Emma.”

I look wide-eyed up at him. The firelight causes the silver flecks in his hair to shimmer. I’ll never forget how he looks right now, scorched into my mind. But what about after? What about *Dad*?

Sitting up, I push my lips against his again so I don’t have to think. He groans in response, moving his fingers faster against my clit. My pussy and my legs feel like they’re melting with pleasure.

It’s so sudden, so unexpected—the heat between us. I moan through the kiss. Then I can’t kiss anymore, thunder clashing in my body. My folds are soaked. My core feels tingly, waiting for his finger, his tongue, his... I swallow. Should he know? Maybe it will make him stop.

“Is something wrong?” he says.

Yes, yes, yes. I take his face in my hands and shake my head, knowing that everything is wrong, but it feels so right. “Keep going, Logan.”

“Oh, hell,” he groans as he slides his hand down my tights, beneath my underwear, finding my entrance and circling it with his finger. “You’re drenched for me. Come for me, Emma. Come and get your perfect hole even wetter for me.”

He pushes the heel of his hand against my clit as he slips inside me. I gasp and throw my arms around him as he gets steadily faster, kissing at the pleasure deep within and my clit at the same time. I try to keep my eyes on the living room, but it gets too intense.

I have to bury my face in his chest to stop myself from screaming. The orgasm is just pure heat, sweat coating every inch of me. It’s so much hotter than thinking of him was. It’s

so much more primal. Wetness leaks out of me. I can feel it, the fluttering, the orgasm, wave after wave. I want to stay in this place forever.

Then Logan is growling, tugging at my dress. “S-stand up,” he says shakily, like he’s barely holding himself back.

“Logan, we...” *Can’t*, I try to make myself say, but then I’m doing as he says, climbing to my feet.

“What?” he asks, taking the hem of my dress.

I shake my head. He really should know that I’m a virgin. I don’t usually do this or know *how* to do it, but that’s crap. I follow my heart and the ache between my legs.

“We have to be quiet,” I whisper.

He nods, his lips shaping into a frown for a moment. However, once he’s pulled my dress over my head, his expression becomes *complete* captivation. I never knew a man could look at a woman like that, and not just any man. Logan Ice stares at me like I’m the answer to every question he’s ever had.

“Fucking. Hell.” He reaches forward and massages my breasts gently. “You’re so curvy. So perfect.”

“You like my body?” I whisper, tugging at his shirt, hoping he gets the hint. Weirdly, it would feel odd to *tell* him to take his top off. I don’t know why.

“I don’t *like* your body,” he groans, fiddling with my bra strap. Nerves try to throttle me when my breasts bounce free. I’m also conscious that we can’t stay out here long, and if I think about it, I might stop. I don’t want to stop. “Your body is goddamn perfect.”

He grunts, leans down, and starts sucking on one of my nipples while rubbing the other. I moan and pull at his shirt. Finally, he gets the hint, standing up and pulling it over his head.

“Where should I go?” I whisper.

That frown again, like he knows why I’m rushing things and we have to stop. Right now, this moment, the one that just passed, and the next... Each one is a chance we’re willfully

throwing away. A chance to do the right thing, but instead, he sinks his hands into my hips, lifts me, and gently lays me down on the table next to the fire. The flames kiss my naked skin.

What would we do if Dad came out here and saw his daughter lying naked on a table with his old best friend? *We should go to the bedroom*, I try to say. Then Logan has his hand on my pussy again, pushing two fingers inside me, gently moving in circles that have me on the edge again, ready to come for him and melt. Is this level of lust normal?

I lean up just enough to look at Logan's body glistening in the firelight, the tight, muscled skin, a very faint smattering of hair across his chest. He keeps his eyes locked on me as he reaches down, unbuckles his belt, and frees his cock.

It springs free and massive. So big that his hand hardly wraps around it. The tip glistens with precome. I should tell him now. Can a virgin take that? But the thing is, we have to do this soon. We have to keep going. Any second, my life could change forever. Dad would never look at me the same again. What's my plan for after this? I can't afford to think about that, either.

"Your pussy is as perfect as the rest of you," he snarls, pushing the helm of his huge, hard dick against my clit.

The waves of pleasure make it easier to ignore the doubt, my inexperience, and Dad. Shame on me that it helps me forget about my father and how much of a betrayal this is.

CHAPTER SIX

Logan

What the *hell* am I doing?

It all feels like it's happened so fast. My head is beyond cloudy. It's filled with thoughts of my woman, Emma. I feel like a beast, finally unchained after months of thinking about her. Pretending I'm not, even to myself, but imagining her in that tank top, her big, tasty-looking nipples poking through the material.

Now, I *have* tasted her nipples. She's made me drunk. I'm high on her. My hand is still wet from her eager young pussy, the way she twitched for me, releasing her orgasm. She couldn't have been more attractive if she was trying.

I massage her clit with my cock, looking down at her pink slit. I know I should get a condom. It would be the responsible thing, but I haven't got one. I never needed to carry one. The second I leave this balcony, this fire, this interaction ends. We both know it. I can see it in her wide, excited eyes. This is wild and reckless. If we stop for a moment, we stop completely. Common sense will take over.

Moving my tip lower, I push it against her entrance. She's so tight, kissing my head. She whimpers, shifting against me, her hands resting on her legs to help hold them in place. It's so hot, her small hands disappearing into her thick thighs.

"You're so tight," I growl.

“Hmm,” she nods. “L-Logan.”

“My tight, horny woman,” I grunt. “My tight, perfect woman. Nobody else touches your wet little pussy, do they, Emma? Just me.”

“Just you,” she moans. “Yes, yes, yes.”

Her walls flutter with *each* yes, just enough to let me push and slide my dick inside. I gasp, staring down, forgetting about everything else. The ice. My friend. All I can feel is her tight heat clasp my end, stroking further down my cock as I glide inside her.

She closes her eyes and clenches her fists. Her lips twitch into a cute smile once I’m all the way in. I look down at our bodies, completely joined. It seems *right*, as if this is what we were made for—to be together.

I lean down, my skin getting hotter as I approach the fire. Her body is temptingly warm. I lay against her, slowly pull out, then thrust in, quicker this time. She gasps right in my ear.

I turn my cheek and catch the noise. I fixate on it. It moves my gaze to the living room, too. So I can watch for Michael? I don’t think about that, just her. As I drive deep, her moans get more and more passionate. I lean up again, watching her breasts bounce for me.

“Just for me,” I grunt. “You never moan like this for anybody else. Those tits never bounce like that for anybody else. Understand?”

“Yes, yes,” she gasps. “Oh, L-L-L...”

“Your pussy’s getting tighter,” I groan. “Oh, fuck, are you close already?”

“I don’t know,” she whimpers. “Just don’t stop. Puh-pl...”

Please, she’s trying to say, but neither of us can talk. I thrust into her faster, causing the table to jump around. Pressing down against it with my hand, I hold it still, pounding into her. I want her so bad—the future. I need to explode inside her. My seed belongs inside of her.

“Ah, ah, ah,” she gasps, then bites down.

I watch as she experiences her second orgasm. I can feel this one pulsing around my dick as I push into her. Her pussy is clenching around my cock. I'm not sure how much longer I can take it.

She grabs my shoulders and digs her fingernails in. "Are... you..."

That's all the encouragement my body needs. With a snarl, I pump into her harder, savoring every inch of her pussy, her warmth. The walls of her slit squeeze onto me as though coaxing my seed out, as though part of her knows this is where this has to end.

I almost roar when my length fills with intense pressure. Then, my ability to think is gone. All that exists is the pleasure—ten seconds or ten hours of feeling utterly connected to my woman, of not having to doubt. As I come, I know we will make this work... somehow.

A moment later, I collapse against her, heaving. The fire seems to flicker. The balcony seems to get darker, but nothing has changed physically. It's just the aftermath of what we've done.

Quickly, we get dressed. We don't even look at each other. It feels so seedy. It's wrong. I hope she doesn't think I'm using her. But what's the alternative? I tell her the truth, that I want her, that I need her?

Her clothes are messy. She hasn't replaced her tights. She looks up at me, biting her lip. Looking so damn sexy, I could do it all again, even if that would mean doubling the risk.

She looks at me and then at the floor. I try to think of something to say. Then I remember the ice, just me and *Michel*, the hours and hours we played. The video chats more recently, the laughter, and feeling like I could let my guard down. What have I done? What the *fuck* have I done?

"Logan—"

But I don't hear the rest if she says anything else. I throw the door open and almost run across the suite. I'm being a coward. That's twice today that I've failed to be the man I should be.

There was the tantrum in the locker room, and now this, but this is so much worse.

I've left her out there. Just as bad, I know I'll have to lie to Michael again and invent an excuse. He's only here one more day, but I can't see him. I don't know how I'd look him in the eye. I've betrayed him. Maybe I'll have to let the friendship fade. Go back to being alone, just me and the ice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

SIX WEEKS LATER

Emma

I don't think Chrissy knows she's digging her fingernails into my arm as we stare at the pregnancy test. Chrissy is my best friend, the only person I've told about the crazy night with Logan. I was starting to think it was a wild fantasy, but the test proves it was real.

"This is nuts," she says, letting my arm go and dropping onto my computer chair.

It's November, but the sun shines through the window, making me almost long for Quebec. But why? Logan left, then ditched Dad the next day. He hasn't had a single video call with Dad since. Dad has mentioned he thinks it might be because of how drunk he got that night, but mostly, he doesn't talk about it. He just focuses on his work.

Only *I* know why. My whole body has been tingling every day for six long weeks, thinking about why—that night, the heat, the absolute insanity of what we did.

"*Emma!*" Chrissy yells, clapping her hands in front of my face.

I jolt out of my thoughts to find Chrissy frowning at me. She's wearing her hair in intricate long braids, her thick, stylish bracelets jingle-jangling as she grabs the edge of the computer chair. I shake my head, grab the test from the desk, and hold it to the light.

“Why don’t you lick it, too?” Chrissy jokes. “Just to be sure.”

“Hey, this is serious.”

She frowns. “I’m sorry, E. I’m just so confused about this. I can’t think straight.”

I move to the edge of the bed and sit down. It’s no good standing there staring at the pregnancy test. Then again, it probably wasn’t very productive to spend the last six weeks replaying that one night over and over in my mind, remembering what he said.

You never moan like this for anybody else, just for me.

It was clearly just dirty talk, part of the thrill. He didn’t come back after storming out. He didn’t tell me he needed to see me again. If it weren’t for the test on the desk, this would be over.

“Emma,” Chrissy says softly.

“Yeah, sorry.” I rub my eyes. “I haven’t been sleeping very well. You said you’re confused about this?” When she nods, I follow up. “What do you mean, confused? About whether or not...”

I can’t even finish the sentence. Everybody makes their own choices in life, and I’d never judge anybody else, but I feel connected to this baby already. It’s like Dad said I would play with my baby dolls even as a kid, imagining the day I could offer and receive that love. Does that make me a lame weirdo? Maybe, but it’s who I am.

“No, not that,” Chrissy says, twisting one of her braids around her finger. “But I can tell how much you genuinely like this guy. When you told me what happened, your whole face lit up. I’ve never seen you like that before. About a boy *or* a girl.”

I smile. “A girl?”

“Well, how was I supposed to know?”

“We’ve been friends since, what, fifth grade?”

“Yeah, when you helped cut that gum out of my hair. You’ve always been ace. But don’t come at me acting like you’ve

ever, *once*, shown a romantic interest in anybody. Now this guy has lit you up like the Fourth of July.”

He’s not just *this guy*. He’s not just somebody. He’s the man I’ve been waiting for, dreaming of. The second I saw him, I knew it, and now I can feel this baby growing in me. That’s technically impossible, right? But I feel it, like a seed greedily drinking water, taking whatever nourishment it can. Suddenly, there are tears in my eyes. I rub my face again.

“Hey, E...” Chrissy walks over to the bed, sits beside me, and wraps her arm around me. “It’s going to be okay.”

“What’s confusing you, Chrissy?” I ask, wanting to stay on the subject or at least not make my tears the subject.

“I’d be happy for you,” she says sadly, “if it wasn’t so complicated. That’s the confusing part.”

“If he wasn’t friends with Dad. If he wasn’t twice my age. If he hadn’t walked out on me. If this pregnancy wasn’t the definition of an accident?”

Perhaps it’s an *accident*, but not a mistake. I’ll never say that.

“Yeah,” Chrissy sighs. “I’m trying to think of some kickass advice. It’s tough.”

“It’s enough that you’re here,” I tell her, resting my head on her shoulder. “Do you think I should do another test?”

“That was the third one,” she points out in a soft voice. “Each one was positive. What are the chances they were *all* wrong?”

I nod. “I think I should go to the doctor and make sure before I...” I swallow, more tears trying to appear in my eyes. Through my bedroom wall, I can hear Eric in his room, yelling into his microphone as he plays some computer game.

“Tell Logan?” Chrissy offers softly.

I close my eyes as the weight of her words settles on me. He’s still in Canada. His team is doing well after that initial screwup. Logan is back on his game. Apparently, a quickie with his friend’s daughter got it all out of his system. I open my eyes and nod.

“Yeah, but I need to be sure first. He’s not going to be happy about this.”

“Why do you say that?” she asks sharply. “You have no idea how he’ll feel.”

“He walked out, Chrissy,” I reply just as sharply. There we go—more fantasy stuff. “He made it clear how he feels. He got his quickie, took my V-card, and ran out the door.”

“You don’t know how he feels,” Chrissy says. “Anyway, you said he didn’t know you were a virgin.”

I swallow, my belly bubbling, nerves slamming hard. “Which do you think I should tell him first, that I’m pregnant or I’m a virgin?”

Chrissy giggles, nudging me. “Well, only one of those is true.”

I reel back, shocked. Chrissy never tells vicious jokes, definitely not about pregnancies or babies. She looks at me, eyes narrowed, and then I get it. Duh. “I’m not a virgin anymore.”

“No, E. Having sex sort of makes that impossible.”



I’m sitting on the couch two days later during family movie night. Mom insists on it. She always acts as the glue of the family, even as I disappear into writing and college work, Eric into video games, chasing girls, and occasional homework, and Dad into work. Mom sits across the couch from me, swaddled in her blanket. She looks over and smiles. People say we have the same features and the same cheeks.

You okay? she mouths.

I smile and nod. Mom can tell I’ve been acting weird, a little distant. I’m doing my best to be normal around Dad, but every second in his presence is like being jabbed with a million tiny, invisible needles. It’s constant but not *overbearing* pressure. I’d almost prefer everything to blow up to break the tension.

Dad glances at Eric on the floor, both grinning as the bad guy's tank explodes. Eric would never do something like this to Dad—just me, the crappy daughter.

I went to the doctor yesterday. It's official. I'm carrying Logan's baby. Now I have to work up the nerve to tell him. The action movie races toward its climax, and I try not to think of my climax with Logan, the flames, and the balcony. I decide it will be tonight. I'm not sure exactly where he is or the time zone difference, but if he's awake, I'll tell him.

And then... I can't think about what happens next. I don't think it will be good. It won't be my dream of Logan telling me in his gruff voice, *"We'll make this work, me and you, Emma. That wasn't just dirty talk. You. Are. Mine."*

He's had six weeks to contact me. It's not difficult. My email is listed on a website I use to publish some of my stories. It seems—and I hate to think this about my child's father—he got what he wanted from me: a quick screw.

One way or the other, I find out tonight. First, I must do something that makes me feel like an even worse daughter. After the movie, I excuse myself up the stairs into Mom and Dad's room. Dad's phone is on charge.

Quickly, I unlock it, typing in his passcode. He shares it freely with the entire family. I think we all know each other's passcodes, even Eric. It was the family policy when they gave us phones. I haven't changed mine since becoming an adult. I take a photo of the number, close the contacts list, and sneak from the bedroom.

Eric is standing at the top of the stairs. He's wearing a black T-shirt with a skate logo, his hair a mop of black curls. He's the opposite of me, tall and skinny, with sharp cheekbones when he smiles and frowns like he's doing now. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing. Keep your voice down."

He strolls over to me, a cocky grin on his face. "Nothing, in Mom and Dad's room, right?"

"Listen, Eric. Please listen."

His cocky grin vanishes. He's a good kid. Emotion flits into his eyes. Something in my tone must catch his attention. "Whoa, what's up? I was only messing."

"You can't say anything, okay?"

Eric looks at me. We're already the same height despite the age difference. "You should tell me what's going on. Whatever it is, I can help you."

His earnest tone melts my heart. He means it, but it's too risky. "I'll tell you later, okay?"

He narrows his eyes. "Okay... as long as nothing bad is happening."

"No, nothing bad," I say quickly, pushing past him and walking toward my bedroom, and that's right. It's not *bad*. In my bedroom, I smooth my hand over my belly, leaning against the door, already feeling love flow between us. No, it's not that.

It's just complicated and borderline impossible, but not bad.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Logan

I lie in my bed, the sheets coated in sweat, staring at the ceiling. I jolted awake from a nightmare a few minutes ago. It was some monster woman thing, all mixed in with my mother. I sit up, rubbing sleep from my eyes. I won't be able to get back down now.

It's not the nightmares. I get them from time to time. It's that the second I wake up, I think of Emma. Day or night, I remember what we did by the fire, her body moving with mine. I remember how I walked out and pushed Michael away. Shut down my emotions.

I focused on the ice and the game. The team's doing better. The hectic schedule makes it difficult to think about anything else, but for the first time in my life, I ask why? What is this all for?

Before, the game was enough, learning every intricacy I could. The patterns of offensive players, the unique way their skates touched the ice, even if it was only in the smallest details. Now, I think *past* that to the future. I've got all the money a man could ever need. I've got my health, which is more than some can say in this sport. I'm lucky. If I retired, I could...

I could what? Call up the girl I screwed and abandoned? Then, when I turn up at her house, make small talk with her dad? Her dad, who I basically told to go fuck himself, in polite terms?

Walking through the hotel suite, I stand at the window, stretching my arms out. This is bad. It's four a.m. High-quality sleep is a big part of being a professional athlete, especially as you age. I haven't slept an entire night once since I walked out on Emma.

My cell phone rings from the bedroom, deeper into the suite. I quickly grab it. There's no reason my teammates' sleep has to suffer too. It's a number I don't recognize. I reject it, then set my phone to silent. Not long after, I get a text and a voicemail notification.

Listening to it, every inch of me aches and burns. It's her voice, sounding small and unsure. "Uh, it's me, if you know who that is. Please call me when you get a chance."

If I know who that is? When I hear her voice, I immediately think about finding the person making her sound so scared and nervous and making them pay. But what if that's me? What if simply calling *me* is the reason she sounds like that? To her, I'm a monster—the prick who walked out.

I call her back immediately, sitting on the bed. My foot won't stop tapping against the floor. It goes into overdrive even when I place my hand on my leg.

"Uh, hello?" she says.

I breathe huskily. Hearing her voice puts me right back on that top-floor balcony. Since then, I've wondered if anybody saw us. Not because I'm worried about snapshots of me, but if anybody else saw her like that... It was a private suite, so there was nobody above us to spy.

I'm there again, feeling her warmth, her wetness, reliving her giving herself to me.

"Logan?" she says, more insistently.

"I'm here."

"I need to tell you something. Have you got time to talk?"

"I'm not doing anything," I tell her.

My voice is coming out cold and robotic. I realize I can do it, over the phone at least, though it's one of the hardest things

I've ever done. I can close down my feelings, but when they explode...

"I'll be quick. I know you probably don't want to speak to me."

I swallow. "It's not that, Emma."

"N-no?" she says.

"I left things badly. I shouldn't have walked out like that, but your dad... He helped me while I was growing up. He was there for me, whether or not he knows it."

After a pause, she says softly, "So you ghost him?"

I grit my teeth. I can't explain how hard that was, but it felt necessary. It *was*. Hell, if Michael knew I was speaking to his daughter now, he'd be furious, and he'd have a right to be.

"I'm sorry," she says after a pause.

"You don't need to be. It's fair. I've handled this like a jackass."

I can't be close to any of them. If I kept speaking with Michael, I'd keep thinking about Emma. I'd end up fantasizing about her and wanting her. I've become good at ignoring what I want and focusing on what I need to do. At least, I used to before that night. That's my baseline: ignoring and burying.

"Why did you walk out?" she murmurs.

Because I could've told her I loved her right then. I could've meant it. I could've proposed to her. With my body content from the sex and the connection, I could've pledged myself to her forever with her dad sleeping in the next room.

I take the coward's way out. "Isn't it obvious?"

She sighs. "Dad..."

I wait, wondering where she's going with this. When she doesn't speak, I say, "Did you just want to talk, Emma?"

"Would it be a problem if I did?"

I realize I haven't asked her where she got this number, but it must've been her dad's phone. Did she ask him for it? "No," I

say, even if I should say the opposite. “We can talk.”

“That was a bit of a sneaky question,” she murmurs, “just to see what you’d say. The truth is, I have a specific reason for calling. I need to tell you something.”

I wait. Her sighs and small movements on the other side of the phone make me think of her sitting in bed, anxiously gripping the sheet. That flush in her cheeks, but more concerned than sexy. Or both. I wish I were there to hold her. Goddamn, I was wrong about it being easier over the phone. My defenses are crumbling.

“I’m not sure how to say this.” She pauses and makes an *EEK* noise. “Okay, I’m just going to say it. Just get it out there, and then we can deal with it. Band-Aid logic, okay?”

My heart picks up speed. In all the games I’ve played since that night on the balcony, I haven’t noticed my heart pounding once. But now, I feel it. I can’t ignore it. It feels like my life is about to change forever for the better, I hope.

“I’m pregnant,” she says. “I’ve done three at-home tests and been to the doctor. So yeah, there’s no doubt about it. I don’t know where to go from here.”

I’ve got my teeth clenched. I want to cheer. I want to punch the air. I want to run next door and shake Chuck awake and tell him. I’m going to be a dad! I’ve always wanted this, a deep primal urge, but I never knew if I’d meet the right woman.

“Emma,” I say, trying to keep my voice level. “This might sound insensitive, but—”

“You want to know if I screwed somebody else right after we had sex. Is that it?” she snaps.

The thought makes me beyond sick. It makes me want to find anybody who’s ever touched her and break my hockey stick over their head.

“Because that’s the sort of woman I am,” she says. “I sleep around. I fucked you on a balcony after a quick conversation. So I fuck people easily, right? On a whim?”

“Calm down,” I say gruffly. “If that’s my son or daughter—”

“They *are* your son or daughter, okay? I was a virgin when we had sex, and I haven’t slept with anybody since. There, happy now?”

I try to speak, but nothing comes out but a shaky breath. “You were a virgin,” I whisper, remembering how she rocked for me, how wet and ready she was. “That was the first time you had sex?”

“That’s what a virgin is, right?”

“Easy on the sass,” I tell her.

“So you get to boss me around now, huh? Yes, that was the first time I had sex.”

“You were perfect,” I say, my voice torn. “*We* were perfect. Together. It felt so natural.”

“I assumed that’s how it always felt for you,” she says.

“I’m not a playboy, Emma. I don’t sleep around.”

After a pause, she sighs, then says, “Anyway, I thought you’d want to know. I don’t know what we do next. I haven’t thought very far ahead. I’m not going to start showing for a while, but...”

“You’re not thinking... are you?”

She audibly swallows. “What would your opinion about that be?”

My opinion is that I’d do anything to protect my woman and my child, but what happens if they conflict? “I want you to keep the baby.”

“I was hoping you’d say that,” she says. “I think we can be grownups about this. Somehow, we can make it work. This isn’t the fifties. You don’t have to marry me to save my honor. We can come up with a plan.”

“I’ve got a plan,” I say, the primal urge driving me to my feet. “I’m coming to California.”

“Wait... what?”

I'm already striding across the room. For weeks, I've felt this strange hollow feeling like I lack purpose when playing hockey was all I ever needed before. Now, I'm filled with direction. My child. The beautiful, perfect woman carrying my baby. I have to be with her. I pull out my suitcase, lay it on the bed, and push clothes into it.

"Haven't you got a game, Logan?" Emma says.

"I don't give a damn. I need to be with my child."

"L-Logan," she stutters. Her voice tells me she's confused. Part of her likes this. Did part of her *want* this? "There's no baby here yet. You've got a game tomorrow, haven't you?"

I smirk. "Been keeping track, have you?"

"There's nothing for you to do here."

"Are you saying you don't want to see me?" I growl.

"No," she whispers. I can hear so much emotion in her voice. "But what about your team? What about Dad?"

I clench my teeth. There's a new feeling working its way through me. I wonder if I will have to get used to that—the idea that new, strange feelings will grip me occasionally. Maybe that's what happens if a person spends so long trying to lock down everything inside of them.

My mind is speeding ahead to ugly ideas. What if this baby thing is a trick somehow? What if she's trying to *get her hooks in*, as Chuck once said about an ex-girlfriend attempting to blackmail him? She'd Photoshopped some photos of them together, threatened Chuck, but he said screw it, release them, and the internet proved she was a liar. That sort of thing happens all the damn time.

Another thing I'm feeling is jealousy, like I'm being abandoned, like *Emma* is abandoning me. I sound like a child—an infant. I clench my teeth harder, my fist following suit. My entire body becomes tense. "Don't you want me there?"

"How the heck am I supposed to answer that?" she replies.

"Honestly," I growl, then add even more emphasis to my voice. "You have to be honest with me always. Otherwise, this

doesn't work."

"What, you think I've lied?"

"I need to be there to see."

"To see *what*?" she says, lowering her voice. I guess she has to be quiet. Her dad, brother, and mom might overhear her talking to a man twice her age. "Do you want to watch me pee on a stick?"

It's almost like there are words trapped in my throat. There's so much I want to say, but I have to be smart about this. I can't let my feelings take over. Logic, just like the ice, works through the possibilities. If I tell her, right here, that she belongs to me, that I owned her the moment I saw her... What would she say? I have no clue, and even if she immediately agreed, what would *Michel* say? What would her mother think?

"Logan?"

"Do you want me there or not, Emma?"

"Are you saying you want to be involved?" she counters.

"I asked you first," I say, remembering another incident with my teammate. Funny, I didn't think of it until now, considering I reached out to Michael.

One of my teammate's old friends called him a few years back and pretended they were just talking. Then it turned out this so-called friend was recording my teammate secretly, trying to make him say something shocking or what? Worthy of leaking to the goddamn media, I guess.

"Am I going nuts here, Logan? It sounds like you don't believe that I'm pregnant. Why would I lie about that?"

"If you're preg—"

"I *am*," she hisses, then hangs up the phone.

I quickly stand, fists clenched even harder, trembling at my sides. My entire body is shaking. This isn't good. It's like when I get into a fight on the ice. Not like the enforcers, but a

scuffle that involves strength and rage. However, this is so much more intense.

When I call her back, she answers with a small sigh, “Sorry for hanging up on you. I got mad.”

I sit on the bed again. It’s like I’m covered in heating lotion suddenly, the type they put on a sore muscle. The tension is relieved. I was ready for a fight, but that was low of me. I shouldn’t fight with the mother of my child. I believe her. That’s the truth. That’s how I *feel*, but I have to *think*.

“You have a game tomorrow,” she says after a pause. “So when I answer, it’s just about that, okay? It’s not about making up a story or anything.”

“I haven’t accused you.”

“Your *tone*,” she says. “I can tell what you’re thinking. *Oh, some nineteen-year-old girl wants to get her hooks in or whatever.*”

That was the phrase I was just thinking of with Chuck. She’s reading me like I read plays on the ice. “I asked you if you wanted me there as a father to the child.”

“Of course, I *want* you here.” Her voice gets quieter but more intense, strangled with passion. “I can’t even believe you’re offering. I thought we were done, but yeah, I *want* you here. But...”

“But...” I prompt her when she stops talking.

“*But* Dad didn’t like being ghosted. He hasn’t said much, but I can tell it hurt him. I can tell it made him mad, too. It’s all tied up with...”

“With what?” I say.

“With you and him when you were kids.”

“Wait a second.” I grab some sheets like Emma grabbed my shirt that night. No, not *just like*. Hers was lust. “What did Michael say about when we were kids? What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Nothing, nothing really,” she says.

“What does *nothing really* mean? That’s my business, Emma. Tell me.”

“Logan...”

“Tell me *now*.”

I’m almost yelling. This is the lowest thing I’ve done yet. I’m not worthy of being this woman’s man or the baby’s father, but it’s not about being worthy or choosing. It’s what I am, but I can’t let her break into this part of me. I’m not *him* anymore. I’m Logan, goddamn Ice, the Ice Demon.

“Just that you might’ve had it hard, that’s all, you and your mom in that house alone by the lake. But Logan—”

I don’t hear what she says next. I end the call, sit on the bed, and stare at the wall. I breathe slowly. I let it all wash away. I think of the ice, the *swoosh* of skates on a silent lake, and my mother’s voice calling out across the water. Scaring me, that’s the truth—scaring the shit out of me like she was a monster out of a book. It’s not fair. It wasn’t her fault. Maybe I need help. Perhaps I need my woman. Maybe she *could* understand.

I’m alone. I always have been. Even as part of a team, I make myself lonely, but it was never *lonely* before Emma. It was just isolated, in the most literal sense—disconnected, knowing no better.

Slowly, I stop the panic from taking over. *Michel* was my friend, an older brother figure, but I kept my private business to myself. He never asked. I never offered, and I was fine with that, but now, he thinks he can spread shit. Emma didn’t tell me the entire story.

She’s ringing me back. We’re one-for-one for hangups. I turn the phone over and decide I’ll wait for proof. I’ll wait until I know the kid’s mine. I tell myself, hearing it in Chuck’s voice, *Hey, man, it’s just another normie who wants to wring us for everything we’ve got.*

When I try to lie down, I can’t. I can’t even think about sleeping. Despite the sense of betrayal, the suspicion, and the doubts, I can’t stop thinking of being a father—a connection

that spans thousands of miles. Me and my baby, in my woman's belly.

Suddenly, I'm packing again. I shove things into my suitcase. I'm not going to call her. I'm not going to warn her. I don't know what I'm doing. I'll figure it out when I'm there.

As I leave my hotel room, I'm on my phone, booking a flight. Chuck is walking up the hallway. He's wearing a bright purple shirt and skinny jeans. He looks like a different species to me. He stops, weaving a little from side to side, rubbing his eyes. "Fuck, man, what time is it? Am I late for practice or something?" I hadn't even realized he'd left the room, honestly.

"You've got time to sleep it off, Chuck." I realize I'm grinning. I've gone from having no moods to a worrying number of mood swings. Stepping forward, I jab him on the shoulder. "Tomorrow, my teammates will have to pick up the slack for me."

"Wait..." Chuck steps back like he's forcibly trying to sober himself up. "Why won't you be there?" He looks at my suitcase. "What's happening, Logan? Why are you *smiling*, man?"

"I can't explain yet, but I won't be here. Tell coach."

Picking up my bag, I walk down the hallway. There goes my heartbeat again. As I leave the hotel and climb into a taxi, I know why I'm smiling, even if I almost had a meltdown upstairs. Or maybe I *did* have a meltdown, but it doesn't matter. I'm smiling because I know I'm doing the right thing, getting closer to my child.

I tried to trick myself into thinking Emma might be lying, but the closer I get to the airport, the more confident I am. I'm going to be with my child and my woman. Protect their mother. Forever.

CHAPTER NINE

E mma

I sit on the porch, my eyes feeling heavy after last night. The phone call with Logan didn't go as planned at all. When he got mad, it was like some evil witch took control of my tongue, forcing me to spit out the stuff Dad told me in confidence when he was *drunk*. I've betrayed his trust and made Logan doubt me in one quick move.

It's late afternoon, early evening. I've been to class, staring through bleary eyes, and now I'm watching as Eric and his friend grind along the railed box on their inline skates. They've been practicing for three or four years now. They're incredible at putting their skates in different configurations, spinning out one way or another, landing in slides, and leaping to their feet. Their skates, anyway.

Taking a sip of my hot cocoa, I think of last night. Though, it's not as if I've been doing anything except thinking of last night. When he asked me if I wanted him here, I should've just said *yes*, and let whatever happened after happen, but I got so pissed when his tone changed. He became defensive like he was suddenly dealing with a blackmailing fan or something.

I didn't handle it well. After I hung up, I answered when he called me. He blanked me, even when I tried him again, then a third time. After there was still no answer, I curled up in bed, hand over my belly, feeling our baby, imagining we were holding hands, taking comfort from each other.

Dad walks onto the porch, sitting beside me, and pulls a blanket over his knees. He's in his work shirt and dark cargo pants. From inside the house, I hear Mom singing to the radio. Dad taps his fingers on his knees, a small, content smile on his face as we watch Eric grind along the rail in the dusky lowlight.

"Good day, kiddo?" he asks after a while.

"Oh, it was okay," I reply, with that awkwardness I've felt in every exchange since coming home, every single moment we've been together for six weeks. "I got three thousand words done."

"For school or your own work?"

"One thousand for school. Two for my own."

"It's usually the other way around," Dad says, still with that soft smile, but I can tell he's feeling the vague awkwardness, too. It's vague for him, anyway, since he doesn't know about the fire, the heat, looking up and seeing Logan's chest brimming with lust.

"I'm really getting into my children's book," I tell him.

It was easy to write today in the library after class with my headphones in. That was only because I could think about my and Logan's child, the playfulness in their eyes at a particular line, a laugh, or maybe they'd clap at this or that dialogue. It all felt so vivid. I wanted to hug my child after I finished writing, as though they'd been there the whole time, and they're not inside of me, still so small, so precious. Oh, *jeez*. I'm almost crying. I quickly sip some soda and gather myself.

"You're going to be a huge success one day," Dad says. "Just wait. You'll have dozens of books published. You'll have the family you always dreamed of."

"Are you looking forward to being a grandfather?" I ask, though really, I should change the subject. This is needlessly masochistic.

"I'd never want you to rush," Dad says, eyes still on the boys, the *scree* of their skates against the rail. "But yeah, Em. If you found a man who loved and respected you, who treated you

how you deserved, and you wanted to get married and have kids, I'd support you. Honestly? I can't wait to meet my grandkids."

My belly twists like the baby is already somehow kicking. Dad said if I found a man who loved and respected me. Did Logan respect me, quickly pulling away after he was done, getting dressed, hardly even looking at me before leaving the hotel room? What else was he supposed to do, stay and cuddle?

A car slowly pulls up at our dead-end street. Our road has a circle at the end for turning around, and Eric and his friend have set up their grind box on the edge, away from the cars. This large pickup is raised off the ground, the paint shiny and brand new. They stop right in front of the grind box.

"Eric," Dad says, his voice suddenly tight. He's on his feet. "You and Jack come inside now, bud."

"Dad?"

"Now, Eric."

Eric and his friend awkwardly skate-walk up the narrow stone path to our house walking up the lane.

"And you, Em," Dad says, hands on his hips, looking at the car.

Fear has slithered into my throat, almost choking my words. It's the change in Dad's demeanor. I realize I've never seen him truly scared, but it emanates from him now, almost like a smell. "Dad, what's wrong?"

"I need to have a conversation with these men."

Standing, I see a burly man in a white cowboy hat and another even bigger man in a leather vest, his arms covered in tattoos and his chest covered in thick, black hair. Thick, black hair falls around his face, too.

"What? Why?"

"*Get inside, Emma!*" Dad snaps, turning to me.

I hurry through the door. It's a reflex. Dad never yells at me. Only a few times can I remember him getting angry when I

was a kid, but this isn't anger. This is panic. Closing the door, I find Mom, Eric, and Jack crowded in the hallway. The boys stand near the window, peering out onto the street.

"What's going on out there?" Mom says.

"I don't know. Some guys pulled up. Dad seems scared."

Mom's eyes register recognition, and then she's in Mother Hen mode, hurrying us out of the hallway toward the rear of the house to the kitchen. She waves her hands and flaps at us. Then, when I turn to look, she gently touches my elbow. "I've got a pie for everybody. Come on. Let's not disturb your father's business."

In the kitchen, when Eric and Jack are shoveling pie into their mouths, I tell her quietly, "You know what's going on, don't you, Mom?"

She swallows and shoots me a look. "It's work-related, dear. Nothing for you to worry about."

"If something bad is happening, I deserve to know." Especially now, it's not just myself I have to worry about. "Those men looked dangerous and scary. How is that work-related?"

"Dangerous-looking and scary-looking men are still human beings."

"How is that an answer to what I just asked?"

We cut our conversation short when Dad appears in the large doorway, hands on his hips, a false smile on his face. He's curved his lips into the correct shape but can't hide the panic in his eyes. "Whoa, she let you eat the pie early?"

Eric grins, mouth red from berries. "I know, right? Jackpot."

"I want in. Could a fine young lady get me a spoon?" Dad winks at Mom, and Mom rolls her eyes, walking to the drawer.

I sit at the edge of the bar, trying not to chew my fingernails. Whatever happened outside wasn't good. Dad's acting like nothing's wrong, but he can't stop his boot from tapping against the foot railing. When he scoops the pie, his spoon rattles against the bowl.

“Was everything okay with your work stuff outside, Dad?”
Eric asks once he’s done with his pie.

Dad widens his artificial smile. “All good, champ. Just had to settle a few things up.”

I can’t sit here and pretend anymore, but I also can’t imagine causing a scene right now. I can’t imagine demanding that Dad tell the truth. We’re just not that sort of family. We’ve never had big screaming blowouts. Okay, once or twice, but it’s *rare*. Dad wants to play make-believe, and Mom’s going along with it.

“I’ve got some college work to do,” I say, keeping my eyes on Dad. “I’ll see you all later. Nice to see you, Jack.”

“And you, Emma,” Jack replies.

Dad swallows, meets my eye, then quickly returns to staring into his bowl. I go upstairs and lie on my bed. I intend to do some more work, but I return to my position from last night, staring at my phone on the side table and waiting for it to ring.

When it does, I answer it quickly without looking at the number. My whole body is racing with my speeding heartbeat, a flutter that shrouds me in warm tingles. Even if we might fight again, just the idea of *speaking* to him makes me feel like that.

“Emma?” It’s Chrissy. She slurs my name, but she’s speaking urgently. “Are you there?”

“What’s up?” I ask.

“Just... I’m at a party, and there are these guys. I got a ride here. I don’t know. I don’t really want to be here.”

“Has anything happened?” I ask.

“Not yet, but they’re getting more drunk. Some girls are doing stuff like they want to, which is fine. They’ve started asking me and some others, and we don’t want to. I just... This isn’t my sort of party.”

“I’ll come to get you right now. Drop me a pin, Chrissy. I’m on my way.”

“Thank you, E. Really.”

“Always.”

It’s almost refreshing not to think about myself, the baby, or Logan. I have a clear purpose as I pull on my jeans, hoodie, and boots. Get my friend from what is probably a frat house, sober her up, and be there for her.

When I go back downstairs, Dad is sitting in his office, clicking away on his computer. I see the reflection in his reading glasses. Though the screen faces him, I see him close the window, glasses going dark.

“Can I borrow the car?” I ask. “I need to pick Chrissy up from a party.”

He lets out a sigh of relief. He thought I was going to ask about those scary and dangerous-looking men.

CHAPTER TEN

Logan

“It doesn’t matter if we won the goddamn game!” Coach Tremblay yells down the phone at me. His furious voice bounces around the interior of my rental car. With each step along the way, the flight, the car, driving here, to the end of Emma’s street, I’ve become more certain.

I’m listening to my feelings, not my logic. I promised myself I couldn’t do that, but this is more than a feeling. It’s like being back at that fire with my woman, covered in heat and filled with intent.

“Logan,” he snaps. “I need some information. Maybe we can make this work for a couple of weeks, but you know the games we’ve got coming up. Real hitters. Real scorers. I need your reflexes.”

I mentally go over the game schedule in my mind. It’s amazing that I didn’t do this during the flight, but somehow, I forced myself to fall asleep. It was only because I knew it would bring me closer to my woman sooner, or what felt like sooner, anyway.

“Yeah, you will.” I sigh darkly. “Listen, Coach. Give me two weeks. Then I’ll be home. I’ll be sharp, but I must take care of this.”

“Can’t you tell me anything else, son?” Coach Tremblay says. “You’ve never missed a single game, bar injuries. You’ve

never walked out. You're a quiet, hard worker. You've never let the fame go to your head. You've always just focused on the game."

Pride rises in me, almost like I'm that little boy again, making patterns in the ice with my blades, driving my muscles to complete exhaustion. Then, finally, I could sleep. "I can't tell you anything," I say, "except that I need to be here."

"The press is already asking questions," Coach grumbles. "What am I supposed to tell them?"

I close my eyes for a moment. I've pulled at the end of her dead-end street. I know the address because I sent Michael some pucks last month. Few cars pass this time of night. The sun has set, and the air is cool, but it's still far, far warmer than I'm used to this time of year.

"Tell them I'm handling a personal matter."

"That will raise *more* questions."

"Tell them anything, Coach. I don't give a damn what they think. This is bigger than the press."

He grunts. "Get back here as soon as you can. We need you."

I hang up the phone, drumming my fingers against the dashboard. I came here in a rush, so intent on being close to my woman, my child. Now, I don't know how to make that happen.

What will I do, knock on the door and say, *Bonjour, Michel?*

I lean forward when I see the car driving past me. She's so intent on the road she doesn't spot me. She probably assumes I'm a parked car, but I see her—my Emma. I almost smash the window of my car to get to her. She's got that concerned flush in her cheeks as she drives away.

Am I really going to follow a woman? Apparently, I'm a stalker now. I came here to see her. I'm going to see her. Starting the engine, I pull onto the road, driving until she reaches the highway. The mechanics of following somebody are surprisingly easy. I keep my distance and watch. I'm not

overly cautious or overly reckless. It's almost like defending a player.

She drives out to the college, then a neighborhood next to it. We've been driving for about forty minutes. When she pulls up to the party house, something in my stomach drops with a dull thud. It's like all the hope drains out of me. It's another new, strange feeling.

Lights flash inside all the windows in the house. I hear the music from the end of the street where I'm parked. Young men and women dance and drink on the front lawn. Suddenly, I see myself for what I am—an almost forty-year-old man stalking a nineteen-year-old woman who just wants to have some fun.

So why did she tell me she was pregnant? Was that revenge for me leaving her on the balcony? She walks up the lane, disappearing into the crowd. I should drive away. I'm torturing myself. The team needs me. The coach needs me. I've made a goddamn fool out of myself.

I flew for five hours to be here to be with the so-called mother of my child. Chuck's voice is in my head: *Told ya, buddy. They all want their piece of flesh.* On the lawn, two people kiss and fall onto the grass. People cheer and throw beer over them. It's disgusting. I feel truly old, older than I am, ancient. I feel like running onto that lawn and telling them all to have some fucking self-respect.

Only a few minutes have passed when Emma leaves the party. She's got her arm around a dark-skinned woman, clearly drunk, in a sparkly silver jacket and one silver heel. Emma walks awkwardly, one hand on her cell phone.

Then some masked douchebag comes running through the crowd. He's shirtless, a jock, most likely. Fairly well-built. He's wearing a large rabbit mask. Emma turns and starts waving her phone at him. Veins stand out on her neck. She looks like she's yelling. Then the man does something very stupid. He reaches out like he's going to put his hand on my woman and hurt her.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Emma

I've written stories about princesses trapped in layers of emotional turmoil, the sadness, resentment, and pain turning into tendrils that wrap around their legs and arms and hold them in place. It was supposed to be a piece about panic, and maybe it worked, but that's not me. After what I just saw, I snap into action. Phone in hand. *911* on the line.

Now, the man in the rabbit mask has his hand wrapped around my wrist. His eyes gleam as he thrusts his face toward me. "Don't be a melodramatic little slut. It's all a bit of fun."

"That girl was passed out!" I yell, but it's too loud on the lawn with the party going. Nobody hears me. Chrissy is getting more difficult to hold, her body being limp since they clearly dosed her up, too. "Get away from me!" I try to wrench my hand back, but he holds me in place.

"Just settle do—"

Suddenly, the man is off his feet. It all happens so fast. Dad's car grunts metallically when somebody shoves the masked man against it. I gasp, almost dropping Chrissy in shock. It's Logan, his arms bulging out of his fitted black tee, his jaw clean-shaved, showing his lips twisted angrily.

Logan holds him there with one hand, then grabs the man's mask, pulls it off, and lets it drop. He brings his face close to

the man's. Logan is like an animal, a fairytale protector erupting in rage.

"Fucking coward," Logan snarls. "Assaulting a woman. Hiding behind a mask."

I force myself to move, pick up the phone, and talk into it as clearly as possible. My words come quickly, describing what I saw. "I know I sound crazy, but I saw it. Several men were wearing rabbit masks, and some girls were passed out. They drugged my friend."

When Logan hears this last line, he pulls his head back, headbutts the man, then drops him on the ground. "Get out of here, Emma," he growls, picking up the mask. Before he puts it on, he leans over and kisses me, just once, on the forehead. He lets it linger as if he's savoring it. It's the most romantic thing I've ever experienced. "Get your friend somewhere safe. Now."

"Ma'am? Ma'am?" the 911 operator is saying down the phone. "Are you there? The music is making it difficult to hear."

"Yes, I... I'm waiting for the cops. What should I do?"

They order me to get away from the property, so I bundle Chrissy into the car, ensure she's comfortable, and then get into the driver's seat. Driving away is so difficult, knowing Logan's in there with all that fury bubbling out of him, all that fire. What if he gets hurt? Some of those freaks might have weapons.

"I'm sorry," Chrissy moans from the back seat. "I've got a boyfriend."

"It's okay, hon," I say, backing the car up. "Everything's going to be okay."

I hope.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Logan

Music pumps through the walls as I walk in and out of the rooms. I shove people aside, but nobody starts any trouble. Maybe it's the fact every vein in my arms is throbbing. Perhaps it's the fact I could've killed that fucker out there for daring to touch my woman.

I heard what Emma said on the phone to the cops—Emma, whose skin, fear, and sweat I can still taste on my lips. I listened to what she saw, what these bastards did. Suddenly, this is bigger than me, Emma, hockey, and my baby. Not in the long term. Not forever, but right now, goddamn. *These* were babies, too, once. These people deserve protection. Is this how fatherhood changes a person?

I climb up the stairs, then spot a door at the end of the corridor. Two beefy bastards wearing rabbit masks stand in front of it, their arms crossed over their middle. I'm a hockey player, not a fighter. I don't know what sort of training these men have. I have to be smart and think. I'm sober. They're probably not. They're not expecting a fight, but I am.

“Did you get the bitch?” the rabbit on the right asks, almost as tall as me, wearing a gray T-shirt drenched in sweat. “We kept guard like you asked.”

“Wait a sec...” Rabbit number two leans forward. “Bro, that ain't Johnny!”

I dart my hands out and grab them by their shirts. Then I drive them into the wall like I'm trying to smash them through it. They grunt and hit me. One catches me in the chin, but I still hold their shirts. I've taken too many pucks to the jaw for that to make me let go.

Another hit, but then I spin and throw them into the corridor. Turning, I kick the door down. The muscles around my thigh, hips, and glutes clench like I'm striding on my skates. The power bursts the door open, and I rush inside.

Damn, this is fucked. How many rabbits? Three of the bastards in here, the two outside, and the one in the street if he's woken up by now. There are four women, two on the bed and two sitting on the couch if that half-awake lean they're sunken into can be called *sitting*.

When the door bursts open, they all turn. Too slowly. This is a game now. My senses are focused on this. Get these girls out of here. These girls were babies once, like the child growing in my Emma's belly—my woman's belly. They were babies, and now I *know* Emma is pregnant. I felt it when I kissed her on the forehead. I don't care how nuts that may sound.

Holy shit. I've blacked out. The rage, goddamn.

When I "wake up," I'm on top of one of the rabbits, raining fists down on him. Another has his arm wrapped around my neck, but I keep hitting anyway. Finally, I roar and flip him over, sending him into a display unit. It collapses and falls on him. Girls are screaming. I hit the rabbit again, caving in his mask, then roar when something cold and metal catches me over the head.

I turn to find the final masked man holding a golf club. There are sirens in the air now. He swings again. I dart my hand out. Don't think. I've got a trick I do sometimes for the media. Catching a puck. I think of it like that. Close my hand around the cold metal. Lean *into* the pain. It's a cheap piece of shit. It starts to bend as I pull on it, and he tries to fight me. He's strong.

Then I pull the club from his hands and smack him across the face with it. The two conscious women are clutching onto each

other, screaming. I look down at the men, all battered and busted up. This is California. What are the laws here? I don't know. I don't know if they could charge me with going too far. That's the last thing I need, with a baby coming. It's the last thing my team needs.

Moving across the room, I gently put both women into the recovery position, then pull a blanket over them. The sirens are getting louder now. The two other masked men in the hallway have woken up and fled, but not the three in the room.

"Fuck... man..." one groans as I drag him toward the closet.

"Shut up," I growl. "You don't say a goddamn word."

I throw him inside, then grab the second one. The third wakes up as I drag him over, and he throws fists at me. I think of my daughter, our child. I imagine her here instead—the drugs in her system. I feel sick at the thought. I hit him, then hit him again. I cave in his nose.

When he falls unconscious, I toss him into the closet. Grabbing the twisting golf club, I jam it through the door handle. Then I run down the stairs, pushing people aside. The music has stopped. At the front of the house, I hear, "*Police! Police!*"

But they're not shouting at me. They're trying to get through the crowd.

I slip out the back, pull off the mask, jog through the backyards, and keep running. I'll have to come back for the car later. I jog at the side of the road away from the streetlamps when a car pulls up.

Dammit. Okay. I'll have to call the team lawyer. Running doesn't look good, does it? I'm not used to this stuff. I just know I have to be free to protect my baby. I can hear Coach Tremblay saying, *Why did you run, Logan? Why did you do that?*

I turn to find Emma sitting behind the wheel of a small family vehicle. There's a small dent in the side, and then I remember. It's the car I shoved the man against.

Emma rolls down the window. "Get in."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Emma

I sit in the backseat with my hands wrapped around Chrissy's. She has her cheek resting on my shoulder, moaning in her sleep, the words difficult to make out. I'm not even sure I could call this *sleep*. It's more of a moaning nightmare.

When I told Logan to *get in*, he shook his head, blood smeared across his face, forehead, hair, and hands. He said, "No, I'm driving you to the police station."

He follows the GPS on his phone in the passenger seat.

"What's your plan after dropping us off?" I ask quietly.

"I'm waiting for you. I'm only taking you because the police will want to speak with you, too."

I swallow and nod, remembering the tender kiss on the forehead. That was before he charged into the house, before people started spilling out, yelling. Two men came running out, still wearing their rabbit masks. Then, as I watched the police arrive from my spot near the end of the street, I saw a shifting shadow in the semidarkness. I looked closer and saw a large silhouette, so I followed.

"After that," he says, "we can drive back to get my rental car. I doubt the police will think to check it."

"I don't think you'd get in trouble," I say softly.

Logan laughs humorlessly. “I’m not so sure. I’ve heard of it happening—excessive use of force. I hurt those bastards badly, Emma, and I’d do it again. I was thinking...”

“What?” I ask, drawn in by his intense blues gleaming in the rearview when he glances at me. “Logan, what were you going to say?”

“I was thinking...” He swallows. “What if this was my daughter? What would I do then? But that was a bad thing to think. I could’ve killed them, and I wouldn’t have felt a damn thing except that they deserved it.”

There’s something like awe in his voice, as though he never suspected himself of so much savagery. I knew it was in him, watching the Ice Demon on the rink, looking up at him the night he took my virginity, the fire in his eyes.

“They would have,” I say firmly. “What should I say happened when the man in the mask followed me out of the party?”

Logan sighs and turns a corner. His phone says aloud, “*Three-point-four miles until destination.*” He reaches over and adjusts the volume. “I won’t ask you to lie to the police.”

“I’m *offering*. It’s not like you did anything wrong.”

He shakes his head. “They might use footage from people’s dash cameras if any are on that street. Maybe somebody was recording. No, don’t lie to them. Tell them exactly what happened.”

“I’m not giving them your name,” I snap. “You obviously don’t want me to.”

“Everything except for that,” he says. “Tell them a man came out of nowhere, headbutted the asshole, put on the mask, and ran into the house. You drove away because your friend wanted some space. Then you decided to drive to the station.”

I nod, though maybe I shouldn’t be accepting all this so easily. I can’t risk the father of my child going to jail, especially since he did the right freaking thing. Maybe we’re being irrational. Perhaps we should just be honest, but this is what he wants. I’m going to stand by him.

We park up the street from the station, and Logan opens the car. “I’ll be nearby waiting.”

Excitement is the last thing that should flurry through me right now, especially considering what I just saw. Yet it almost feels like we’re on some adventure together. A second after this thought slams into me, guilt wraps around me, binds me tight, and twists. I nod, leaning over and gently rocking Chrissy.

“H-hey,” she murmurs, pushing against me.

“You seem a little more alert.”

“Uh, yeah...” She looks up, eyes narrowed and still heartbreakingly hazy. “Is that the Ice Demon?”

Logan offers her a warm smile or his best attempt at one. It’s the effort that counts, and I can tell he’s putting a lot into this, trying to make her feel better. It’s so easy to imagine him doing the same thing with our daughter, if we have one, when she needs to know her father will always be there for her, just like mine is.

“Chrissy,” I say quietly, guilt twisting my stomach, but I have to say this. “Can you forget you saw Logan?”

She lowers her gaze and closes her eyes. “I already have.”

I’m in the police station for under an hour, explaining everything that happened. I wonder if I should be worried about how easy it was for me to conceal Logan’s name. It felt as natural as being loyal to my man, the father to my child. When I said *stranger*—the whole point of the lie—I swear, this glow was inside me. This warm orb expanded from my womb like my baby was talking to me.

As soon as I get out, I call Chrissy. Stupidly, we brought her here to the station. She should’ve been at the hospital so they could check the drugs. Anxiety hammers in my chest as the phone rings. Then her mom answers.

“Is she okay?” I demand before she can hardly say the entire word *hello*.

“She’s fine. They checked her over. She’s sleeping now. The officers have just left. Are you still at the station?”

I let out a long breath. “I’m so happy she’s okay. I wasn’t thinking.”

I *was* thinking, but not about my best friend. When I saw Logan running through the dark, all I could think about was our family and getting him out of there.

“Relax, sweetness. She’s going to be okay. She didn’t... They didn’t *get* to her if you understand what I’m saying.”

I swallow, remembering the room, what I saw, and the ugliness that will forever turn me into fantastical worlds. The real one is sometimes too blunt, painful, and sick to look at. “Yeah, I get you, Miss Harris.”

“The police were asking about somebody else on the scene,” she says. “Did they ask you, too? Apparently, somebody beat those boys bloody and locked them in the closet. Broke a nose. Busted several ribs. They’re all laid up in the hospital.” A pause, and then Miss Harris’ voice gets low. “They said this to Chrissy like she’d care and make her liable to give them something. It makes me sick. Whoever that is, and whatever his reasons for running, he did the right thing.”

“We can agree there, Miss Harris,” I say fiercely.

“Take care, sweetness. Chrissy will call you tomorrow.”

“Goodbye.”

I walk down the street to my car and climb inside. I doubt any officers are watching me, but I still want to be careful as I look up and down the street, searching for Logan.

“I’m here,” he says from the backseat.

I almost jump but hold myself back. He’s lying in the backseat in the shadows. His eyes must be closed because those blues always catch the light, even if there’s hardly any at all.

“Drive,” he goes on.

“Where?” I whisper.

“Anywhere.”

I start the engine, pull away from the station, and drive down the highway. Instead of taking the exit that leads to our suburbs, I keep going, heading toward the hills. Logan sits up in the backseat on his cell phone. He’s cleaned the blood off his face, but his knuckles are grazed.

“Who are you texting?” I ask.

“My teammate, Chuck.” Logan sighs. “He’s not happy with me. None of the players are. It’s not like the season’s over, and we’re still winning.” He runs a hand through his hair and sits back. “You’re a good driver, Emma.”

I laugh, so delighted at being here in his presence. It’s like I’m drunk on him all over again, just like that night six weeks ago. Somehow, it feels like so much more time has passed, but at the same time, none at all. “Thanks. It’s easy when it’s this late. When should I turn back for your rental?”

“We’ve got time,” he says, his eyes glinting when we pass a bright road light. We’re winding through the hills now, LA glistening in the distance. “Or maybe it’s like that night.”

My skin tingles all over. My belly warms up, too. “What about it?”

“We kept going.” His voice is deep, gruff. “On that balcony. We both knew we should’ve gone somewhere else. Somewhere less risky, but we kept going because if we stopped...”

“The spell would be broken,” I whisper. “So we *had* to do it there.”

“That sounds like an excuse,” he says quietly, “for both of us.”

“That’s how it felt, though. You’re right.”

He smirks. “I’m right? You said it, Emma. A spell. Why don’t you stop here?”

I follow his gesturing hand to a rock face on the side of the road, the shadow almost completely black. Just past it, there’s

a tree. I slow the car, drive over the gravel, and stop near the tree. When I kill the engine, I leave the lights off. We sit in darkness together.

When he finally speaks, it feels so intimate. “Explain what happened with the baby.”

“I don’t get it.”

“From start to finish. Learning you were pregnant.”

I almost snap again, but his voice is too fierce, too certain. He needs this. There’s a strange energy emanating from him. The atmosphere of the car changes to something somehow primal.

“Well, at first, I realized I missed my period.”

“More detail,” he says. “I want to be there with you. When I think of it, I want it to feel like I’m remembering it.”

I swallow. This is a bigger challenge than most creative writing teachers give me. “I was sitting at my desk, working on a story about a fantasy princess who becomes a warrior. It was an old one. I started it when I was a kid. I return to it now and then, sharpen it up. I don’t know if it’s any good.”

“I’m sure it is,” he says, with complete confidence, though he can’t possibly know.

“Then it just hit me. I felt like such an idiot. I rushed to the store. Well, first, I walked down the stairs, one step at a time, one step, one step...”

He chuckles. “Okay, smartass. As much detail as you want, then.”

“I drove to the store, called Chrissy... Uh, Logan, Chrissy knows about us, too.”

I say this before I can chicken out. When he hung up last night, I never dreamed he’d rush here to be with me. I never dreamed he’d... what, follow me? He must have done just that, followed me to the party. Should I feel violated? I don’t.

“I don’t care if the whole world knows about you and me,” he says.

Light flutters through me. So maybe that means I'm not just another quick lay, another fan, another notch in his belt. He said he wasn't a playboy, but then I think about... "But not Dad," I reply.

"He's going to find out. You're going to grow soon."

I swallow. "I can't even think about how he'll react, especially after how you two left things. Or would it be better if you were still friends?"

"We are friends," Logan growls. "Just because I handled this thing like a jackass doesn't mean we're not friends. It's just... complicated."

"Yeah, that's an understatement."

"He shouldn't have told you anything about my childhood," Logan goes on, voice cold. "But... yeah, I consider him a friend. As odd as it may sound, he's my best friend. The closest one I've ever had."

It's also odd that we're sitting like this, me in the front seat, Logan behind, in complete darkness. I want to feel his body, his security. I want to feel arms wrapped around me so that I never have to question if he will be there for me, for us, the baby, but he's right. We'll have to tell Dad eventually.

"Has Dad ever told you about his sister?" I ask.

"He didn't have to. It happened while we lived in the same village—that poor girl. She thought that teacher loved her. She really believed it, and when he got arrested, she walked into the ice. The kids used to say she haunted the area. That was why *Michel* and his family moved. Yes, I remember her."

"He said she used to get this look in her eye," I say, a chilly feeling creeping over me as I think of the aunt I never met. "Haunted, distant, and..."

"And I get that same look," Logan says. "Is that it?"

"Yeah," I whisper. "You have it now."

"It's too dark for you to say that."

I look in the rearview. He's wrong. His eyes glint, sharp, alert. "Whatever happened, it's okay—"

"We're not speaking about this," he cuts in.

I bite down and almost push the issue. It's clear something is eating him up. Maybe he's spent too many years trying to lock it away. He doesn't have to hide it from me, whatever it is. I'll always be here for him. But how can I tell him that without pushing way too hard?

"So you and Chrissy went to the store..."

He wants me to get back to the pregnancy story. "I bought several tests. Did them all. The next day, I went to the doctor to be sure. There's no doubt about it. I'm pregnant."

"We're going to have a baby."

Finally, he touches me. His hand moves from the back of the car over my shoulder. When he squeezes, warmth seeps down my arm, through my body, pushing away any other concerns. I reach up, press down on his hands, then pull away when I remember the cuts on his knuckles.

"It doesn't hurt," he says. "Nothing is as painful as it should be when I'm with you."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Logan

I squeeze her shoulder lightly, feeling heat blaze through her shirt like the fire on the balcony. The fight at the frat house has pumped me up. I could stay awake for days with my woman—holding, kissing, and letting her know how wanted she is.

I can feel the pregnancy signals emanating from her. It's a scent, too. It's tempting every piece of me. I lean forward, moving my hand from her shoulder to her breasts. It's a savage thing for me to do, but the road is quiet. We're in the dark. My body is throbbing, and my instincts are determined. I groan and start massaging when I feel her curviness through her shirt.

“Luh-Logan,” she whispers.

“I've thought about you every single day since I walked out on you,” I groan, slipping my hand under her shirt and bra. I find her nipple and touch it softly. It will get more sensitive further into her pregnancy, won't it? She's going to cream for me as I suck her nipple. “Every second.”

She moans softly, drawing me back to that night, but these moans are even sexier. These are the moans of my pregnant woman.

“W-whoa,” she whimpers.

“What?” I say, stopping my fingers for a moment.

“My nipples feel crazy.”

I laugh softly. “In a good way?”

“Yeah, just be gentle.”

It turns out I was wrong about it happening further into the pregnancy. Hell, what do I know? Just like on the balcony, I forget about the rest of the world. Instead, I focus on my woman’s moans and her nipple between my fingers. I’m so gentle, but I start moving quicker.

She shifts against the seat. I can hear her fingernails scraping against it. “Is this making your pregnant pussy nice and wet for me?” I growl.

“Oh, my... y-yes,” she moans. “I like it when you say that.”

“You like it when I call you my sexy, *pregnant* woman?” I move my fingers faster. “When I say I want to fuck your horny pussy even harder, even more passionately? Because you’re *glowing*, just for me.”

Her moans become wordless. She’s writhing against the seat. I’m captivated. I’ve never learned an instrument, but I imagine this is like that. Moving my fingers, hearing the sweet music, except this is so much more intense. The music is my woman, my future wife.

“Uh... uh... oh, my...” Goddamn. She shivers against the seat, then sits still. Her chest rises and falls. “I can’t believe that.”

“You’ve never creamed from that before?” I snarl, my member pushing hard against my pants, my balls aching with fullness.

“Logan, I’ve never done *any* of this before,” she whispers.

“Come back here with me,” I tell her. “I want to kiss you again. I need it.”

“This is Dad’s car,” she murmurs. “We can’t...”

My balls throb. “I need to taste your lips. Get back here.”

She opens the car door and climbs out. I open the back door and then pull her into my lap. She sits sideways, her legs

draped over me. My dick pushes against her ass. Her thick, sexy thighs are in the perfect position for my hand.

I smooth my hand down her legs, pushing against her pussy through her pants. She moans and leans down into the kiss. I open my mouth and feast on her. Our tongues move against each other as the kiss deepens. I'm addicted to her taste.

She rocks in my lap as I palm her pussy. Her pants get warm and clammy. I rub harder, feeling her wetness. Then I can't take it anymore. I slide my hand down the front of them, down her underwear. I find her eager, fertile slit.

"This isn't fair," she whispers in my ear, her breath hot. "I don't want to lead you on."

"I'll fuck your horny hole soon, baby," I snarl. "I'll take you any damn way I want. I'll bend you over and watch your perfect ass bounce for me. I'll lie you down and watch those tits shake. Or you'll go on top, and I'll hold you, looking into your beautiful eyes, but not at the side of a road."

"Logan," she whimpers.

"All you need to do now is come for me. Come for me so I can feel how ready you are."

I'm telling the truth. I don't want to have sex with her on the side of the road in her dad's car. I don't want to disrespect her or *Michel* like that, but the more I rub her pussy, the less I give a damn. She grinds her ass against me. She squeezes her legs around my hand, then grabs my wrist as though holding me in place.

It's sick and twisted that we can do this and lose ourselves after what we just saw—after the depravity of it and the fighting—but maybe this is why we can do it. The rest of the world is messy, but not me and my Emma. Nothing else matters when we're locked into this spell, as she called it, whether it's a balcony or a car.

I block all that from my thoughts and focus on her soaked slit, rubbing faster. After minutes, my woman can't take it anymore. Her moans get louder. I drive forward with my manhood, letting her feel how rock-solid I am against her ass.

She collapses against me, wrapping her arms around me. Then she kisses my cheek. “We have to stop. We can’t do this, not tonight.”

I know what she means without asking. It’s what I was just thinking about. We both witnessed some harrowing shit, but the chance of her dad catching us didn’t stop us before. This isn’t stopping us now. She kisses me, grabs my face, then leans up to split her legs over my middle.

I greedily sink my hands into her hips. “I thought we had to stop,” I growl.

“We do,” she moans.

I rock with her, pushing my dick through my pants against her crotch. She grinds up and down. “I need you,” I breathe in her ear. “I need your body. I need your pussy. I need to fuck your perfect pregnant body. I need—”

Suddenly, we’re not in darkness anymore. Light cuts across us, throwing the shadow of Emma up against the nearby rocks. The lights get brighter, then turn around the corner. Who knows if the driver saw us? But I can’t risk *anybody* seeing my woman naked, horny, and ready for more.

“Not here,” I say, shifting to the side. “I need a minute.”

She slides out of my lap, sitting on one side of the car. I sit on the other, looking out the window at the darkness. My dick is solid. My tip is leaking with hot precome. My nervous system is reliving the final moments on the balcony, the most intense release of my life.

“Are you okay?” she asks after a while.

“I’m trying as hard as possible not to throw you on these seats and fuck you until I explode inside you.”

“What if…” She shifts across the seat and strokes her hand over my groin. I let out a long moan, the tip of my hard dick pulsing when she moves across it. “Just this? Nobody can see into the car. Just let me help you, Logan. You make me feel so good. I want to make you feel the same.”

“Only me,” I say fiercely. “Nobody else.”

“No, just you.”

“When I saw you walking into that party, I thought...”

“Just. You.” She rubs faster, making it difficult to speak. “Can you tell me what to do?”

I almost call her a *horny virgin*, but only one-half of that is true now.

“Unbutton and unzip my pants. Get my cock out. Then stroke it just like you were. Stroke it until I explode for you. I’d call it a waste, Emma. A goddamn waste. My seed belongs in your tight, perfect pussy, but you’re already pregnant. So this is just for us.”

She moves her hand to my button, unclips it, then pulls my zipper down. I sit up slightly so she can slide my underwear down. Just enough for my cock to spring free. She gasps as she wraps her warm hand around it. I can feel my veins pushing against her palm.

“You’re huge,” she moans. “I can’t believe...”

“Say it,” I growl. “Don’t get shy with me.”

“I’ve never done dirty talk before.”

“Whatever you were about to say, it was hot as hell. Your tone got all playful. All needy. Fuck. Keep talking.”

She smears precome from my swollen end to my base and back again. Her hand gets quicker as my groans deepen. Seed pushes up against my shaft like it’s trying to make me explode. I grab onto her leg and hold tightly.

“I can’t believe your big dick fit inside of me,” she moans, hand slick, moving up and down, up and down. So much heat. I’m fucking bursting for her. “You made me come so hard when you took my virginity.”

“Keep... going...”

I can barely speak. I can’t even think about the chance of somebody catching us. It’s headlights this time instead of her dad. All that exists is her hand, voice, my woman, our future.

“I’m yours, Logan,” she moans. “I... I belong to you.”

“Oh. Emma. Y-yes.”

“I’m yours.” She keeps going, a moan entering her voice when I hold her leg tighter. “Only yours.”

“Yes,” I growl, or I think I do. Speaking is so difficult. I’m lost in my woman. It’s like she’s read my mind as easily as patterns on the ice. She’s seen what I want.

“I got pregnant the first time you fucked me with your big dick. That proves it. Yeah, Logan? Yeah? Are you close?”

“So close,” I grunt. “F-fuck.”

“Wait, I think—”

“Emma,” I groan as the hot seed rushes up my shaft and explodes out of me.

She leans down. Oh, hell. She’s taken my dick in her mouth. She’s got her eager lips wrapped around my cock, making gulping, swallowing noises as she drinks my seed. It’s like instinct is directing her. She knows my come belongs inside of her. If not her horny slit, her mouth.

When I finish, she sits up, wiping her mouth. My head feels light. My entire body does. Everything is floaty in a pleasant way. I didn’t get to be with her after the last time. Well, I chose to walk out, but still.

“Your lips felt so good,” I say, stroking her leg.

“I did it because I didn’t want to make a mess.” She laughs, so cute, as high on me as I am on her. “But when I started swallowing, I sort of liked it.”

“What about it? The taste?” I tease, lightly tickling her side.

“No, it’s a little salty, but just the intimacy. It’s one of the most intimate things you can do with a person.”

I move my fingers to her neck, tickling her gently. “I’m going to taste you soon.”

She puts her hand on my chest and presses. Not as if she wants to push me away, but with enough force for me to know she doesn’t want a round two. It’s probably wise, considering the road.

“Did you... like my dirty talk?” she asks after a pause.

“It was—”

It's more than dirty talk, but I'm starting to think something unlikely. I'm beginning to believe that fate, or something else, is playing a role here. It's the opposite of my usual approach to everything. Just as I'm about to tell her everything, offer myself to her, her cell phone rings.

She leans forward and looks at her phone in the passenger seat. “It's Dad.”

“You should answer it,” I tell her. “He's probably worried.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Emma

I stop across the street from Logan's rental car, my heart pounding at the thought of leaving him, even for a day. We haven't made definite plans yet, except that Logan will get a hotel. We'll see each other tomorrow, but after that—the baby, Dad, the rest of our lives—I don't know.

"I can't believe she told Dad," I murmur, my heart beating even harder. On the phone, Dad said Miss Harris had texted him, thanking him for raising the sort of daughter who would come to her best friend's aid. It would've been a heartwarming text if it didn't mean I had to lie to Dad *again*. He can't know who the masked, so-called mystery man is any more than the police can.

"We're going to have to tell him," Logan says. I study his face in profile, his powerful jaw. He's looking determinedly at the road. "Eventually, he's going to find out. All we can control is how and when we tell him."

"I hate lying to him," I murmur, "but what would we say? *Hey, Dad, your best buddy knocked me up. Maybe you could reconnect?*"

Logan grunts. "That's not funny."

I touch his forearm. He's all taut, like when we were parked in the dark. "I'm sorry. I guess making light of this makes it easier."

“No, I get it,” Logan says, sighing. “It’s far more difficult for you than it is for me. He’s your dad.”

“You said he was your best friend.”

“He is.” Logan laughs in that humorless way he sometimes has. “But that’s only because I’ve been so isolated, without even realizing it, honestly. I’ve always kept to myself.”

I remember how cold he got in the car when he shut down the conversation about his mom. I want to ask if maybe that has something to do with it, but I don’t want to ruin these final moments together. Not *final*, like it’s the end, but it’s going to feel like that when we’re apart.

He leans over and brings his lips to mine. “We’ll see each other tomorrow. A date.”

“We can’t go on a date, can we?” I murmur.

He sighs. “I don’t care if the world sees us. I don’t care if everybody knows, but I understand. I can’t just expect you to tell him right away.”

“I’ve always been so close with him,” I say. “He’s the best dad. It’s the idea of him seeing me completely differently, somebody who would break his trust. It’s eating me up.”

He kisses me with surprising gentleness on the cheek. “Let’s just focus on tomorrow. You’re pregnant. This is good news. We’re going to be parents. We should celebrate.”

“What about your team? What about Dad? What about—”

He kisses me. Somehow, it’s more passionate than any we’ve shared yet. It’s a kiss that allows me to let it all go. I sink against him, press my hands against his chest, and feel his hard body through his shirt. He pushes against me, almost right into my seat.

“You’re too damn tempting,” he groans. “Don’t worry about the rest of the world. Just us for a little while.”

I almost say, *but what about* again, and then he kisses me, and it’s so beautifully easy to forget. As he said, at least for a little while.

“I can’t believe you’re working today,” I say, closing my laptop when Chrissy walks over wearing her barista’s gear. She texted me this morning, telling me to swing by if I was around. I don’t have class today, but I would’ve come by anyway.

She sits opposite, working a hairband around and around her wrist. “I’m not letting those assholes take one day from me, E, not *one* day. I got away lucky. I was next on their pathetic little list. The *losers*. Did you hear how bad Log—that man beat them up?”

I smile when she smoothly corrects herself, not saying Logan’s name, letting her know I’m grateful. I know Chrissy. She’ll never tell a soul, just as I’d never betray her if she asked me to do something, but I understand I put her in an awkward position.

“Yeah, I heard.” I saw the cuts on his knuckles, too.

“I’m glad,” Chrissy says, then leans forward, lowering her voice. The café isn’t super busy, but customers are at nearby tables. It’s a hipster sort of place with guitars and records hanging from the walls. “So, what’s the plan?”

“I don’t know if any of this could be called a *plan*.” I lean forward, too. “He raced here and saved me. Now he’s got a hotel. He wants to have a date later. We can’t go out because the paparazzi might get us, though.”

Then Dad would see. That’s the only reason I have for caring about photos.

“So we’re going to have dinner in his room,” I go on.

Chrissy nods, a soft smile on her lips. “This is great. You were scared he wouldn’t be interested, but look what he did. He left his team and followed you. Whoa, I said *followed you* like it was romantic, but it’s kind of weird. I don’t know.”

I can tell she’s flustered. She snaps her hairband on her wrist. She developed that habit in high school soon after her dad left

her mom. I reach over and gently remove the band, as I have before. “I get where you’re coming from.”

She interlocks her fingers. “*So*, don’t make me waste my break for nothing, girl. What are you going to do?”

“Are you sure you want to talk about this? After last night...”

“Trust me, that’s the last thing I want to talk or think about. No, feed me with the drama of your life, please.”

I shrug. “I don’t know. I’m not sure what we’d even tell Dad. Lying to him is getting so hard, though. Or, not lying, but just being near him, knowing there’s a bunch of stuff he should know. It’s like hurting him on purpose. Willfully doing it.”

“So tell him...”

“Tell him *what?*” I say.

“He’s going to learn about the baby soon anyway.”

“Soon, as in *months*. That’s a lot of time to...”

“To what, E?”

“To think of a better way to handle this!” I wave my hands, then lower them. “I’m so sorry. First, I don’t take you to the hospital right away. Now this. Unloading.”

“Hey, look. I’m here. I’m fine. Just because something bad happened to me and something evil *almost* happened doesn’t mean you have to treat me like I’m made of glass, right?”

I nod. “I’m tired of feeling like a terrible daughter. Everything I want to do will make me an even worse daughter. Every time Logan and I are...” I clear my throat. “Intimate.”

Chrissy grins, a flash of her usual self pressing through her tired features. “I’m so proud of you, girl. You’re normally so shy.”

My cheeks flush. “That was pretty tame compared to the stuff I was saying last night.”

“Oh, do tell.”

I shake my head, angry with myself. “This is what he does to me. He makes it seem okay to have fun and smile, but I’m

betraying Dad every single...”

Again, I shake my head, doubly angry with myself. Chrissy might say it’s okay, but I’m here to support her. She’s so brave for coming to work today when she can probably still feel the effects of the drugs in her system. I can *see* she still feels the impact of the terror of what almost happened.

“This is seriously not important. Tell me about your last bike ride.”

Chrissy rolls her eyes. “You have zero interest in mountain biking.”

“Not anymore. Now, it’s the thing I’m the most interested in, like, ever.”

“*Like, ever,*” Chrissy repeats, imitating my Valley Girl impression.

We laugh, and then she tells me about this trail she biked, the near misses, the jumps, and I realize I should listen more. I’ve been a bad daughter and a bad friend. Her eyes light up when she speaks about this. It’s not that we *never* talk about it, and it’s not like I *always* lie to Dad. It’s the choices I make when it matters that define our relationships.

But I can’t tell Dad, not today, maybe not tomorrow. I know I’m being a coward. There’s no denying it. The most shameful part is I *still* want to see Logan.



“Maya tells me you and Chrissy are staying at a mutual friend’s this evening,” Mom says in that suspicious tone she’s used ever since I was eleven, and she *thought* she smelled cigarette smoke on me. In truth, Chrissy is staying at her boyfriend’s house.

Mom raises her eyebrow from across the living room, her knitting needles clicking away. She took up knitting when she was twenty-one, the day she found out she was pregnant with me. “*When I learned I would be a mother, I knew I finally had*

an excuse.” I’ve never been sure if this is a joke or how she actually got started.

“Yeah,” I say, not looking at her, staring at my laptop screen instead.

Our family isn’t one of lies. Ours isn’t like that. Until recently, we’ve been honest with each other.

“Emma,” she says quietly. “I think you’re going to be staying somewhere else tonight.”

My gaze snaps to her reflexively. “What makes you say that?”

She lays her needles down. “Your reaction, for one, but you’ve never been able to lie to me. You’ve turned almost completely red.”

I almost slap myself across the face—betrayed by my own cheeks.

“I could say the same to you,” I reply, knowing it’s a bitter tactic, but I’m not ready to tell yet. They can’t make me. Gosh, I’m being juvenile. “You know who those men were. The one in the cowboy hat and the hairy one with the tattoos. I know you know them.”

Mom scowls. “You can’t turn this around on me.”

“I’m nineteen. I can stay wherever I want.”

“As long as you’re behaving responsibly and are not in any danger. Yes, of course, but I *think* you’d understand why I’m worried!”

Her voice breaks, and I realize I can add *terrible daughter* times two to my list of failures. She’s probably been talking with Miss Hariss about what happened, imagining me in Chrissy’s position. I put my laptop aside, walk across the living room, and sit beside her.

“Of course, Mom,” I whisper. “I’m safe. Nothing bad is going to happen to me. I won’t be drinking any alcohol. Consuming any drugs. Nothing like that.”

“So, where are you going?” she asks.

The tension is almost painful. I let out a sigh. “To see my boyfriend.”

“Your *boyfriend*?” Mom says, eyes snapping open widely. “Why on earth does that have to be a secret? That’s excellent news!”

“Mom, please,” I say quickly before she starts yelling in excitement and brings Dad in here. “It’s more complicated than that.”

“What? How?”

“He has a girlfriend!” I blurt, the only deranged thing that comes to my mind. “He wants to leave her, but she’s got issues. She’s fragile. They’re working through it.”

It’s like sitting at the keyboard, typing out a story. The disappointment on Mom’s face threatens to shatter me. It reminds me of what will happen if I tell her the *actual* truth.

“He should break up with her before beginning a relationship with you,” Mom says sternly. “I’d rather you found somebody who didn’t start a relationship while already in one. It doesn’t bode well for the future.”

I couldn’t agree more with Mom. Infidelity makes me sick. There’s no excuse for it. “I know, Mom. It’s... complicated.”

“You’ve already said it’s complicated, but I don’t like the thought of this boy taking advantage of you or humiliating his girlfriend. Or *you* being any part of it.”

“I’m not in any danger. That’s what you wanted to know, right?”

“Yes, but I almost wished I hadn’t asked.”

“What if I ask about those men, Mom? The ones who made Dad look the most scared I’ve ever seen him.”

“I love you, Emma. I love you so, so much, but there are some things parents have to handle alone.”

“Well, there are some things daughters have to handle alone, too, it turns out. And I love you too.” After a pause, I ask, “Are you going to tell Dad or Eric?”

“Of course not. It’s not their business, but please be careful.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Logan

I do pushups in the hotel room, mentally replaying the game I just watched. The joke of a defense we put up. The simple tricks on the ice the other team pulled. Feint shots, quick passing, things we should've been all over. Basics we've drilled countless times.

"You're not just a defenseman," Chuck says down the phone as I reach my forty-second rep, my technique not yet affected. "You're the Ice Demon. You have a presence out there. You help people play their best. Your tackles inspire others. I'm not trying to stroke your ego here. This isn't even Tremblay talking through me, but trust me. He's furious."

"I can imagine," I grunt, sinking into another rep. "That was a pitiful defense."

"Some others are talking, Logan, and wondering if you're moving to another team. Is this sabotage? Tremblay was even talking about contracts earlier. You're in breach, technically. They could dock your salary."

"I don't care about the money," I growl.

It's just what I watched: the pathetic defense. Far more than nine mistakes and chaos than I ever allowed on the ice. I grit my teeth. It's almost painful. Not the pushups. Rep number fifty-two and getting close to failure. I did sixty-one last set.

"It's the game, Chuck. The *game*."

“Then get your ass back here.”

Emma’s name appears on my phone screen. *Call waiting.*

“I’ve got to go,” I tell Chuck. “I’ll see you soon.”

I mean it as a general way of saying goodbye, but he answers,

“I hope so, Logan. Really.”

“Hey,” Emma says. “I’m, uh, ready. You said I should call you?”

“Yeah, I’m going to send a car,” I tell her.

“I can grab an Uber.”

“I’ve already hired the car. I just need to send a text. I’d come to pick you up myself, but...”

She sighs. “I know. I’m the holdup here. You’d come and get me if it didn’t mean telling Dad. *You* were the one who said we should try to forget about everything for a little while. The rest of the world. Problems.”

She’s right. I’m being a cold, blunt bastard. It’s the game. It’s replaying over and over in my head. The simple mistakes. The patterns on the ice. I’m thinking about my kid again, about whether or not I will be the sort of man who quits. What kind of example does that set?

“You’re right,” I say, “but I’d prefer to tell him. I can’t lie about that.”

“That’s fair.” Her voice turns into that anxious, withdrawn, low tone that makes me feel so distant from her. Like an ass for treating her like anything other than a queen. “Are you sure you still want to do this?”

“Yes,” I say immediately. I’m as sure as I was on the balcony, in the car, and whenever I’m with her. “I’m sending the car now. Where do you want it to park?”

“At the end of the street would be better. Is that okay?”

Her voice is still quiet. It’s like she’s worried I’m going to snap at her. I need to cool the hell off. “Of course, it is, Emma. Anywhere you want.”

“Okay. See you soon.”

After hanging up, I send the text. Then I go to the window, looking out onto the hilly landscape. Arid. Not like just a couple of nights ago, staring out a window back home at the cold incoming winter. I quickly shower, my thoughts turning to Emma, her curvy body and those hips. There's no risk of anybody catching us this time.

Maybe it's selfish, but by the time I've toweled myself off, I can think about my woman instead of the game. At least I'm able to push the game into the background. What would my daughter think? What would my son think, abandoning my team? Am I supposed to abandon my woman instead?

My cell phone rings. It's Emma. My body goes tight when I remember almost telling her everything last night. The need to claim I feel for her, but I wonder if I even have to say it aloud. Surely, coming here shows her how committed I am to the family. "Hey, I'm outside," she says when I answer.

"I'll come down now."

I swallow, my body turning savage again. Every muscle in me twitches as I ride the elevator down, my cock pushing against the shorts I've hastily thrown on. Luckily, the elevator is empty, but it still would've been better to put something else on. My tip presses right against the material.

My shaft shifts when the doors open, and I see Emma standing at the end of the corridor. My chest clamps when she hurries forward. She walks into the elevator before it closes.

I press the button, balls aching when I look down at her. Her hair is loose against her shoulders. She's got subtle makeup around her eyes with fine black lines. Her cheeks are red. Maybe makeup, maybe just that sweet pregnancy shine. She's wearing a large coat that has me wondering what's underneath.

"Hey," she says with an awkward half-smile.

I smirk. I can't dwell on the game for too long. Not when my woman is so clearly doubting when she never has a reason to. Leaning down, I kiss her passionately. She makes that adorable, almost shocked, whimpering noise. It's like the pleasure always catches her off guard.

Moving my hands down her body, I sink my fingers into her hips through the coat. I feel her curviness, addicted to it, always. Hungry, forever. She moans again when I push her against the wall, driving with my hips so she can feel my member against her.

When the doors open, I step away, relieved nobody is waiting for the elevator. Nobody can see her when she's all flushed and horny. I keep forgetting that.

I take her hand as we walk down the corridor. "It's so good to see you," she says softly. "It doesn't feel like it's been, what, less than twenty-four hours? Not even a day."

I squeeze her hand. "Time does strange things with us. Honestly, it doesn't feel like I met you just six weeks ago."

As I unlock the door, she pulls herself close and kisses my arm. I feel the warm imprint through my shirt. It's so intimate. It feels like something a girlfriend would do. I almost laugh thinking of that. Girlfriend? She's so much more.

"What's funny?" Emma asks as I lead her into the suite.

"When you kissed me, I thought, damn, it feels like having a girlfriend, but we're more than that."

Once I've shut the door, she turns and presses herself against me. Her fingernails dig into my skin as she clings to my neck. I can feel her lust bursting through her. She looks at me with those wide, pretty eyes, subtly ringed with makeup. "Are we?" she whispers.

"You're going to give birth to my baby," I growl. "That means we're connected. That means, as a man, I must do the right thing. I want to do the right thing."

She kisses me on the cheek, then rests her face against my chest. We stay like that, my hand on her shoulder. It's another hard shot of intimacy. It feels new and exciting, like a teenager experiencing my first foray into love. "Were you close with your dad?"

"You want to talk about this *now*?" I say, massaging her thick hips. "When I know you're hiding a beautiful outfit underneath that coat?"

She looks up at me, her hand on my chest. “This isn’t just about sex, Logan.”

I squeeze her hips harder. Her moan betrays her. The lust in her eyes betrays her, too. “No? You sure about that?”

She leans up and pulls herself close, almost off her feet. I grunt and wrap my arms tighter around her, lifting her up. She wraps her legs around me. My manhood bulges against her core, but there’s too much coat there, too many clothes. Carrying her into the living area, I sit her down on the back of the couch, sinking deeper into the kiss, the closeness.

She breaks off the kiss with a tempting moan, tilting her head at me. “Why do I feel you’re interested in only *one* thing tonight, Mr. Ice?”

“I’ll make you a deal,” I growl. “You give that sweet, curvy, pregnant body to me. You offer yourself up to fuck any damn way I want, and I’ll answer any damn question you want me to.”

“That’s a lot of swearing,” she says, laughing. “I hope you don’t have a potty mouth when the babies come along.”

“Babies?” I say, emphasizing the plural as I move my hand up her leg beneath her coat.

She glows. I’ve heard that phrase often about pregnant women, but she really does. “Maybe we’ll have twins.”

I smirk. “Or triplets.”

“Easy there,” she says, with another captivating laugh. Then a frown touches her lips.

“Why are you pouting?” I demand, my cock almost erupting with all the seed.

“You said we’re more than boyfriend and girlfriend because I’m pregnant, right?”

“Not *just* because you’re pregnant,” I say fiercely.

She tilts her head. A cute twitch on her lips. “No?”

I kiss the edge of her mouth. I’ve stopped moving my hand up her leg because I won’t be able to stop. I won’t be able to keep

from massaging her eager slit, slipping my finger inside. “It’s... it’s a smell. It’s instinct. It’s animalistic. Don’t ask me to explain.”

“You said *any* question.”

“Deals go both ways.”

She moans, leaning forward. “I don’t have to make a deal to do *this*.”

She kisses me with a sense of adventure and daring. It’s like it’s as thrilling for her to overcome her shyness as it is for me to skate demon-like across the ice. However, this is heart-pounding for me, too.

I pick her up again, carrying her through the suite. Laying her down on the silk sheets, I stand, resisting the urge to rub my dick. I want to stroke it. Again, an animal need.

“Show me,” I groan, “your perfect pregnant body.”

She sits up, unzips her coat, then stands and slips out of it.

I take a step back. I can’t look away. I can hardly think. Holy *fuck*, she looks so good, smoking hot. Steamy as the flames that heated us the first time I took her. She’s wearing a black corset, pushing those big, juicy tits together. The tights stop at her thighs, showing her naked skin, and there’s a slit that shows her eager, pink pussy. My hands are shaking. My dick’s so hard it almost hurts.

“Do I look sil—”

“Sexy,” I grunt before she can say *silly*. “Jesus. You’ve got me so hard.”

“I bought it after we... I thought if we ever reconnected, but it felt silly. I left it in my closet. Do you really like it?”

I tear my T-shirt over my head, then pull my shorts and underwear down. My cock springs up. Precome leaks hotly out of my tip. “You can see how much I like it. Lie down. Spread your legs. Show me that fertile pussy.”

“I must be, right?” she says with a smile. “I mean, it was our first time.”

“If I could get you pregnant again, I would,” I groan, my dick twitching.

She lies on the bed and opens her legs. I pant as I walk to the edge of the bed and kneel. I reach up and stroke my hands along her body. I greedily sink my fingers into her gorgeously thick legs and kiss her thigh, getting closer to her center.

I smell her scent. It’s as though her fertility, pregnancy, and perfect young body are talking to me. I feel like I’m starving as I open my mouth, lick her clit, and suck on it. I pull it into my mouth and indulgently stroke it with my tongue, pushing down with pressure that makes her hips twitch for me.

I sink my hands deeper into her thighs, listening to her moans, minding the movement of her body, too. My woman makes such hypnotic noises when she’s lost in pleasure. The sounds tell me where to go, but it’s hard to listen. Hard to think about anything else except feasting on her sappy slit.

Her moans get louder, her body moving quicker when I push my tongue into her. I rub her clit with my thumb. I push my tongue deeper, letting her taste blossom across my mouth—so *her*. She whimpers in that telltale way when I tongue fuck her faster and rub her clit with more intent.

Glancing up, I see she’s sitting up slightly, staring down at me with wide eyes, those tits shaking in the pushup bra. I snarl, tonguing her, owning her. Her eyes get wider, and she begins to gasp. She claws at the sheets. She’s nodding and wants to say, *Keep going*, but she can’t speak. She doesn’t need to. I tongue her even quicker, rub her bud, and push against it.

“Ah... ah... ah...”

Her walls flutter around my tongue. She twitches as she creams for me. Then I stand up, cock thick, aching all over. My muscles burn. My seed is desperate to get inside of her. Not her mouth this time. Her slit. So wet, glimmering in the lamplight, and *soaked* for me.

“Any way you want, remember?” she whispers, sitting up. “Where do you want me, Logan?”

I wonder if I should be a gentleman and gently take her when she's on her back. It's only her second time, but I'm too far gone for that. "Let me see that outfit from behind."

She climbs onto her knees and turns. I groan when I see the fabric disappearing between her legs. Her plump, round ass is entirely on display, her beautiful thickness trembling for me as she perches on the bed. "Stick that perfect fucking ass out."

She pushes her hips back and looks at me over her shoulder. Dark hair splays across her eyes, eyes seeming somehow more intense with that subtle makeup. Big, juicy ass presented just for me. "Like this?"

I groan and lean over. I open my mouth and bite down softly on her ass, massaging her with my hand at the same time. She shifts against me. I kiss her, bite, then bite harder. She gasps and shivers against me.

"I want to spank you. Watch your skin go red. Like a rose, Emma. Just for me, but I can't do it too hard. I have to think of the baby."

"Hmm-mm," she moans.

"Is that a yes?" I growl.

"Y-yes," she says in her daring voice, "but not too—"

She cuts off when I bring my hand down on her ass. I lean back, staring as her thickness jiggles for me. Her creamy skin turns a gorgeous shade of pink. "You're mine, Emma. Just mine. Always mine."

"Just yours," she says, biting her lip. Then she whispers, "Is this just dirty talk?"

I spank her again. I could never tire of her moans, whimpers, and shaking, voluptuous ass. I greedily bury my hands in her ass, massaging, squeezing. Then I climb onto the bed and slot my shaft between her thick thighs.

"What did you say?"

She shakes her head.

I grab my dick and guide my tip to her entrance. The fabric of her outfit is wet from where I feasted on her slit. Her pussy's so soaked it's gleaming. I grind my tip up and down her hole and around it, teasing her and torturing myself. "Tell me."

"It's just... You own me, Logan."

"Yes." I push against her, feeling her spread for me. "Always."

"Just when we have sex?" She twists around, looking at me boldly. "Or... *really* always?"

"Always," I groan. "The first time I saw you..."

I slid my tip in, looking down at her tight pussy gripping my dick.

"Y-yeah?" she moans.

"On video chat. In the background, you were wearing a tank top and no bra. Those big nipples were showing. So juicy. Your body was *made* for me. Fertile as fuck. Made to give me a family."

I push deeper and deeper, my dick disappearing into her.

"Look at me," she moans, voice strangled as though she's forcing the words out.

I look up and find her staring at me. Her eyes get that slightly watery look. Like she's feeling so much pleasure, she's almost crying with the release. "Do you mean it? The first time?"

"The..." I slide deeper. "First..." Even more. "*Time.*"

I fall against her, laying my torso flat against her back, reaching around, slipping my hand inside her bra, and touching her nipples. She gasps, our faces pressed together as I lean down.

"I was the same." Each word sounds like a struggle for her as her pussy grips my entire shaft. She's holding on like she's working up to another release. "When I s-saw you... the f-first time."

I slide out of her slowly. "Is that the truth?"

“Yes,” she whimpers. “I swear... the first time. I knew I wanted to be with you. Have your babies.”

“Then you’re as crazy as me.” I pull out, leaning back, letting me look at her ass. “And I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“Oh, *heck...*”

I push all the way into her, almost losing it when her warmth wraps around my base. She pushes back against me, her hands clawing at the sheets. I don’t know which part of her to look at. There’s lust in her hands as she opens and closes them against the silk. Her big ass bounces against my abs as I pound into her. I gaze into her eyes as she turns and looks up at me. Our eyes meet and hold contact.

“Forever,” I snarl, almost roar. “For. Ever.”

She nods, biting her lip. We go like that for a long time. Or maybe it’s not long at all. I don’t care because it feels like forever, this moment. I’m lost in it, my entire length aching, the pleasure building.

Finally, my woman creams down my dick, a thick, white release that pushes against her hole when I thrust back inside. I stare as her release smears over her skin, making the globes of her curvy ass even shinier for me. I lean down again, pushing my body against her back, wanting to be as close as possible when I—

All-consuming heat. All-consuming sensation. The end of my dick is on fire as seed burns out of me. I bite softly on her shoulder, tasting her sweat as our bodies shift together. It’s like we’re becoming one person. Like we’re going one step further than even marriage. We’re bonding. We’re *one*.

The release passes. I stay atop her, kissing the place I bit.

“Did you mean it?” she asks quietly.

“Every word. The first time I saw you...”

I lie down, gesturing to her. She’s even more flushed, even more excited. She falls into my arms. I squeeze her against me and kiss the top of her head.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Emma

“So you don’t believe in soulmates?” I say, perched on his chest, feeling so many warm sensations flurrying through me that I’m giddy. I can’t even *imagine* letting anything else into my head. It’s only us. Me and my man. Oh, heck, is this real? It *feels* real!

He smirks. “Is that so surprising?”

“How do you explain us, then?” I ask. “If you knew you wanted me the first time you saw me, and I knew I wanted you... What’s that, if not soulmates?”

He gets a calculating look in his intense blues. “I don’t know. Maybe my genetics are perfectly matched to yours. Maybe I somehow knew, through a video chat, you were my woman...” he trails off doubtfully. “But that makes less sense than the soulmate thing.”

I laugh, not even for any particular reason. His phrasing it as *the soulmate thing* is not even inherently hilarious. It’s just all this happiness flooding through me, like the most effective potion a witch ever brewed. It’s as if I’ve been struck with Cupid’s arrow and a whole bunch of love. “The soulmate thing?”

He smirks. His eyes have a glint, reflecting the low lamplight, but it’s far warmer than usual. He’s not the Ice Demon here. He’s the freaking *fire* demon. Am I being a dork? I feel like

singing. It's crazy. He meant it. He said it. We're talking about it—really, really being together.

A nasty imp in my mind hisses, "*But what about Dad?*"

"I don't have to understand it," he says, his hand stroking up and down my shoulder, sending tendrils of warmth through me. "All I know is *before* you were pregnant, I wanted to make you pregnant. I needed you, and not just that. I needed to be close to you and make you my woman. I tried to fight it. I was getting on so well with Michael. It was like the old days."

He coughs and clears his throat. I'm unsure if he actually needs to clear it or if it's a manly way to push his emotions down, but he can't hide them from me anymore. "I was—I am—certain. That's why I had to come here when you told me you were pregnant. That's why I have to be with you. You mean so much to me already."

I kiss his chest and taste his sweat. It's curious and interesting how things that would be gross if I thought about them before—tasting his sweat, my body on his lips when we kiss, or his release—feel so intimate, starry, and warm now. "You mean everything to me."

We don't say anything for a while. I get comfortable, closing my eyes and resting my cheek against his chest. I know we'll order room service in a while, but for now, it's enough to lie here with him and listen to his heart beating in his strong, powerful chest.

"Did you forget about the deal?" he asks into the silence.

I kiss his chest. "Nah, I was biding my time."

He chuckles. "If there was ever a time I'd answer questions, it's now with you."

"You seemed pretty pissed last night when I asked."

His hand tightens on my shoulder. It's like a reflex, as if any gesture toward the past ignites pain. Slowly, he releases the grip, but if he needed to hold on, even if it hurt—which it didn't—I'd let him if it helped him vent. "Ask me, Emma," he says with extra intensity. "A-ask me."

I breathe slowly. I sense this is a big deal for him. “I don’t want to force you,” I whisper.

“I’ve never talked about it. I feel like an ass even thinking about it, but seeing Michael maybe brought some of it back. I’m a grown man.”

“You don’t have to be ashamed. If you’ve never talked about it, how the heck is it supposed to heal?”

He shudders, then laughs as if trying to put himself down. “It’s the past. It’s sad, Emma, and pathetic, having nightmares and letting it define me. It helped in its own way. It helped me.”

“You are *not* pathetic,” I say firmly. “Don’t even think that. It’s ridiculous. You’re a good man. Look what you did at the frat house. Nobody asked you to do that. You could’ve been hurt.”

“I didn’t think,” he replies. “I just did it. That’s when I usually worked best before I met you. Now, if I don’t think, I’ll claim you, over and over, whether or not your dad gives us his blessing.”

My belly tightens. “I want his blessing. I don’t want to ruin things with him.”

He kisses my head. “I know. Don’t worry. That’s what I’d do if I didn’t *think*, just acted, but I have to think. We both do.”

I shift up the bed, then sit up to look at him. He sits up, too, frowning down at me with more sadness in his eyes than I’ve seen so far. Worse, there’s this shimmer of *shame* around him, as if he really believes he’s pathetic, but he’s not. He never could be.

“You can tell me,” I whisper, taking his hand. “Whatever it is.”

“It’s probably not even a big deal. I’m making it seem like that. Blowing it out of proportion.”

“You *don’t* have to downplay your feelings.”

“Feelings? I never had those before I met you.”

“I bet you did. You just buried them.”

He sighs and nods. “Maybe you’re right. If I did that, I did one hell of a job. I never had to worry about them before you.”

I wait, sensing he wants to go on, but he’s not sure quite how. It’s understandable. I’ve had Chrissy, Mom, Dad, and even Eric sometimes. We’ve had deep, emotional talks, but Logan hasn’t had anybody. By the sounds of it, not even his team. He considers Dad his best friend, even though Logan was eleven the last time he saw him. My chest tightens for him. My heart aches. He deserves better. I’m going to *give* him better.

“I thought it was normal,” he says, laughing darkly. “You asked about my dad. No, I wasn’t close to him. I never knew him. I only learned who he was a few years ago. By then, it was too late. He’d passed on.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine,” he says with another laugh.

“Nothing’s funny,” I whisper.

“Maybe I have to laugh,” he grunts.

“I’m just so sorry.”

“My mother was ill. Schizophrenic. I didn’t know that at the time. I believed everything she told me since I was a kid.” Another laugh that breaks my heart, husky like he’s holding back tears. “Other parents tell their children there aren’t monsters in the closet. My mom, the poor woman, convinced me an army of monsters lived in our house. I know it sounds like nothing.”

“You don’t have to keep downplaying it,” I say softly, leaning up, kissing the light stubble on his cheek. “You were a child. That would have terrified me. You believe everything your parents tell you without question.”

“And that’s just it,” he goes on. “It took me years to realize what she said wasn’t true. It was after *Michel* left. I think I was around fourteen or fifteen when I realized. Every night since I can remember, Mom set up a rocking chair in the corner of my bedroom. She slept during the day. I know now she had money from my dad, so she didn’t have to work. She rocked in her

chair and watched me. Sometimes, she described the monsters in the room with us.”

I blink, tears stinging my eyes and flowing down my cheeks. “Oh, Logan.”

“It’s okay,” he says, but his voice is shaking too. “I was a kid. Dammit. It was *decades* ago.”

Neither of us says anything for a while, and then he keeps talking, his voice low. “But like I said, it helped me. Mom let me do whatever I wanted in the day. I went to school, stayed quiet, played hockey, and that was it. I skated like a demon until my whole body was sore until I could hardly walk.”

“Because otherwise,” I whisper, the tears flowing freely now, “you wouldn’t be able to sleep.”

“Exactly.” He sighs. “Even if I got to sleep, sometimes, Mom would wake me up. She’d say she just fought one of the monsters away. She had different names for different types...”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Ones with claws. One who belched acid. It all sounds so not scary, but it was back then.”

“Logan,” I say firmly, pushing past the sobs, trying to choke my words. “It sounds terrifying. As a little kid, being woken up every few hours, always on edge, thinking somebody would hurt you and your mom.”

He leans back against the headboard, closing his eyes. I watch him through blurry eyes as he swallows what looks like a sob. He pushes it away. I want to tell him it’s okay. He can cry if he wants, but clearly, he doesn’t want to. When he opens his eyes, he seems steadier.

Gently, he strokes the tears from my cheeks. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“You deserved better than that,” I tell him. “Every child does.”

“*Our* child will,” Logan says forcefully. “Look at your parents. They’re an example of how to do it right. We’ll be like them. We’ll never hurt our kids. We’ll protect them. They’ll do

sports if they want to but because *they* want to. Not so they can fall into a coma every night.”

“We’ll give them so much love,” I say.

“Love,” he repeats, looking down at me. For a second, I think he’s going to say *I love you*, but then he nods. “Yeah, we will. All the love in the world.”

A thought occurs to me. “Is that why you’re called Ice Demon? In homage, or a middle finger, to your childhood?”

“No,” he replies, with a slight smirk, a shadow of a real smirk. “That was a coincidence.”

“How did you realize the monsters weren’t real?” I ask. “You said you were fourteen.”

“It was small things,” he says. “When I was six or seven, or even nine or ten, she would say, *I just fought with a monster, Edouard*. I believed her, but as I got older, I started questioning it. Where are the cuts? The bruises? Wasn’t there a scuffle? Things like that.”

“Wait, who is Edou... How do I say it again?”

He smirks wider this time. “That’s my birth name. Edouard Boucher.” He pronounces it in a heavy French-Canadian accent. “That was how I sounded as a kid, but I moved out young and joined the minor leagues. I left my old life behind me, including my old name. Logan Ice. Logan after Wolverine, a Canadian superhero, you know, from *X-Men*. Michael used to loan me those comics and Ice because it’s all I’ve ever known. All I ever knew before you.”

My head spins. “So, what should I call you?”

He chuckles. There’s still a hint of pain in his eyes, but it seems to have retreated somewhat. “Logan. It’s my name. Legally. It’s who I am. I’ll admit I chose the name when I was eighteen. As I get older, I wonder if it’s too blunt. Logan Ice.”

“No, it’s great. You sound like you were destined to be a hockey star.” I pause. “But I guess you made your own destiny. I’m surprised the media hasn’t dredged this up.”

“I come from a tiny village. It was fairly simple to bribe local councilors to amend my birth certificate. I know it’s wrong, committing a crime.” When I slide my hand over his scraped knuckles, he laughs gruffly. “I’ve committed worse recently.”

“No, both were justified. I get it. You couldn’t be that scared little boy anymore. You had to forge your own path.” After a pause, I ask, “What about your mom? What happened to her?”

“She moved in with my aunt when I left home. She was scared of me going out into the world on my own. She thought the monsters would get me. I tried to talk to her, but she wouldn’t listen. She left the county. After that, she got help. A few years ago, she reached out. That’s how I know who my dad is. Was.”

Conflicted emotion surges through me. This is his mother, and she was ill. “Did you talk?” I ask.

Logan grits his teeth. “Not much. It was easier to tell her I was busy. I’d been sending her money through my aunt for years. When she said she wanted to meet me, I offered to send her more.”

“And what did *she* say?”

“She stopped accepting my money. She said she wanted her son back instead. What was I supposed to say to that? I couldn’t handle it. I focused on the game. It was easier.”

“Did she say sorry?” I ask softly.

“Yeah, she did, but it wasn’t about whether or not she was sorry. It was what you said—not being that kid anymore.”

“Maybe...”

He closes his hand around mine. “I know she’s changed. I know she was ill, but...”

“It still hurts,” I murmur.

“Not as much as this will,” he says, his hand tightening around mine. “I don’t want to. I mean that, Emma. This is the last thing I want to do, but I have to leave.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Logan

It's shocking how easy it was to tell Emma about the past, my name, and everything else. Maybe it was the relief of emptying myself inside her, joining with her, and then being able to *hold* her after. All the ice in me melted away as we lay together, the scent of our sex all around us.

Now she frowns. Her eyes are puffy from making her cry. "L-leave?"

I realize she might think I mean forever. I swallow. It's like a weightlifting workout, my muscles tearing and breaking down as though to keep me here. I know that's not literally happening, but it feels so real. "My team needs me. At this rate, we'll dig ourselves into a hole."

"Mess up your ranking?" she asks.

"Pretty much." I groan. "Honestly, I'm ready to retire."

She gasps. "*What?*"

I smirk somehow, but that's what it means to be with Emma. She can stir deep memories and drag me through so much pain. *Still*, there's light inside us both. "Don't look so shocked. In professional athlete years, I'm ancient. With the baby coming along, it makes sense. I've been smart with my money. Our kids, hell, *their* kids won't want for anything."

“We won’t spoil them, though, will we? I want them to be happy and to have a purpose. I’ve met a few trust fund kids through college. It’s not pretty.”

“We’ll give them drive,” I say passionately. “I’m glad we’re on the same page about that. What I mean is I don’t have to work. You don’t, either, unless it’s something you *want* to do.”

She cuddles closer to me, kissing my chest. I love when she does that. I love the way her hair falls across her face. “It’s not about the money. It’s the security. Knowing we’re going to get through this together.”

“I’m ready to retire,” I go on, “but I can’t leave my team in the lurch. I need to finish the season. It’s in my contract, but that’s not the point. The boys deserve it. My full attention. Or as much of it as I can give.”

I grit my teeth. My temples are pulsing. Leaning down, I kiss Emma on the lips. That relaxes the tension in my jaw. She kisses me passionately, her fingers trailing up my arm.

“But I don’t want to be away from you,” I say. “Come with me.”

“To Canada?” she replies quickly. “What about college? What will I tell Mom and Dad?”

“Tell them we’re together. Tell them we’re going to raise our baby *together*. I’ll come with you. We can sit them down and...”

“No, no, just wait.” She shakes her head, then sits up and sits on the edge of the bed. “I... I need to clean up. I’ve been lying here in this silly outfit.”

“Don’t call it sil—”

Silly, but she’s already run into the en suite. She shuts the door and locks it. I sit up, find my shorts and T-shirt, then wait for her in bed. She’s still wearing the outfit, her hand on her chest. “Klutz that I am, I left the bag in the car.”

“It was in the trunk?”

“In the backseat with me.”

I pick up my cell phone. “Don’t worry. I’ll have the driver drop it at the hotel lobby.”

She sits on the bed, wringing her hands. The animal in me is tempted to fall to my knees, bury my face in her cleavage, and suck her sensitive nipples, but this is serious. We have to think now. We have to plan. “I want to tell them,” she says after a pause, “but not now.”

“When, then?” I say. She throws her hands up and turns to me. Her face is red, and her eyes flood with more emotion. I walk around the bed and take her into my arms. “I don’t want to rush you.”

“I mean it, Logan,” she says passionately. “I really want to tell them, especially after tonight and all we shared. I feel like we belong together.”

“That’s because we do,” I say with confidence. “Just me and you. For the rest of our lives.”

She clutches onto my side tightly. “That’s all I want, but when I picture the future, I see Mom and Dad at family barbecues. I see Dad with his grandson or granddaughter on his knee. I see Mom teaching our daughter to knit.”

I swallow. My lack of regular family structure is showing. I only see Emma and the babies when I think of the future, but she’s right. The children deserve to have as many loving people in their lives as possible.

“Is there a way to make that happen?” I ask. “You know your parents. Is there a way to make them understand?”

“Maybe,” she murmurs. “I don’t know. Maybe if... Maybe if I told them while you were away. Then, if they agree to speak with you, we can get on video chat or something.”

“I’ll be flying down for that,” I tell her. “Even if it’s just for a few hours. That sort of conversation has to happen in person, but I’d rather—”

“I know,” she cuts in, “but I just can’t do it tonight or tomorrow. It’s too fast. It’s...”

She trails off. I decide to stop badgering her about it. She's emotionally torn, plain and simple. I won't hammer the point yet, but what if she starts showing before her parents know?

"It's okay," I whisper. "I want you to know something." I lean down, kiss her briefly, tasting her. "I don't want to leave you, but I have to do the right thing. That means finishing the season. When our kids are old enough to understand, I want to tell them I did that. I want to set an example for them."

"You're going to be an incredible example," she says. "They're going to look up to you, love you, and respect you because you will be an amazing father."

"How can you say that?" I whisper.

She leans up and presses her lips against mine, letting me feel her emotion. The certainty in her kiss. The *love*. I can feel it all. Then she moves away just a bit, enough for us to stare into each other's eyes. "I can see how concerned you are to be a good dad. I can see how much it means to you, and heck, you're Logan Ice. When you put your mind to something, you get it done."

"I'm going to do everything I can to be the best dad," I say fiercely. "I'll read all the books. Come to the classes."

She bites down, and I know why. She's not coming to Canada with me. We can't discuss the later months of pregnancy until we have her parents' blessing. She wants to return to our usual ways, disappearing into the now. Pretending nothing else exists. Like the balcony, the fire.

"How is this long-distance thing going to work?" she says quietly. "You know, in the meantime, while I work out how to tell Mom and Dad."

She shudders, making a croaking noise. I know it's going to be difficult for her. She wants to do it her way. I have to respect that.

"I'll call you up as many times as I can before you get sick of me," I say, smirking.

"Yeah..." She smiles. "Just... We'll have to be careful. Eric's room is right next to mine." When I sigh, she says, "I'm sorry."

Really. I'll try to figure it out."

I hold her tighter. "Don't stress about it. That's the last thing you need, and the *baby* needs too. I promise everything is going to work out."

"How can you know that?" she whispers.

I close my eyes and let my lips rest on the top of her head. I savor her warmth, her closeness. "I just know."

I know something else. Every day, every minute we're apart, it will hurt. Physically tear me up, but that's what being a father is—doing the right thing, the noble thing, even when it's hard, especially then.

"Our kids will hear about all this one day," I say. "The crazy way we met. They'll laugh. Make jokes. *Michel* will be there too. One of our kids will be sitting on his knee. Angela will be knitting in the corner. *Michel* said she likes to knit."

She squeezes tightly onto my side, shaking slightly. I think she's crying again. I kiss the top of her head.

"I promise," I say fiercely. "We're going to be together. All of us. One big happy family." My voice gets choked up. I've never had that. A family, but now, maybe... I think about my mom and imagine her in the scene, rocking in her chair. "Maybe I'll even reach out to Mom. She's almost seventy. She was never healthy."

"It's your choice," Emma says. "I'll support you either way."

I lean down and kiss her again. "I wish I could stay. If you asked me, I would, Emma. If you told me you needed me here and to abandon my team, I'd do it."

"I can't do that. I want to be with you, but you're making the right decision, especially if this is your last season. Think about your legacy. Maybe you won't regret it immediately, but you will one day. Being the man who ran out on his team." She leans back in my arms and wipes her cheeks. It's like this is hurting her to say. "I wish we never had to be apart, but this is the real world. We have to be mature about it. We can make it work."

“Me, mature?” I say, kissing away her tears. “I’m not mature, Emma, just old.”

“Oh, hush. You’re thirty-six. Even if you think you’re ancient in professional athlete years, you’re *not* ancient in real ones.”

“Either way, people are going to talk. They’re going to call you a gold digger. They’re going to call me a cradle robber.”

“Let them say anything they want,” she hisses passionately, staring up with that captivating fight in her eyes. “I don’t care. If Dad, Mom, and Eric support us, nobody else matters. Just me and you. Just our children.”

I love you, I almost say like I did earlier. I got so close, but I couldn’t crack myself open completely. Not until I know we’re getting our happily ever after *if* we do.

“I feel the same,” I tell her. “The world can have any damn opinion they want. We know we are made for each other.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TWO WEEKS LATER

Emma

I sit on Chrissy's beanbag, my chest aching like crazy, which is pretty much the norm these days. My head hurts, too, aching from lack of sleep. It feels like pressure constantly expands inside of me. I groan and rub my face.

Chrissy wags her finger at me, causing her bracelets to clink together. "Why are you groaning, huh?" She just asked me, *So, when are you telling your dad?* "It's been two weeks of secret texting. Phone calls. Two weeks of you telling me you'll rip the Band-Aid off. Then nothing."

I sit up, glaring at her. "I've already told you. We're not talking about this crap. You just said it—two weeks. It's only been *two weeks* since you—"

"Nope, nah-uh. Jeez, E. Okay, I was drugged, but those men are in jail. In fact, I'm pretty sure the cops have stopped looking for Mr. Vigilante, so *that* story has a happy ending, at least. Apparently, the weirdos even gave up their friends who ran."

"That's great news!"

"*But,*" Chrissy goes on, fidgeting in her computer chair, twisting it from side to side, "none of that means you have to treat me differently. It's in the past. There are only so many times I can talk about the one freaking bike trail I've been to this past month, okay? So let's cut. The. Crap." She claps her

hands with each word. “This is making you miserable. You haven’t slept. It’s not good for anybody. You need to tell them.”

I stand up, wanting to yell, but I can’t, not at Chrissy. I want to yell at myself for being such a coward. My life has taken on a routine these past two weeks: video chatting with Logan mid-day when Dad’s out with the volume turned low. The camera sex. The *phone* sex. Logan’s team is winning again.

“I’m sorry,” Chrissy says. “I didn’t mean to yell at you, but it’s painful, E. Watching you eat yourself up. Look at me. Look at what happened, but it’s *over*. Not knowing, imagining all the worst-case scenarios. That’s the really bad part.”

I rub my eyes. She’s completely right, which makes arguing with her impossible. Whenever I think about telling Dad, his reaction surges into my head, his face malformed from the hate. “I should’ve told him the day Logan left. Every day, we’ve made it worse with more sneaking around. Dad doesn’t even know why Logan ghosted him. It was because of me, of how he felt. Logan *wants* to be Dad’s friend, but he can’t reach out until Dad knows.”

“Why not?” Chrissy asks.

“Logan doesn’t want to lie to him. He wants to tell him, and it’s not like we’ve got forever.” I let my hand move over my belly. Chrissy’s retro-style digital clock reads *December* above the time. “I have to do it. Soon. Tonight.”

“Is Logan getting impatient?” Chrissy asks.

“He doesn’t talk about it unless I bring it up. Honestly, I don’t think he has the time. Logan’s very good at cordoning off parts of his mind. Do you know what I mean?”

“Compartmentalizing?”

“Yeah, that’s it,” I say, nodding. “It’s like he’s a computer. He’s passionate. Don’t get me wrong, but in terms of his focus, it’s impressive. It’s like he only has enough bandwidth for me and hockey. There’s nothing wrong with it. It’s nice. He’s respecting my decision to wait until I’m ready.”

“But you’re never going to be ready,” Chrissy fills in for me. “You’re never going to *feel* ready. You’re always going to have doubts.”

“I know.” I grip my hands together, squeezing, thinking of the baby. That reminds me. Taking my backpack from Chrissy’s bed, I get my folic acid capsules. I take it with some bottled water, wiping my mouth. “I have to tonight. I-I promise *you*, okay, Chrissy? I’ve never broken a promise to you, have I?”

“Not that I can think of.”

“Then I promise you. I’m telling Dad tonight.”

“How was training?” I ask, the phone on speaker as I drive home, the pit in my belly opening wider and deeper the closer I get.

Logan’s voice comes husky through the speaker system. “I can’t wait for the season to be over. That’s how it’s going.”

“You’re playing well, though. You almost got a top-ten record last game, didn’t you? For goals scored by a defenseman? You know, to go with the two spots you *already* hold.”

I can hear the smile in his voice. “Somebody’s been doing her homework. I’m only doing well because I think of you before each game—you and our child. I think about telling them about my last season. That almost gets me to where I need to be. That almost makes me the Ice Demon.”

“What gets you the rest of the way?” I ask.

“The anger,” he snarls, “of not being with you. I wish you were here.”

“College semester will be over soon,” I murmur, “and it’s early in the pregnancy. I think I’ll be okay to fly.”

He lets out a shuddering breath. “I want that so badly.”

“That’s why I’m going to do it. Tonight.” A pause, and I say, “Logan?”

“I heard you. That’s good, Emma, but don’t feel rushed.”

“What’s wrong?” Then I realize, of course. “It’s because of last week, right?”

I said I would tell Dad *then*, too, but as I approached him, I seized up. It was like my ability to speak just left me. I felt so weak and pathetic.

“I know you’re going to do it,” he says.

“You’re just not sure I’ll do it *tonight*.”

“I’m sorry, Emma. I’m not angry with you.”

I laugh like Logan does sometimes—gruff, almost darkly. “Maybe that’s part of the problem. It might be easier if you yelled at me and demanded that I tell him.”

“I don’t want to shout at you. I just want to be with you.” He sighs. “Anyway, I have to focus. I feel like a selfish ass, but it’s the truth.”

“No, it’s not selfish. You’re doing the best for your team and your legacy. I wish I were there to massage your sore back after a game.”

“I’d be doing some massaging of my own,” he says breathily. “Anyway, tell me about your story. You said you’d written four thousand words? What’s happened?”

“Nah-uh. You have to wait until I finish it.”

He chuckles. “I love it when you do that with all the voices you do. I can’t wait to watch you read to our baby. They’re going to love it too.”

There are lots of “*loves*” in there, but neither of us has outright said it. It seems like an immature thing to fixate on, yet I find myself longing to hear it.

“I’m almost home,” I tell him. “I’ll speak to you later.”

“It’ll probably be tomorrow now,” he says. “We’ve got an early training session. Then some drills. I wish I could spend the whole night with you and hold you, but...”

“I understand,” I tell him. “We’re more than boyfriend and girlfriend, remember? We can make this work.”

After we say goodbye, I pull into the driveway, climbing from the car. It’s the family sedan. The door’s still dented from a couple of weeks ago when Logan smashed the masked man against it. Dad’s not usually the type to leave the car busted for so long, but he’s been busy with work lately.

I walk into the house. It’s after seven. Mom is sitting on the couch, her legs tucked up, watching TV with a magazine on her lap. Eric sits on the other chair, playing his Nintendo Switch with his headphones.

“Evening, hon,” Mom says. “There’s lasagna in the oven.”

“Okay. Thanks.”

However, I have to make a stop first. I can’t let myself go one more second without telling Dad the truth. I can’t allow any more sneaking around, any more cowardice. It’s time to do the right thing, just like Logan is, even if it hurts him to be away from me and the baby. He’s playing his game, focusing on the *now*. That’s how I’ll have to do this, one step at a time.

I approach his office and knock.

“Wait a second,” he snaps, his tone uncharacteristically taut.

I step back, breathing slowly. Maybe it’s a work call. My mind flits to those dangerous-looking men, but Mom won’t tell me anything about them. When I asked Dad, he told me they were work friends. That’s what he called them—*work friends*.

Finally, the door opens. Dad’s eyes are bloodshot. He doesn’t look good at all. “I’m busy,” he says bluntly.

“Dad, I—”

He shuts the door hard. He doesn’t *slam* it. I wouldn’t go that far, but he closes it more forcefully than expected. I hear his footsteps pounding across the office.

Turning, I go into the kitchen and dish up some lasagna. I don’t even want to eat, which is unusual for me. Logan is always encouraging me to keep the baby healthy. He’s right. I have to put the baby first.

Afterward, I go upstairs, shut the door, and wonder what the heck is going on with Dad. Maybe it's those men. Maybe something bad is happening. I've never seen his eyes so bloodshot and with that panicked look. No, not *never*. That day on the porch, I saw it.

I'm so tired from not sleeping last night that I pass out in my clothes. Like the norm these days, I wake up a few hours later at one a.m. At least I'm getting plenty of practice for when the baby arrives.

I need the bathroom. I walk into the hallway and push on the door. It's locked. "Occupied," Eric says.

I groan. "How long?"

"Don't blame me. Blame the curry Jack's mom made us for lunch."

"Ew, Eric."

I walk down the stairs. I'll use the downstairs bathroom instead. I hear Dad's voice from his office when I reach the bottom step. He's still in there?

I creep—that's right, *creep*, this is so wrong—toward the office. The door is slightly open, a triangle of lamplight coming from inside. The closer I get, the louder Dad's voice becomes, though it's still low, a secret hiss. He probably doesn't think anybody will be awake or, at least, downstairs at this hour, hence the open door.

"That's not what I'm saying, Logan."

What. The. *Fuck*? Dad is talking with Logan? Since when?

I crouch down next to the door. If somebody somewhere is keeping a list of all my daughterly infractions, they can definitely add *eavesdropping* to the list.

"No, I know. I *know*, Logan." Dad sounds pissed. Has Logan already told him about us? I don't get it. "We can't solve this by arguing."

Crap. A floorboard just creaked. Dad trails off. I hear his footsteps, quieter but still angry as earlier, walking toward the door. I hurry into the hallway. Dad leaves the office and looks

up and down, clearly hiding something. I peep through the gap in the stair rail.

Dad frowns, turns, and goes back inside. I want to hear the rest of the conversation but can't risk getting caught.

We can't solve this by arguing...

Logan wouldn't have told him, would he? Not without warning me?

CHAPTER TWENTY

L o g a n

“Got ya,” Chuck says, jogging after me in the hotel lobby.

It’s the middle of the night, and I’ve got an overnight bag gripped in my hand. I could throw the straps over my shoulders, but I’d rather hold it like this. Squeeze it tight. Let out some of the rage. The anger at the phone call, at what *Michel* said.

“I thought I heard your door open,” Chuck says. “Disappearing on us again?”

“I’ll be back in time for the game,” I tell him, “but I need to take care of something.”

Chuck runs a hand through his wild red hair. “Listen, man. If you don’t want to tell the others what’s going on, that’s cool, but we’re the *old men* of hockey. We owe it to each other.”

“You’re going to be the old *man* soon, my friend,” I reply.

“Wait, you’re retiring?”

“I’m finishing the season, but then, yes. Yes, I am.” I let out a breath. Maybe it’s the idea of seeing my woman again after what feels like years. The fact it’s only been two weeks seems ridiculous to me. “In fact, I’m going to have a baby with the love of my life.”

Chuck gawps. “Holy... Whoa, man! That’s great!” He leaps forward and throws his arms around me. “That’s seriously

great news.”

After a pause, I awkwardly return the hug. “Don’t tell anybody. I mean it. It’s complicated. I need to handle some things before anybody can know.”

“Say no more, partner,” Chuck says, miming zipping his lips, “but I mean it. Hell yeah. A kid! Look at you, man. You’re smiling again. She must be one special lady.”

I let the smile grow wider. “Yeah, she is. She’s perfect.”

I’m not smiling when the plane lands in Cali. I’ve spent the flight handling business and making arrangements. On-plane Wi-Fi has helped me get a *lot* done. Hopefully, all the nasty pieces are in place.

As I disembark the plane, I think about what I’ve got to do and the path ahead. Michael believes something like this can be settled with money. He thinks the big superstar Logan Ice can throw cash at the problem, and suddenly, like magic, there’s no problem anymore.

He’s wrong. I’m not settling this with cash. There are some things money can’t solve, and this is one of them. Walking through the airport in my shades and hat, I’m relieved I managed to sneak through without being recognized.

Michael is waiting for me, awkwardly standing beside his car. I remember what Emma said about him telling her about my mom. I wouldn’t have opened up to his daughter had he never done that. I never would’ve felt so fused to her that night. The night we revealed the truth. We *both* want this. Need this. We’re both going to fight for it.

I swallow guiltily when I reach Michael. From where he stands in the early morning sun, I can see how pale his cheeks are. He looks like he’s on the verge of a breakdown. Or slowly recovering from one. He looks far worse than the last time I saw him, the night I took his daughter’s virginity.

“You didn’t have to come,” he says, stepping forward.

I raise my hand, clap him on the arm, and do my best to smile. There's so much he doesn't know, like inside jokes with his daughter and the heat we've shared. As we stand in the Cali sun together, I remember the lake. The long games of hockey. *You're an animal, Logan.* It's funny. He didn't call me Logan when we were kids, but in my memory, that's the name I hear—the name I chose. Maybe for childish reasons, but it's still mine.

"It's good to see you," I tell him, "despite everything."

He sighs. "I still don't know what you think we're going to do."

"I've already done it," I reply. "All we need to do is attend the meeting. It's at your office, right?"

He tilts his head at me, his eyes curious. "Yeah, but we've got some time."

"Good. I've got the correct details, then."

"You're not making any sense."

"Do you think I came all this way to half-ass this, *Michel?*" I snap, thinking of what he told me. Some people think they can do any damn thing they want. Some people think they can treat people like dirt. "If you're going to do something, do it right."

"But what can we do? Believe me. I appreciate you coming. I didn't think you would. I'm ashamed, honestly. You're the only wealthy person I know, but you said money can't fix this on the phone last night."

"I said *paying* them can't," I reply. "Money can fix many things, and I just happen to have a metric ton of it." I clench my fists, thinking of my future baby. This is their grandfather—an honest, loyal, kind man who doesn't deserve this. "Let's go. We don't want to keep the bastards waiting."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Emma

I stand in the shower, letting the water sluice down my body, trying not to replay the conversation I overheard—okay, *eavesdropped on*—last night. My thoughts whirl as I try to figure out what they were talking about. Dad was gone early this morning. It’s a Saturday. Usually, we eat breakfast together, but Dad vanished.

“Must be work,” Mom said, gesturing to the table, the TV-show-like spread she’d laid out.

I sat and ate, thinking of the baby, but my heart was pounding hard the whole time. Where was Dad? Should I call Logan? I know he had training this morning. I don’t know what to do. I promised Chrissy I would tell Dad. So that’s something else I’ve failed at.

Leaving the shower, I walk to my room, a towel around my head and one wrapped around my body. I almost scream when I see him—Eric, lying on my bed, looking at my phone. He’s scrolling. “Eric,” I yell, causing him to jump off the bed and drop my phone. “What the *hell* do you think you’re doing?”

“Uh, uh, uh,” he says, shaking his head, looking so young, so scared. I feel bad for yelling, but this is not okay. “I’m sorry.”

“I asked you a question,” I snap. “Why were you on my phone?”

“I swear, I was looking for Dad’s cell phone number.”

“You know his cell phone number.”

“No, somebody changed it on my phone. It’s this prank the other kids play. Change the number so you accidentally call someone. It doesn’t hurt anyone. It makes you feel awkward, but I needed his number, so...”

“Let’s say I believe you,” I snap. “That doesn’t explain why you were scrolling through my...” I flip my phone over, my mouth dropping open. Holy heck. This isn’t good. “My texts.”

He’s one week into my thread with Logan. Or *Stylist*, as I stupidly named him. I wonder if I can claim pregnant brain already because I didn’t change my phone password. That’s the most essential thing I should’ve done when we started regularly texting.

“It’s Logan Ice, right?” Eric says quietly, his wide eyes flitting to my belly. “He’s...” Eric swallows, a flush creeping up his neck. Logan says I’ve got the same flush, letting him read my nerves, my sassiness. “He’s your baby’s dad, right, Emma?”

I spin, go to the door, and shut it.

“Mom’s out,” Eric says, raising his hands when I return to him.

“What are you doing? I’m not going to *hit* you. I’ve never hit you before.”

“Yeah, well, you’ve never been pregnant before, either.”

I sit on the bed. Eric sits beside me.

“Did you read *all* the texts, Eric?” I ask.

“I swear to God, no. I swear. I skipped the ones when you started getting, you know, how people get. I skipped those. I probably missed some because I scrolled through any second it started to get like that.”

“Okay.” I let out a breath. “That’s good, but you shouldn’t have been reading it at all.”

“I know. A text came through. I just clicked it. I’m an idiot, sis. Seriously.”

I scroll to the bottom of the thread. He's right. There's a text from Logan. *Good morning, beautiful x*

I rest my hand on my belly, feeling that warm glow that always pulses when I read a message from him, hear his voice, or think about him sometimes. "Are you going to tell Mom and Dad?"

"No way," Eric says. "Not unless you want me to."

That would really be the coward's way out, letting my little brother take the reaction for me. That would be the lowest of the freaking low. "No, I can't do that. I have to do it, but he was in a terrible mood last night."

"You're telling me," Eric says, huffing. "Apparently, it's this big meeting he's got at work."

"Hmm," I say, hoping that's all it is.

"What's up? You know, apart from the baby cooking in your body?"

I laugh in delight. There's something so relieving about hearing my little brother talk about the baby like that—like they're real. I mean, of course, they are, but to have somebody else acknowledge it is so neat. Apart from Chrissy, that is. "That's one way to phrase it. Are you okay with it?"

"You say you're happy in the texts. He seems happy. Logan, I mean."

"Oh, Eric. You really shouldn't have snooped like that."

"I won't do it again," he says. "I promise."

"On *anybody's* phone."

"I promise. I swear." He looks genuinely guilty. "The last text before that mentioned *the baby*... I was like, what the hell? That's why I started scrolling, but I know it was wrong."

"I'm sort of weirdly happy you did look," I sigh heavily. "It's been so hard keeping it to myself. I've been a chicken every step of the way."

"You'll get there," Eric says. "It's going to be awesome. I'll be an uncle. Wait, that's right, right? Or will I be a nephew?"

“An uncle,” I reply, laughing. “You’ll be the best uncle any kid could ever have.”

He beams, then frowns. “Why did you say *hmm*?”

“Huh?”

“When I said about Dad’s work meeting. You said *hmm*.”

“Nothing gets past you.”

“Is it about those guys?” Eric asks quietly.

“What guys?”

“Come on. You know, the ones when me and Jack were skating the box. That pickup truck. That hairy guy with tattoos. The one with the cowboy hat. Remember?”

I nod. “I was thinking the same thing. I thought you bought Dad’s thing about them being work friends.”

Eric scoffs. “Listen, Dad needs me to be happy, so he’s happy sometimes, okay? He works hard. I don’t want to stress him out, but I saw how scared he was. We both did.”

“Yeah, it was bad. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I know what’s going on,” Eric says, shooting to his feet and dancing across the room.

It’s like when we were really little, Eric toddling around, always making me laugh. “What are you doing?” I giggle.

Eric pretends to dance with somebody, ballroom dancing, spinning around the room. “What does it look like, huh? I’m celebrating. You’re going to be a mom! That’s ace, Emma. That’s awesome. I know you’ve always wanted it.”

I beam. “Come on, Eric.”

“Nah-uh. *You* have to get your boogie on, too.”

“Get your boogie on? Are you an old man at a wedding?”

“I am now.” He grins, spinning around the room. “Three cheers for my pregnant sister! Hip, hip, hoo...”

Eric suddenly stops. His hands drop to his sides. He stares at the door. I turn. How the heck didn’t I hear her? I was too

caught up in Eric's smile, silliness, and *pride* that I'm going to bring a baby into this world. It was a better reaction than I ever could've hoped for.

Mom stands in the open doorway. She's got a pie in her hands. It's almost comical how she drops it in slow motion. The pie falls to the floor while her mouth falls open. She doesn't even attempt to clean up the mess, which is unusual for her.

There's no way we can pretend we were talking about something else. With all that pregnancy talk, Eric might as well have shown her the pregnancy test.

"Uh, I thought you were at Karen's," Eric says a moment later.

Mom walks right over the apple pie, looks at Eric, then at me, then at Eric. Suddenly, her face gets serious. "Is it with *him*?" Mom scowls. "The man who's cheating on his girlfriend? Has he even broken up with her yet?"

Eric gasps at me, probably wondering if I'm with *Logan* and this man with a girlfriend at the same time. Or if Logan's got a girlfriend. The thought makes me completely sick. I have an instant, volatile reaction whenever I contemplate it, even for a second.

"Mom, it's—"

"Complicated?" she says, raising an eyebrow.

"Well, yeah."

"Then you better explain," she says sternly, turning around. I don't know what to do. I can't tell her about Logan, can I? Or maybe it's time I stop running.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Logan

Michael's office sits alone on a dusty road, a two-story structure. We parked on the other side of the road with thirty minutes until the meeting. I let my head fall back on the rest, glancing at the dash clock.

"When did it start?" I ask.

Michael picks at a loose thread on his pants and starts pulling. "Two years ago. They showed up one day and told me they were with the mob. For a month, I tried not to pay. Then, they started sabotaging my gear and vandalizing the office. Lately, the payments have become ridiculous. They're bleeding me dry."

I look at him, pushing Emma and our baby aside for now. Emma says I'm good at compartmentalizing. That was a word I never had cause to know until she used it. I create boxes in my head. Lock things away. Emma's the only thing I can never completely ignore, not that I want to.

"Don't worry. It's over now," I tell him.

"It hurt my pride, calling you," Michael says after a pause, "but I only wanted a loan. I was going to pay you back."

"You think these lowlives would've left it at that? They'll bleed you until there's nothing left. They gave you fake names, by the way."

Michael flinches. “What?”

“They said they were Tony and Luigi, but that’s crap. They’re not in the mob, either. They’re two-bit criminals by the name of Leon Reynolds and Martin Blackwood. They were imprisoned for grand theft auto a couple of years back. Since then, it seems they’ve moved onto this scam.”

Michael is staring wide-eyed at me. This would be a proud moment, helping my friend, if it weren’t for the obvious complication hanging between us. “How could you know any of that?”

“I didn’t sleep on the plane,” I tell him. “The internet is a useful tool, *Michel*. I was liaising with a private detective. He’s the top-rated one on the site. I paid him ten times what he usually gets. That was enough for him to dig this up and something else, too.”

“What?” Michael asks.

“A video of these fuckers shaking down a store, claiming to be the mob. The store owner was going to press charges, but then these cowards threatened him. The video was still on file, though.”

“What good will that do?” Michael says.

“The video’s just part of it,” I tell him. “I’ve hired a private security firm, too. Four ex-soldiers. Just think of it, *Michel*. All those hours on the ice. Years of playing in the league and spending almost no money. Now, I get to put it to good use. I get to make something right.”

He’d called me asking to borrow twenty thousand to pay the criminals off. I’ve already spent over fifty thousand arranging everything on the flight, including the video and the private security firm. I’d spend ten times that so my friend doesn’t have to live in fear.

“But this firm, they’re legal, yeah?” Michael says.

“Completely.”

“So they’re not going to hurt them?”

“Would you want them to get hurt?” I ask.

“I-I don’t know. I’m not sure.”

“They came to your home,” I say gruffly. “They threatened you and your family when your wife and children were inside. If I were in your position, I’d want to tear them to pieces.”

Michael looks at me for a few long moments, seeming almost scared. “I’m sorry about the game, Log—”

“You don’t have to apologize,” I cut in. I can’t hear this. “You didn’t do anything wrong. You got drunk and had a good time.”

I was the one fucking his daughter when he was sleeping off the liquor. I was the one falling more and more in love with her with each moment. I was the one who ruined what the friendship could’ve been.

“I shouldn’t have ghosted you like that.”

Ghosted, it’s a young person’s phrase. Talking with Emma has allowed a few of those to slip into my vocabulary.

“Why did you?” Michael asks in a small voice. For a second, he sounds so similar to Emma. “I know you’re busy. Life can get hectic. I don’t blame you if you wanted to ease up on the video chats, but...”

He sounds uncomfortable even to be bringing this up. I understand why, but telling him the truth would mean betraying Emma. I can’t lie, either.

“There are some things I can’t mention right now. I know that’ll make you curious as hell, but I’m sorry, *Michel*.” I almost switch to French, speaking as we used to, but then I remember he’s forgotten most of his. “I want to tell you, when we were kids, your friendship meant a lot. I was going through some bad things at home. My mom, she was—”

I swallow. This isn’t like when I told Emma, the tears almost sliding down my face. I keep my voice steady, but it’s still difficult to address this. “She had problems. She never hit me, but she hurt me in her own way. Your friendship and those hours on the ice were a refuge. It meant a lot. That’s all I wanted to say.”

I clear my throat and stare at the road, waiting.

“It meant a lot to me, too,” Michael says quietly. “All that stuff with my sister. The drama with her teacher, and then after.” He shudders. “When we were playing hockey, or even just skating, it was easy to forget about all that.”

“Amen, *Michel*,” I say. “Amen.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Emma

“I’m sorry for my reaction,” Mom says, sitting on the chair, folding her legs, suddenly poised and ready. “That wasn’t fair of me, Em. I don’t know all the details about your relationship.”

Mom has asked about my so-called boyfriend with the girlfriend a few times since Logan left, but I’ve always shrugged it off and told her I wasn’t ready. Now, I’m not sure what else to do. I don’t want her to think I’m the sort of woman who would do this.

“*Has* he left his girlfriend?” she says after a pause.

I sit opposite her, summoning my courage. If there was ever a time for me to put my big girl pants on, it’s now. “He never had a girlfriend, Mom.”

Her eyes narrow. I can see her calculating, trying to think of worse options, even darker possibilities. *If she lied about him having a girlfriend, how bad is the reality?* I can see that question scrolling through her mind like the text at the bottom of a newscast.

“Explain,” she says shortly.

“He’s...” I press my hands together. It’s like there’s something lodged in my throat. Eric isn’t even here. He’s upstairs. Mom wanted to talk to him *separately*. “Do you remember the hockey game?” I say after a pause.

Mom's eyes look like they're going to *burst* out of her skull. She grips the arms of the chair, leaning forward. "Wait a second... Are you saying?"

"Dad was in his room. It was just me and Logan. We... I don't know what happened. We just got carried away. It was so romantic. It was so magical. It was everything I wished my first time would be."

"Oh, yes. I'm *sure* he made it feel very magical and romantic for you!"

I flinch. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Celebrities and their young women, Emma. *That's* what it's supposed to mean."

"Mom, you need to stop. Don't start down that road. Seriously. You do *not* have all the facts."

Mom sits up at my tone with a look of genuine regret on her face. She knows she can be a hothead sometimes, as much as I can be. When I was younger, we used to get into fights—nothing crazy, hardly any yelling, but usual daughter-mom stuff.

That seems so silly now, so immature. Now, we're able to share a smile. She nods. "Fair enough. Then why don't you explain it? You can understand my reaction, though."

I think about what Logan said in the hotel room. The world will always brand him a cradle robber and assume I'm a gold digger. They're going to whisper behind our backs, maybe spread gossip. So my question becomes, what am I going to do about that? Crumble?

"It's not what you think. It was a one-night stand, fine, but it *was* romantic. He didn't push me or anything. I wanted to do it. I know I shouldn't have."

Mom frowns. "Your father and Logan are friends. Or they were." *How could you?* she almost says. I'm sure of it, or something similar, but she pulls it back at the last moment.

"I know," I whisper. "I feel like a terrible daughter. Every day since it happened, I've felt that way. That's why he ghosted

Dad. I tried to bury it, pretend it never happened, but then I found out I was pregnant.”

“You’re smiling,” Mom says softly.

I adjust my expression.

“Do you always smile when you talk about it? Think about it?”

I nod. “There’s this glow inside of me. It sounds weird, but I feel it, my baby. I feel a glow when Logan talks about them riding their bike or the house we’ll have, or...”

Mom narrows her eyes. “You talk to Logan?”

“He visited,” I say, finally understanding what people mean when they say a weight’s been lifted. It’s not all the weight. It’s not all the doubt and the pain, but some of it is drifting away. “Two weeks ago. He left his team the night I called and told him I was pregnant. He came here *that night*. He wants to be a father. He wants to retire and raise the baby with me. We’re going to be a family.”

Jeez, I’m crying now. I’ve been searching online recently about pregnancy hormones, and apparently, this is normal—the swinging moods, the heightened sense of tragedy that comes so potently, so suddenly. I think I’d be crying anyway.

Mom walks across the room and opens her arms. I stand and lean against her. She lets me cry myself out, clutching onto her sides. “Oh, Emma. It’s okay.”

“I wanted to tell Dad. I’ve felt so bad, Mom.”

“Did Logan say all those things?” Mom asks. “About the baby?”

“Yeah.” I lean back in her arms, and she wipes the tears from my cheeks. We share another fleeting smile. “We’re serious, Mom. If it wasn’t for Dad, I don’t know. I think we’d be married or at least engaged.”

Mom gasps. “He said *that*?”

“No,” I mutter. “Not that part, but I love him, and he thinks he might love me, too. We haven’t said it yet.”

Mom sits me down on the couch, clasping my hands. She looks at me sternly. “You’re an intelligent young woman. You’ve always been an old soul, watching the world, trying to bring it to *life* in your wonderful stories, but love can blind people. You have to think, too. So think. Are you *certain* he wants to do the right thing and stand by you?”

I almost challenge how she’s phrased it as if she thinks he’s only doing this for the baby. He’s told me countless times he knew he needed me the first time he saw me, the same way I felt when I saw him. She doesn’t mean it like that. “I’m sure,” I tell her. “One hundred percent.”

Mom pulls me into another hug, stroking her hands through my hair. I can feel her heart beating heavily.

“You’re going to be a grandmom,” I say. I hear a croak in her breath as she lets out a long shudder. She’s almost crying.

“Don’t,” she whispers as if she can’t handle the joy.

“A grandmom,” I say again, leaning back and taking her hands, looking into her eyes, shiny with tears. “And we want *lots* of kids, Mom.”

Tears streak down her cheeks now. She squeezes my hands tightly. “Of course, I want that. Who wouldn’t want all that love? But I have to think about *you*, Emma. Are you *sure*? Beyond a shadow of a doubt? You know he wants you? And you know you love him?”

“Yes, Mom,” I say, and now I’m crying again too. “Yes.”

We collapse into a hug. I hold her tightly, knowing she will make the best grandmother, knowing my and Logan’s baby will never have to want for love.

After a minute or so, the door whines open behind us. Eric walks in, awkwardly scratching his head. “Uh, are you two okay?”

Mom laughs, and it’s a wonderful sound to hear. My heart could sprout wings and fly right out of my chest! It’s melodramatic as heck, but I don’t care. All those times I imagined Mom learning the truth, I never dreamed of this. It

doesn't mean Dad will be okay with it, though. My belly twists at the thought. I can't forget about the last hurdle.

"Are you here to ensure we're not tearing each other's hair out, Eric?" Mom says.

Eric grins, flashing me a look. It's almost like he's saying, *See, aren't you glad I snooped?*

Then Mom stands up, folds her arms, and his grin goes on hiatus. "How did you find out she was pregnant, Eric?" Mom asks, using her detective-like tone when there's a mystery in the house.

"Uh..."

"Eric," Mom says firmly.

"I was reading Emma's texts," he says, dropping his head. "I know it's wrong."

"If you *know*," Mom snaps, "you shouldn't have done it."

Eric nods, that achingly guilty look on his face. I find it difficult to be mad at him. Every time I look at him, I see my future baby, maybe with the same emotion in their eyes. "I know. I'm sorry. I feel terrible. Honest. Sometimes, I don't think."

"You just wait until your father gets home," Mom says, her favorite phrase, but then she shakes her head slowly. She looks at me, all the happiness drained from her face. "I didn't even think. Emma, we have to tell him."

I swallow, my neck burning like acid is working its way through me, trying to make it impossible to speak. That's more fantasy wordplay, yet another wannabe escape. I have to face the music. I have to do the right thing. "When will he be home?" I ask.

"After his meeting," Eric says. "That's what he told me."

"Okay." I nod and stand. "I'm... I'm going to call Logan. Let him know, just in case Dad wants to talk to him. I want him to be ready."

I walk into the hallway and take out my phone.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Logan

As we walk into Michael's office, I feel my phone vibrating in my pocket. I wonder if it's my woman, my Emma. My heart aches as if telling me to go be with her. She's so close, but I have to handle this first.

"Uh... coffee, gentleman?" Michael says, addressing me and the two criminals. I walk slightly ahead of them. My senses are alert in case they try anything. Neither of them recognized me. If this were farther north, I'd be screwed.

"Sure, double espresso," the big man says. He's even taller than me, burly as an enforcer. He's got a flat nose, wears a black tank, and is covered in tattoos. The other is older and leathery-faced. He wears a cowboy hat indoors and chews a toothpick like we're supposed to be impressed.

I almost snap at Michael when he walks to the small coffee machine in the corner of his office. I know he's nervous. When my guys arrived and we briefed him, his face paled, but offering these assholes coffee?

"Don't worry about it, *Michel*," I say. "He's not thirsty."

"I'm not?" Leon says, the big man. I can't remember if he's pretending to be Tony or Luigi. What a weak scam. Poor Michael. He's had a good life. He had a tragedy in his youth but a loving family. It made him too soft. He doesn't deserve this. He's a good person.

I turn and look the big man in the eye. “No, Leon, you’re fucking not.”

He flinches and looks at the man in the cowboy hat. The office is full of sunlight. Martin’s eyes stare from under the slight shadow of his hat. “Now, ain’t that something. How’d you come by that name, sir?”

“It was relatively easy to acquire, Martin,” I tell him, and he flinches. I grin. “Michael could’ve gotten it himself if you lowlife fucks hadn’t bullied him. Threatened him. Made him believe you’re worth fearing.”

Leon steps forward. The burly idiot smashes one fist into the other. I feel my knuckles aching. Not from the frat house, that surreal night. From a fight on the ice. Some bastard tried to catch me, so he got caught. I almost want to tear into this motherfucker. Maybe I’d lose. I don’t care. He threatened my child’s grandfather, future father-in-law, and oldest friend, but I have a plan. I must get out of this without injury—for my woman, child, and team.

“Don’t play stupid games,” Leon says. “Big whoop. You got our names. It don’t change the fact I’ll beat you and your boy blue if you don’t cough up the cash.”

“I’d listen to him if I were you,” Martin says, chewing that toothpick like he’s in a movie. “If you think he’s impolite now, just wait until he gets angry.”

“You’ve fucked up, both of you,” I growl. “Michael told me what was happening. He told me two men came to him and claimed to be with the mob. The thing is, I’ve got connections in the mob. When I showed them the video, they weren’t pleased. Not pleased at all.”

Martin flinches and looks at Leon. Leon’s doing a worse job of hiding his panic. He knows that size doesn’t matter with the mob, but maybe I need to drive the point home.

“They’ll put a bomb on your car. They’ll kill you when you’re sleeping. You’ll never see it coming with them.”

“Bull. Shit.” Martin finally spits his toothpick out. His hands are shaking. He’s old and weary, and Leon looks bloated.

Maybe he's not as strong as he looks. Perhaps he's just used to picking on innocent people. People who have never had to get bloody. "You're a goddamn liar."

"Hear that?" I say, smiling, strolling over to the desk. I do this casually, but I'm also aware they might lose their cool here. Maybe they think they can use one of us as a human shield. I stand near Michael, drumming my fingers on the desk. "The engine? Don't you hear it?"

Outside, a car is pulling up. Michael looks at me and swallows. I wrap my hand around the paperweight on his desk. It's heavy. If I need to... Hell, I would if I could do it and get away with it. That's low of me, but it's the truth. This is family. *Michel*. The man who will hold my child in his arms and maybe see his own eye color reflected back at him.

I turn, tossing the paperweight from hand to hand. Leon is shifting from foot to foot now. Martin is at the window, tilting his hat rim as he presses against the glass. "Holy fuck. Who are those guys?"

"The big man is a representative of Leonardo Esposito. Have you heard of Leonardo Esposito? He was recently involved in a gang war on the East Coast against the Russian mob, the Bratva. He won, by the way. The two men are also representatives of the mob."

That was easy to discover online—lots of news stories about it. All I had to search for was "mob East Coast violence."

Martin turns to me, removes his hat, and holds it like a beggar. "No, no, no, man. You're joking."

When the door opens, Leon throws himself right at the men. It's a blind rage that makes me wonder if he's on something to do something so reckless. Or maybe it's just panic. Whatever it is, luckily, the two private contractors are well-trained. They surge forward in matching blue suits, their gold chains glinting, their shiny Italian shoes catching the light. They bought everything new this morning, just for the job.

They throw Leon against the wall. The third man, taller, leaner, wearing a much more expensive suit, casually waves a

hand. The other two are from the West Coast, so they won't talk, but the leader's actually from New York. "Sit him down, and you..." He snaps his fingers at Martin. "Sit."

Martin nods and rushes toward the desk. The so-called mob boss, Frank, walks around and sits opposite. He glances at me. "You said there was a video."

Michel is already doing a good job selling the act, hands clasped in front of him, gaping. Or maybe it's not an act. Leon is still struggling, kicking and grunting, but the two men throw him into a chair and hold him there. He's about to rage again when Martin shouts, "Stop it, you Lennie Smalls fucking *moron!*"

Leon deflates, then looks at Frank. Suddenly, he seems younger and terrified.

I do my part to sell the act, averting my eyes as I approach the table. I talk to Frank in a small voice. "I've got the video." I slide the phone across the desk.

When I press play, Frank leans forward and watches it. He does one hell of an acting job. The more the video plays, and he hears Tweedledum and Tweedledee doing their mobbed-up routine, the angrier his face becomes. He contorts his features. He looks ready to kill. When it's done, he stands, grabs a mug, and throws it through the window. The *smash* makes Martin gasp aloud. Leon looks around in panic.

Frank should get an Oscar. He stands with his back turned, breath heaving. Finally, he turns. He walks right up to Leon and kneels, staring him in the eye. Leon cringes away.

"This is Cartel country," Frank snarls. "If we were back east, I'd have my boys drag you outside. One bullet each. Right to the back of the heads. I'd throw you in a goddamn pit. It would be easy, but you fucking *rats* aren't worth the heat."

Leon looks almost relieved, but then Frank goes on. "Not for me, anyway, but I've got a buddy in the Cartel. He can operate in these parts. I'm putting a hit out. If you're not a made man and act like one, that's a no-go. That's the end of the line. If I

were you, fellas, I'd pack a bag. Not that it will make a goddamn difference."

Frank stands, calmly walks around the desk and shakes my hand. When he walks toward the door, the other two men follow. I feel Michael looking at me as if wondering where they're going, but they don't need to be here anymore. The fear is enough.

Frank really hammers the point home. At the door, he stops and turns. "I hope you enjoy the rest of your day, Leon Reynolds and Martin Blackwood." Then he reads out their social security numbers and their addresses. With each word, Leon and Martin look less and less like the big, bad wolves they think they are.

When the so-called mob car pulls away, Leon bolts to his feet. He looks like he's going to act tough, but Martin slaps him hard across the back of the head. "Idiot. Get moving, now."

"But—"

"This is the *mob*. We're done. It's over."

They rush for the door and speed away in their car. Michael runs to the window and then turns to me. His mouth is wide open. After a moment, he smiles semi-deliriously. It's like it's all catching up with him in one moment. I'm familiar with the feeling. It's one thing I try to train for—being in the moment, focused, active, aware when it matters.

"Do you think they'll really stay clear?" Michael asks.

"Frank and the guys are on my payroll for the next few days. They're going to follow them. Park outside their apartments and freak them out."

Michael frowns.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"Nothing, nothing," he says. "It's just... Won't they do this to other people now?"

I sigh darkly. "I don't know. Maybe they will. I hope not."

I wasn't thinking about that. Just my family. Just Michael. But he's right. It would've been better if those scumbags ended up in jail.

"I should see about the window," Michael murmurs. "Clear up the glass."

"I'll help."

We sweep up the glass from where Frank threw the mug. Then I wrap a towel around my fist and clear the rest from the frame. Michael cleans up inside while I go outside to get more glass and the mug. I kneel and pick up the mug. I stare at it with a lump forming in my throat.

World's Greatest Dad, written in clumsy, childish lettering. Michael peers through the window. "That was Emma when she was five. Is it broken?"

I clear my throat. "N-no."

"That's my most valuable possession," he says.

"I can see why."

I go back inside and place the mug on the desk. Maybe this is the moment I'll tell him. I know I should wait for Emma, but...

My cell phone starts ringing. I take it out and see a missed call from the symbol at the top of the screen, but I can't tell from whom. Frank is calling me now.

"Hear that, Mr. Ice?" Frank says, laughing. He must be holding his phone up. I can hear sirens. "Your boys thought it would be a good idea to rob a liquor store before they made their run for it. Luckily, we were tailing them. We managed to stop them, but not before they fully implicated themselves. They'll be doing time for this."

"That's good to hear," I say.

"Oh, please tell Mr. Ferrier I'm sorry about the window. We'll pay for the damages. Got carried away there."

"It worked. Got them hyped up enough to commit another crime."

“Yep. Now, they’re *screwed*. I know you’re paying me a lot, sir, but thanks. This was one hell of a job.”

After hanging up, I check the missed call. It’s from Emma. There’s a text too.

I’m going to tell Dad this morning. Mom and Eric already know. It’s a long story, but yeah, today, lunchtime. Or whenever he comes home. I’m sorry for bothering you when you’re training.

“Is everything okay?” Michael asks as I stare down at the phone.

I nod and try to smile at him, but this is it. The last minutes or hours before he learns the truth. Before he knows I’ve been sneaking around with his daughter—claiming her, owning her, impregnating her, and loving her.

“All good,” I say. “I just need to step outside to take a phone call.”

I walk outside and dial Emma.

“Logan?” she says in a desperate voice. It makes me wish I was there with her. The phone calls and the video chats have been a unique kind of torture, making me feel like an ass for not being there for my woman.

“I’m here,” I reply.

“Eric read my texts. Mom overheard us. She knows, and she doesn’t hate me. I told her everything you said about having a house and a family. I told her you’re going to stand by the baby. She seems *happy* about it, but—”

“I’m *here*, Emma,” I cut in, “in California. I’m with your dad.”

“What the... What the...”

“Heck?” I offer.

She laughs softly, despite everything. That’s my Emma down to a tee. *Despite everything*, she’s always got light in her, no matter how messy it gets. “Yeah.”

“It’s a long story,” I say, “but if you’re going to tell him, I think we should do it together.”

“Wait, are you coming home with him?”

“Yeah, I think I have to. I think it’s the only honorable thing we can do now.”

Listen to me talking about honor. I fucked Emma with her dad sleeping maybe ten or fifteen feet away, separated by a few walls. I fucked her hard and deep, and if I were back there, I’d do it again. Maybe I’d try not to, but I would.

“Okay,” she says. “You’re right. Together.”

I hang up and go inside. Michael’s at the desk, idly pushing the mug around.

“*Michel*,” I say. “I need to ask you a favor.”

He stands, ready. “Anything. After that, anything.”

“Let me come home with you.”

“To the house?” Michael says. “Well, sure.”

He sounds so innocent and confused. He’s looking at me as if wondering why it’s such a big deal, and there’s nothing I can do. Not yet. Just ride in the car and spring it on him like an intervention. But warning him would mean telling, and I can’t. It’s not my place.

“That was a real clapper last week, Logan,” he says as he heads to the car. “It’s because of the facewash, right?”

I can’t help but grin. “You were watching?”

“Oh yeah. I’ve been watching all your games.”

“Yeah. It was because of the facewash. I made him look like a fool on his own court. It has to be done sometimes. Winning isn’t just about the mechanics of the game. It’s morale. It’s...”

I trail off, amazed. I’m talking like I haven’t spent my entire career focusing on the nuts and bolts of it. Since learning about my baby, I started playing with more fire and purpose. Like every game is a war to see my woman and my child.

Michael looks at me over the roof of the car. “I was worried when you disappeared.”

I swallow. Imagine if he knew I was right here, and that I was the masked vigilante. He will know soon, some of it. When I don't reply, he climbs into the car. I open the door and take a moment. Things could go very badly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

E mma

I stand at the window, my hand on the curtain, looking out onto the street. When Jack skated by and asked if Eric wanted to grind the rail, Eric looked at Mom, all at once, a kid again. He had no desire to get involved in the boring grownup showdown. Mom glanced at me as if to say, *It was your phone he was snooping on.*

I nodded. Why not? He knows it was wrong, and, knowing Mom's parenting style, he *will* pay the price somehow, whether through allowance or privileges.

"It sounds like they're having fun out there," Mom says from her armchair. She's frantically knitting, the needles clicking together like nervous mouse teeth. "But I'll make sure he never snoops on another phone. Believe me. Any sign of Dad?"

"No," I reply, turning away, forcing myself to sit down, my hand over my belly.

"You've been to the doctor?" Mom says. When I nod, she lets out a long sigh of relief. "This is such a wondrous occasion—a child. Look at you. You're *glowing*. I should've noticed. I really should've paid more attention."

I feel so much love for Mom. She's always been a dedicated mother. In the early years, she would carry me in a chest harness as she delivered packages around LA. Then, when

Dad's business picked up, she threw herself into motherhood. She became an expert at it. I'm lucky. She beats herself up too much.

I go to her chair, sit on the arm, and lay my hands atop hers. "I was hiding it, Mom. Anyway, the pregnancy glow is just something people say."

"No." Mom tenderly touches my face. "That's not true at all. You *are* glo..."

She trails off when Eric's voice comes through the open window. "*Hey, Dad!*" This sounds overly excited and forced, but then Jack must spot Logan. Jack starts *screaming*. "Logan Ice! The Ice Demon! Oh my God!"

I rush to the window, more love expanding in me when I see Logan kneel and shake Jack's hand. Jack is beaming. I've never seen him this ecstatic in all the years he and Eric have been friends.

Jack skates toward his house, and Logan stands, hands in his pockets. He's wearing a slick silver suit. It's the first time I've seen him in something so stylish. It fits him well, emphasizing his broad shoulders. He turns and spots me, his whole body stiffening. He quickly turns away.

In the old days, before that glorious night in the hotel when we discovered we were made for each other, I would've messed with my own head about this. Is he mad? What's going on? Is he going to split up with me?

Not anymore. Not since that night or since he's proven his dedication through all those texts and phone calls. Jack skates out of his house. Then Logan kneels again, putting his arm around him as Jack's dad takes a photo.

When they're done, Dad and Logan head toward the house. The warmth whelming in me starts to turn cold at the edges when I hear the door open. It's so sweet to see Logan with a child, not that I ever needed proof he's going to be the best dad. However, now, it could shatter and break into irreparable pieces.

Dad walks into the room. Mom stands, her hands flustered, tugging at her clothes. She looks at me, stands up straighter, and looks at Dad. Logan, towering over everyone, stands behind Dad, his intense blues glinting sharply as he glances at me.

“Should I make us some coffee?” Mom says after all the staring.

“Uh... what’s going on?” Dad asks, walking slowly into the room.

I step forward and swallow. The emotion in my throat is trying to stop me from speaking again, but I can’t do this anymore. I can’t keep running. Anyway, Mom’s going to burst if I don’t say something. “I have to tell you something, Dad. Actually, Logan *and* I have to tell you something. Please.”

Dad turns to Logan and raises his eyebrow. Logan looks so conflicted. He nods at Dad, trying to seem like this doesn’t affect him, but I can see the pain. I can always see the pain in my man, even when he hides it from everybody else behind a layer of ice.

“Let’s get some coffee,” Dad says, a note of suspicion in his voice. Ducking his head as if purposefully avoiding everybody’s gaze, he strides into the kitchen muttering to himself. Logan shakes his arms out like he does before a game. I’m not sure he knows he does it, but every time he steps onto the ice, he does that like he’s getting his body ready for battle.

The three of us awkwardly follow Dad. I want to fall into Logan’s arms, kiss him, and feel his security wrapped around me. I know this isn’t the time or the place, especially when I hear Dad slamming around in the kitchen.

Mom walks forward as if to help him as he aggressively opens and closes drawers, then she retreats, her hands raised. She looks at me like she wants help. None of us knows what to do when he finally slams a door shut and spins, his eyes red, glaring at Logan.

I can't read his expression. It's like a mixture of everything. "What could you *and* Em have to tell me? What could *you* possibly have to tell me? There's nothing. Nothing, *Edouard*."

"I think you've got it, *Michel*. Or at least some of it."

"Yeah, I've got it." Dad grits his teeth and shakes his head as if thinking of all the signs he should've read, mentally replaying it. "You invited me to Canada and screwed my daughter. Then, when I called you, you felt so guilty you decided to give this sad sack a helping hand. Well, which part is *fucking* wrong?"

"Michael!" Mom rushes forward, putting her hands on his arms when he steps forward.

I clasp my hands over my mouth. I've never seen him like this. Mom wraps her arm around him, and Dad calms down, but only a little.

"That's not exactly right," Logan says after a pause, his voice calm. "You've got some of it right. Emma and I slept together that night."

Dad surges forward like he's going to hit Logan. It's such a sudden change, so different from how he usually behaves. It's like the pressure has been building within him and finally erupted.

"Michael, honey," Mom yells, pulling him back.

Dad breathes through gritted teeth. He's staring at Logan like, if Mom let him go, he'd spring at him as if by some reflexive action. The spirit of fatherly protection would take hold of him, and it doesn't matter if Logan is bigger and fitter. It would be an ugly fight if Logan dared to hurt Dad, which he wouldn't.

My head is a mess. Logan sighs. His voice is bleak. "You can hit me if you want. Sometimes, I think I deserve it."

"What would you do if it was your daughter?"

"That's the *point*, Dad," I say passionately, finally finding my voice. "Logan's going to feel exactly what you're feeling now. That sense of protection... of, of love." I'm almost crying, but

I can't break down. Dad will soften if he sees me crying. He always has. I won't do that to him now. "I'm... I mean, Logan and me... You're going to be a grandfather!"

I blurt it out. This isn't how I planned to say it, but that's life. Plans are always difficult to rely on. You can have as many charts, tactics, and drills as you want, but eventually, you have to take a shot.

Dad takes a step back, almost stumbling like the news has physically collided with him. "You're... pregnant."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Michael

Angela's arms are wrapped reassuringly around me. I can feel how torn she is. I can feel it pouring out of her. From the small looks and things, she seems to be on Emma's side, the gestures that become wordless communication over years of marriage. My chest hurts from it all. I've never been a strong man. Hopefully, I've been a good one. Just maybe not right now.

Emma nods, my little girl seeming suddenly a fully grown woman. Her eyes shine with tears, but she's bravely holding them back. A memory slams into me and chokes me up. "*I'm not hurt, D-Daddy,*" with a cut on her knee.

Logan stands just behind her. It's easy to see him as a kid, too, his hair across his face, almost feral-looking. Once, at school, somebody called him *stray* and shoved his face into his lunch. Stray dog because he was so lean and raggedy, but that's not the case anymore.

"You're pregnant," I repeat, and Angela registers no surprise. She knew, then. Of course, Emma would tell her first. Angela's always been the best mother.

"Shall I make some coffee? Or tea?" she says, giving me a look. She's asking if I'm going to freak out again, but I feel too stunned. Life is simple when focusing on work, contracts, supplies, and building connections.

I nod, walk over to the table, and sit in a patch of sunlight. My bones are starting to ache. I am forty-one years old, and I've worked almost every day for years just for some punks to come along and take advantage of me. It's a funny feeling to go from fiercely liking and respecting Logan for what he did to doubting every interaction we've had.

Emma and Logan sit opposite me, both of them seeming awkward. Emma's cheeks are red. She truly is glowing. It's like we've always talked about, but with *Edouard*? A celebrity. We've never talked about his love life, but one looks at the news shows and how celebrities jump from woman to woman.

"It's not what you think," Logan says, leaning forward. He's always had the same look in his eyes ever since he was a kid, almost like he's apologizing for being stronger than me, a better player. But it's not pity. It's never been that. I've never felt that. "*Michel*, we had a one-night stand."

My fists clench under the table. It's weirdly... primal? Is that the word? It's like my instincts are telling me to jump him, fight him, even if he helped me. I don't give a damn.

"But I didn't *want* it to be a one-night stand," he says. "I panicked. I walked out. The truth is, I wanted to propose to her right there."

In the main kitchen area, Angela gasps. I know *that* gasp. She's bubbling up excitedly, but she isn't sure how I feel yet. However, I don't even have to ask her how she feels.

"In fact," Logan clears his throat, "the first time I saw your daughter in the background of our video chats, I fell in love with her."

Emma is looking at me, unable to fight the tears anymore. They flow down her cheeks. She opens her mouth, and I can see the emotion working its way up her neck. She's going to say she felt the same. She loves him, too.

"Was it the same for you?" I ask when she swallows her words, maybe for my sake, but I must know.

Angela walks over as the coffee machine whines and sits down quickly. I understand why. She can't be over there making coffee during her daughter's big moment, being in love. "Yes," Emma says. "I felt it right away. I thought I was crazy."

"You didn't think it was a crush?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No. I've never had a crush. I've never been interested, but I *knew*, Dad, and not just that. Right away, I wanted to have a family with him. I wanted to be his wife. I wanted a future together." She lets all this out in one emotional burst, then cuts off, breathing hard. "I'm so sorry for sneaking around—"

"Sneaking around?" I ask, and then it hits me. "Those days you were gone, disappeared, missed a game. You weren't on a bender. You weren't injured."

Logan shakes his head slowly. He looks so damn guilty. Yet there's something else, too, underlying it all. It's solid and tough, the determination he had at eleven years old when we went one-on-one, and he beat me half the time anyway. "It was the night Emma called me. She told me she was pregnant. I had to be here. I walked out. I tried to keep my distance from her, but—"

"Why?" I ask. "If it was love at first sight." I feel Angela looking at me. She's got that attractive glint in her eyes as if she's saying, *Honey, you're missing something obvious*. "Because of me?"

"I loved her, *love* her," Logan says, his voice getting croaky like he's holding back emotion. "But I didn't want to hurt you. Most people might think of it as a small thing, being friends for a few years when we were children, but not me, *Michel*."

I swallow, thinking of my sister, thinking about yelling at my parents and telling them I wanted to stay there because I didn't want to leave my friend. "Me too," I say.

"When I found out she was pregnant, I knew I couldn't fight it anymore. Honestly, I don't know if I would've been able to at all. Not forever, but definitely not then. I never had a father. I

intend to be in my child's life. I intend to provide for my wife and my family."

He leans back, shaking his head as if he thinks he's gone too far.

"It's been... what? Two months?"

Emma and Logan look at each other, then at me, and nod simultaneously. They already seem like a couple, even if they're not holding hands. It's the way they glance at each other. It's Emma's small gestures as if she *wants* to reach out for him. It's the protective note in Logan's voice when he talks about her or the child. If this was a regular introduction and I was in dad mode, assessing her date, he'd get top marks.

"Two months, and you're already this certain."

Angela tuts. I know what she's thinking. When I proposed to her, I told her, truthfully, that it was love at first sight, but she doesn't say anything.

"I was certain the first time I saw her," Logan says passionately. I remember when he was a kid, and he'd talk about having a family, sitting at the edge of the frozen lake, looking across it as though seeing his future life. "*I'm going to try to be a good father. Do the best I can.*"

I'd laugh and joke with him about him, telling him he needed a girlfriend first. He showed no interest at the time I knew him. He was too young.

"I haven't dated in years," Logan goes on. "Over a decade, actually. I've never been in a relationship for more than a couple of months. I felt nothing. That's the cold truth. So I stopped giving a damn. I figured I'd be alone, just me and the ice. I was fine with that, but then I saw Emma..."

He trails off, clearing his throat roughly. I know he's trying to push away emotion as he grips the edge of the table. He trembles, tension working its way through him. "I'm sorry, *Michel*, for sneaking around and distancing myself. For being a jackass, but I can't apologize for loving your daughter."

Emma finally does it, reaches across, and places her hand on the sleeve of his gray suit jacket. He dressed stylishly for the

meeting, he said, to seem more impressive to the two-bit criminals. That's what he called them, *two-bit criminals*—the men who'd been making my life torture. He made it so much more manageable.

Em looks at me as if waiting for an outburst, but I feel hypnotized by the two of them. If I remove the fact that it's my little Emma and that's *Edouard*, they look like they belong together. I believe Logan. He's going to take care of her and protect his family. There's still a shiver of fatherly protection inside me, but not against Logan, just the one always there.

"Thank you, Dad," Emma says a moment later.

"For what?"

"For not calling me naïve, immature, or too young to make this decision."

"You've never been naïve or immature," I tell her. "Even as a toddler, you always saw more. You were always dreaming of the future."

"I don't want to wait for the future," Emma says softly as if she's fighting off more tears. "I know I could date a bunch of guys. Go through the motions. Do the partying thing. Whatever. But what's the point? I've found my future. I'm ready."

Finally, she moves her hand from Logan's sleeve to his hand. Logan flinches and sits up like he's going to snatch it away, but then I shake my head. He sits still and holds my daughter's hand. It looks oddly natural.

"You know what people will say," I tell them, "about your age gap. About how quickly you're getting married. Shotgun wedding. Robbing the—"

"Dear," Angela says.

"He's right, Mom. You know he is, but it's not what the rest of the world thinks, Dad. It's what *you* think that matters."

"That's all we care about," Logan says softly. "We've been real, real low. We should've been honest from the start—"

“And for the record,” Emma says, “Logan *wanted* to be honest. Not about the... you know, the first night.” She nods, moving on, and I’m relieved. The last thing I want is details. “But when he found out I was pregnant, it was me, Dad. I tried to tell you. I was just so scared.”

“And maybe I haven’t been the easiest to talk to,” I say, thinking of last night when she tried to speak with me, and I slammed the door in her face. I felt so bad about that after. The so-called mobsters were calling me nonstop, demanding money, and saying vicious things.

“No, I could have,” Emma says firmly. “I had so many chances, but I chickened out, plain and simple. I thought you’d never look at me the same if you knew what I did. Lying to you. Going behind your back.”

“You’ll always be my little girl,” I say, moving my hand across the table, then stopping when I realize she’s holding Logan’s hand.

Emma lets him go and throws both hands toward me. She holds onto me tightly. “I love you. I want you to be in your grandchild’s life.”

“There was never a question about that,” I say, almost offended. “Of course, I’m going to be in their life. Of *course*.” My eyes start stinging, and I realize I’m crying, too. I’m thinking of Emma as a baby, the first time she was in my arms, so full of love, clutching my finger. “There’s nothing that could stop me.”

“All of us,” Emma says, glancing at Logan. “Together.”

I almost want to say this is enough, but I must know something else. Letting her hands go, I look at Logan. “If I told you to walk out that door and leave Emma, never see her again, what would you do?”

“Michael,” Angela whispers.

“No, I deserve to know.”

Logan rests his arms on the table. He seems even bigger than usual, but not as though he’s trying to be intimidating. It’s just how he naturally is. “I’d have to let our friendship go, *Michel*.

I'll never be a father who abandons his child or their mother. I'm always going to be there for her. I'm always going to protect her and my child. They deserve better."

I know what he's referencing. The haunted look he had in his eyes, the stuff he explained in the car about his mom before the meeting. His demons. Finally, I feel the tension leaving me. I blink, and there are more tears in my eyes. I'm going to be a grandfather.

"Good," I say, looking fiercely at Logan. "You do that, *Edouard*. You make sure *always* to do that."

Emma looks at me, wiping her cheeks. "Does that mean..."

"It means that if everything you told me is true—"

"It is," Emma says passionately.

"I'm going to be there," Logan says. "I'm going to retire after this season. I'm going to put my family first."

"You're going to *retire*?" I say, sitting forward.

Emma laughs in surprised delight. It's so nice to hear that. It's so nice to be with my family without worrying about those wannabe mobsters. Already, I'm thinking of Logan as part of my family. Or maybe I always have on some level.

"After everything we've told you, *that's* the shocking part?" Emma says.

I shrug, grinning. How am I smiling? My daughter's happiness is infectious. If Logan truly wants the best for her, if he will make her happy, why should I be angry? Why should I care if the rest of the world might not understand?

"You've been playing like a demon. Some are saying your best season in years."

"That's because it's my last," Logan says definitively. "I'm going to do what few athletes have the luck to do—retire with most of the money I've earned. Start a family. Live happily. Avoid drugs. Avoid booze. Avoid darkness. Avoid chasing the high that being a star gave because, hell, I never cared for the glamor anyway. And there's nothing..."

“What, Logan?” Emma whispers, looking at him, mesmerized, as Angela sometimes looks at me. Under the table, Angela takes my hand. I give her a firm squeeze. Maybe other people will judge, will say I should’ve kicked this man out of my house, but they’ll never know how deep this bond goes.

Logan turns to Emma. “There’s nothing brighter than you and our family. Not the fans. Not the ice. Not hockey. Not even logic. You’re everything to me.”

Angela squeezes my hand. I can tell she’s giddy. Honestly, so am I, but I have to say this.

“Logan, if you ever hurt her...”

Other men might make a joke of it. Other celebrities, worth millions, almost twice my size, they’d belittle me for saying something like this, but Logan doesn’t. He looks at me steadily, seriously, as he did when we were children if other people mocked or bullied him. He never did. “I swear,” he tells me. “I’ll never, ever hurt her.”

I lean back, smiling, finally letting myself enjoy the news. My daughter is getting everything she ever dreamed of. A man who loves her. A man who’ll support her and a baby on the way. My smile grows wider, and I take Emma’s hand. She’s holding Logan’s hand with her other.

“Our child is going to love you, Michael,” Logan says. “Clearly, you’re an incredible father. You’re going to be an even better grandfather.”

“Well, of course.” I grin, winking at Emma. “*You* have to do all the hard parts. We just get to spoil them!”

We all laugh together, which is a miracle. I feel like something magical happened here. Or maybe that’s just the adrenaline of the mobster meeting shooting around me, but my head feels light. Perhaps from knowing that, in less than a year, *I’ll* get what I’ve always wanted—a chance to meet my grandchild.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

TWO WEEKS LATER

Logan

“This is it,” I tell Emma, as our breath clouds around our faces, and we walk to the edge of the large lake. It’s a short way into a forest, with trees ringing it all around, as nondescript as any lake in this part of Canada, but not to me. I can still see the cuts in the ice and the old, rickety house on the edge, even if it was torn down years ago.

Emma turns to me, looking cute and glowing in her beanie hat, pulled low, bangs sticking out. She’s got earmuffs on, too, as well as a big coat. Since we told her parents, we’ve spent as much time together as humanly possible. When her college semester ended, she traveled to Canada. Now, I finally have a chance to bring her here. She grips my arm. I can feel her passion through her gloves and my coat.

“How does it feel being back?” she asks softly.

I adjust her scarf and make sure she’s warm. In early pregnancy, excursions like this won’t cause any problems. Later on, I may hire somebody to help her. Or perhaps we’ll head back to the States, and Angela can pitch in. Now, though, she looks so capable, so full of life. Still, I hired a car to drive us as far as possible. We’ve only walked half a mile, and I carried her some of the way.

“It feels...”

I look out across the lake. Shimmers dance across the surface and play off the ice. My mind tries to shut them down and stomp on them. Lock them into a room. Then Emma squeezes herself against me, and I feel the love burning between us—the love ignited that first time.

“I feel like I want to run. Get away from this place. I can hear my mother’s voice coming over the ice. I can hear her telling me to be careful of the forest. There are monsters in there. I can hear her telling me to chop more firewood. I can hear... so much, but...”

She wraps her arms around me as the past comes to life, springing from the lake. My eyes are stinging. I can’t downplay this. It’s just me and my woman. I have to let this sink deep. Let this cut. Let it scab over. Tears slide down my cheeks. I cough back a sob and rub my face.

“It’s okay,” she whispers.

I laugh it off. “I’m ice, remember? They’ll freeze.” I sweep her into my arms and kiss her. She makes that adorable gasping noise. I love it so much. It’s like she’s stunned by how much love burns between us every time, just like I am. “I’m ready to let the past go. That’s why I wanted to wait until we came here. I love you, Emma. I love you so, so much.”

She stands on her tiptoes, grabs my coat, and pulls me in for a kiss. “I love you too...”

I find her tongue and groan when I feel the pleasure taking over. She’s never going to stop being irresistible to me. The curvier she gets, glowing more and more every day... I move away, taking her hips, squeezing passionately.

“I never knew I could *feel*, not before you. I never knew I had it in me. You’ve made me feel young again.”

She giggles, shooting me a playful look. “You *are* young. Thirty-six isn’t old.”

I smirk, squeezing her side, making her laugh even more. “Okay, smartass, younger then.” She smiles. I go on, “Everything with you feels like an adventure. Spending the day in bed with you, just holding you, feels like an adventure.

We've got so much ahead of us. I wanted to wait until we were here. I left this place a husk. I was hollowed out. Then I met this perfect, funny, interesting, loving, beautiful woman."

When I kneel in the snow, she blinks, tears filling her eyes. I remove my gloves, lay them on the snow, then reach into my coat pocket. Taking out the ring, I look up at her with so much love expanding inside me. She beams it right back at me. We're swept up in a torrent of closeness.

I open the ring box, letting her see the diamond. It's a four-carat rock set within a platinum band, not too chunky but full and beautiful. "Will you marry me?"

Her reaction is going to be carved into my mind forever. She looks like she almost rolls her eyes, as if she's going to tell me, *Uh... duh, obviously?* She thrusts her hand down, looking at me through tears. "What do you think?"

I smirk. "Nah-uh. You have to say it."

"Maybe I enjoy watching you kneel in the snow, huh?"

I laugh. "I'd kneel here all day long for you."

"Yes, Logan," she says, her voice breaking, quaking with a happy sob. "Yes, oh, Logan. Yes!"

I slide the ring onto her finger, stand up, and pull her into my arms. I spin her around, then kiss her, holding her so tightly. I feel the life growing inside of her, the love beaming out.

"Oh, and I've got a surprise," I tell her, kissing her on the cheek.

She's always glowing, but this is even more intense than usual. She's captivating. "What could make this even better?"

"Well, look over there."

I gesture into the trees. She turns and then lets out the cutest gasp. I smile into the forest at Angela, Michael, and Eric, bundled up in winter coats.

"We're going to spend Christmas together," I say. "All of us as a family."

EPILOGUE

FIVE DAYS LATER

Eric

I skate along the rink's edge, holding my hands out in case Mom falls. She has all the pads: elbows, knees, thighs, wrist guards, and a helmet. That's smart because she's scared as *heck*, as Emma would say. I'm just glad they're still cool with me after I snooped. I really, really shouldn't have done that.

"You got this, Mom!" Emma cheers from the sidelines, hands wrapped around a mug of hot cocoa. Her big rock is glinting in the overhead lights. It's a *huge* diamond.

Mom laughs, then puts her arms at her sides. "That's it, Mom. Small, easy strides in a V shape."

On the other side of the nearly empty rink—it's so cool, we get the whole place to ourselves after closing—Dad and Logan are racing up and down. Dad is moving way quicker than I thought he would. He was nervous the first day on the ice, but now he's getting back into it.

Mom sees me looking. "Join in, Eric."

"I'm helping you."

"Helping *me*?" She lowers her head and makes a few determined strides. "Does it *look* like I need help?"

I grin. "Uh, Mom, I'm not sure you want me to answer that."

She laughs and waves a hand, which sends her into a spinning circle. I quickly rush forward, helping her to the barrier before

she falls. She grabs hold of it, shaking her head and raising her voice. “Emma, I’m stealing your hot cocoa!”

Emma laughs. “Oh, *really?*”

“Yep. I’m coming up there right now and taking it if I can get these things off.”

I grin, clapping my hands. Everything has a Christmassy feel. Not long now. Dad says we might go skiing with Logan. That’s going to be awesome.

“Hey, kiddo,” Dad calls over, making the ice *swish* when he comes to a stop. He puts his hands out on his sides. “You ready for a race?”

“Dad...”

“Hey, come on now,” Dad beams, skating over. “I know you think you’ve got youth on your side.”

“Dad, I’ve got thunder thighs. Legs of steel. You’d never keep up.”

Logan chuckles as he skates over. It’s easy to see how Logan and Dad were best friends when they’re on the ice together. I found it weird before, picturing them being buddies, but they’re like two big kids on the ice. “Those are fighting words, *Michel*. Eric is a very skilled skater.”

That’s a big compliment coming from Logan. It’s unbelievable how expertly he moves around on the ice. He’s got the agility of a man half his size.

Dad pretends to crack his neck, laughing as he skates backward toward the rink’s edge. I skate after him, but maybe I show off a little. I *jump* back and then do an advanced slide to come to a stop. It’s an aggressive skating thing, skatepark stuff—a soul slide. I’m not sure what it’s called in hockey.

“I’m not doing *that*,” Dad says, chuckling. “My knees don’t bend that way.”

Logan skates over to the edge. He’s helping Mom walk up the steps in her skates to join Emma. I look at Dad and see him watching them. I heard Dad yelling the day Emma caught me on her phone, but since then, they’ve been fine together.

They've kind of been like me and Jack. Making up for lost time, I guess.

It's awesome to see. Dad has friends, of course, but this is different. It's like Logan lets him show a whole other side of himself. He's always so focused on the business. I don't mind. It's not like I'm a little kid anymore, needing attention constantly. Anyway, he *is* present when it matters, but with Logan, he's more carefree than with everybody. He's sillier, like my earliest memories of him.

"What do you say?" Dad says, turning to me with a smile. "Do you think you've got it in you, kiddo?"

"You're going to regret this, old man," I say jokingly.

Dad chuckles. "*Old man?* Okay, let's do this." Dad cups his hands around his mouth. "Francesca Fitzgerald, are you racing?"

That nickname always seemed super lame to me. I never told Dad or Emma that because they always acted like it was the funniest thing in the world. Then again, Emma has been writing like crazy, printing her stories, pinning them to the walls, and going a little crazy with it. Maybe it fits.

From across the rink, Emma's laughter echoes. "Maybe give me a year, Dad."

She doesn't want to risk the baby. She's getting super zoned about the pregnancy, searching for vitamins and exercises online. She said she's looking forward to having a big pregnancy belly.

"On the count of three?" Dad says.

I nod. "One, two..."

"Three—" And he's off.

I swing my arms, my legs springing into action, carving the ice. Dad's just ahead of me. I overtake, and then I hear him panting and trying. I slow down just a little. Just enough to let him *whoosh* to a stop ahead of me near the barrier.

I laugh, shaking my head. "You got me, Dad."

He beams, looking so happy. He deserves these moments. He's earned them, but I'm not letting him win the next one! "Round two?" I ask, and he nods.

When we reach the other end—I'm way ahead—Dad comes to a stop with a big grin. He claps me on the arm. "I'm proud of you, Eric. You should spend more time on the ice."

I laugh. "Not much of that back home, and thanks, Dad."

We turn at the sound of Mom's laughter. Logan has his arm around Emma. It looks so natural now. It's not over the top like some people get with displays of affection. It's normal. They look married already, not just engaged. Mom is laughing at something Emma just said.

Dad nudges me. "Round three?"

Together, we race across the ice.

EPILOGUE

ONE MONTH LATER

Emma

I adjust Logan's collar. He reaches up and curls his hands around me. My engagement ring presses cold against my finger. I love the feeling and never want to stop noticing it. It's a reminder of our love.

Logan looks so handsome, a light silver shadow of a beard across his jaw. His intense blue eyes are serious. We're in California on a midweek break from Canada in our new home. There are boxes piled neatly against the wall and furniture to be assembled. It was Logan's idea to have a house here near Mom, Dad, and Eric.

"It's going to be okay," I tell him.

He leans down and kisses me gently. I sink against him. It's such a normal feeling, yet each time feels like the first, too. It feels so exciting. We fall deeply into it, warmth blooming in my chest. The men who drugged Chrissy are going to jail. Mom and Dad have given us their blessing, and Logan's mom is on the way. He flew her out. He wanted to meet her here.

He ends the kiss and then holds me close to his chest. His gentleness contrasts the Ice Demon I watched on TV two nights ago, me and Chrissy sharing popcorn. She was cool about giving me extra since I'm feeding two.

"I know I can't blame her for it. She was ill."

“I think you can feel any way you want,” I tell him. “You don’t have to...”

“Downplay it,” he says, then smiles. “I know.” His smile drops, uncertainty flitting across his eyes. He nods to the door, through its small windows, at the cab pulling up. “I should go and help her.”

I nod, taking his hand. We go outside together. The woman who climbs out of the car looks older than seventy. Logan mentioned she smoked cigarettes endlessly during his childhood but quit after getting help with her illness. She’s wearing a large jacket despite the heat. Her hair is peeled back over her head, tied into a brittle ponytail, and she’s crying. She leans heavily on a cane.

Logan moves forward, takes her wrist, and helps her better grip the cane. “Uh, Emma, can you... I’ll get the bags.” He looks at me, seeming lost, as the old woman bows her head and cries as though ashamed.

I move forward. “Hello, ma’am. It’s nice to meet you.”

She replies in English. I can tell she’s been practicing recently. “It is nice to meet you too, Emma.” She says my name in a sweet accent. Despite everything I know about her, about Logan’s childhood, I find myself warming to her. She deserves a second chance, doesn’t she? But that’s Logan’s decision.

I help her into the house. Logan pays for the cab, then walks behind us with the bags. After helping her sit on the couch, I say, “Would you like some tea? Some coffee? A glass of water?”

“Coffee, *si vous plait.*” She looks at Logan, standing awkwardly behind an armchair, fiddling with the tag we haven’t removed yet because I’m unsure if it fits in the space. I’m seeing if it grows on me. She talks in French, and I hear Logan’s birth name.

Logan swallows, replies in French, then looks at me. “She says you’re beautiful, Emma. She says she never dreamed her daughter-in-law would be such an angel.”

Emotion floods into me. That warm glow expands from inside like the baby is telling us this is what we should do—heal the rifts of the past. I won't overstep until I know how Logan feels. "*Merci*," I say, probably clumsily.

She smiles, takes a handkerchief from her pocket, and dabs her eyes. Logan glances at the bags. She came straight from the airport. Logan talked about her staying in one of our five bedrooms or a hotel, depending on how this goes.

When Marie speaks in French again, I walk into the kitchen and prepare some coffee. When I return with a tray in my hands, Logan is sitting next to Marie. She's clasping one of his large hands. She's crying, and Logan is trembling. Marie talks earnestly in French. I gently lay the tray down and sit opposite them.

Finally, Marie sits back, bursting into tears. Logan clears his throat. Slowly, he raises his hand and places it on her shoulder. He looks at me with red eyes. "She's begging for my forgiveness. She's saying sorry for every night. For every vicious thought she put into my head. She said..."

"What?" I whisper, sometimes wishing he would let himself break down, let it out completely, but that's not Logan. He can still be ice, even if we melt it together often.

"She said if she could go back in time, she would've gotten help sooner. She would've let me live with my aunt, but she really believed she was doing the best thing for me. She believed she was protecting me."

Marie huddles into the opposite end of the couch, weeping, clutching her handkerchief. Logan looks at me, a gentle smile touching his lips. "I think she means it. I know it hurts, but I really think it came from love."

"From. Love." Marie speaks forcefully, pushing through her tears. "All. Ways."

Slowly, Logan wraps his arm around her. He pulls her close to him and lets her cry. He speaks soft words, sounding intense in his husky, emotion-filled voice. "I just told her I want her to be

in her grandchild's life," Logan says softly, "and I asked if she wanted to stay."

This pregnancy pushes me through the hormone Olympics, but this is something else. Logan and I talked about healing the family, and now we've done it. Marie replies in French, looking at me almost girlishly.

"She said only if you don't mind, Emma."

I go to the couch, sit on the arm, reach down, and hug her. When I do, she bursts into tears, which gets me crying too. A moment later, Logan folds his powerful arms around us both.

"Tell her she's welcome," I say. "This is about the future now."

"The future," Logan replies firmly, his hand on my arm, "and it's going to be perfect."

EPILOGUE

SIX MONTHS LATER

Logan

I lie on the bed, looking at my wife sitting on the vanity unit. The morning sunlight filters in through the curtains, resting on her beautiful, bulging belly. She's wearing a light-fitting nightgown, the material showing me her gorgeously swollen nipples through the fabric.

She looks just as beautiful here, dabbing delicate makeup on her cheeks, her hair frizzy from the shower, as she did on our wedding day, walking down the aisle with her father at her arm. "Aren't you looking forward to the baby shower? I could cheer you up..."

She looks at me in the mirror, that pouty, sexy look on her lips. She's become more and more attractive as the pregnancy has progressed, but that's not saying much. She's *always* more beautiful and sexier to me. Even now, my shaft is thickening. My tip is aching as I look at her big nipples.

"I know what *you're* thinking," she says.

I smirk, sitting up in bed. Her eyes move to my arms and my chest. She's going through a majorly horny phase right now. And as her man, the only one who'll ever touch her, I'm reaping all the benefits. She rests her hand on her belly.

"I don't want to overexert you before the celebrations," I say, "but I *do* think you could benefit from some stress relief."

I stand naked, my rock-hard dick bouncing as I go. It feels so natural to be naked around her, but there's always that spark of excitement like the first night. Walking up behind her, I gently massage her shoulders.

She closes her eyes, responding with the hottest moan. She's really grown into her sexuality these past few months. Hell, we both have. We're so comfortable with each other. We need fewer words, just the language of our bodies. I rub her neck gently.

She groans and looks up at me through the mirror. "Logan..."

I smirk. "That doesn't sound like you want me to stop."

Smoothing my hands down her chest, I delicately stroke my fingers around her nipples. I stare at her in the mirror, captivated by how she shifts in her seat like she can't contain herself. I have to be gentle. Her nipples have become extremely sensitive lately, especially since she's started producing milk.

"Rub your pussy for me, too," I say, a note of command in my voice.

"Logan," she whimpers. She places her makeup down and starts gently rubbing her slit. Her moans get more intense when I stroke her nipples faster, her hand moving in time with me.

Kneeling, I grab her chair and spin it around slowly. Then I pull down the front of her nightgown. Her gorgeous, big tits bounce free, those pale lust-filled green veins moving through her curviness. The end of her nipple leaks slightly.

She gasps and covers it with her hand. I smirk, meeting her eye. "You don't have to be ashamed. I've seen it before."

"Yeah, but not... not when we're... you know..."

I take her wrist and gently remove her hand. My dick is so hard, the scent of her pregnancy filling me with that perfect sense of purpose. Leaning down, I take her nipple in my mouth, moving my tongue around it, tasting her slightly sweet milk.

Then I gently slip my hand beneath her bump and slide my finger into her. She's *soaked* for me, as she has been every day this week, the hormones blasting through her. I keep sucking her nipple, listening to her moans. Her hand is in my hair.

"Oh, my God. Yes. Yes. Don't stop."

I move my finger quicker, feeling her heat, her warmth. Moving my finger in circles as I do the same with my tongue, tasting more and more of her milk. She whimpers, her whole body shaking, legs straightening as the orgasm takes hold of her. I lean back, needing to watch. They've been so damn intense lately.

Her face and neck are bright red when it's over. She twitches, her walls gripping my finger like her horny pregnant slit wants to keep me inside. I slide my fingers out, then gently rub her clit.

"What about you?" she whispers.

I smirk. "A month until you pop. This is about you."

She shakes her head with that daring, confident glint in her eyes I love so much. "Nah-uh. I want you to come on my tits."

Oh, *fuck*. My heart starts pounding in my chest. I know what she's doing to me. She hasn't got long until she needs to get ready for the shower. So she's making me as horny as possible.

She reaches forward and grabs the base of my dick, then leans over and brings her mouth to it. I stare at her gorgeously curvy body, made even fuller with the bump. She sucks my tip, stroking my shaft, bobbing her head up and down.

"Will you?" She moans, then kisses the end of my swollen dick, my tip bulging with all the tension, the hunger to release. "Will you come on my tits? I'm *yours*, Logan."

"Y-yes," I groan when she takes my dick in her mouth again, sucking passionately, making it impossible to look away. "You're mine. J-j..."

"Just yours," she whispers, stroking me faster, staring into my eyes. She leans back to let me see her tits bouncing for me,

still wet from my mouth, from her milk. “Only yours. Forever.”

The heat of her palm rushes through my shaft. She’s so hot. So perfect. Her tits are bouncing. She has that daring glint in her eyes.

“I want your come,” she moans, “on my tits. Soon Logan, in my hole again. We’ll have another baby.”

“Yes, yes,” I growl, almost exploding. “Oh, fuck!”

“You’re going to fuck me hard. Fuck me deep. Make me pregnant again...”

A look of adorable victory touches my wife’s features when the hot come explodes from my dick. It spatters onto her chest, slides down over her thickness, and clings to her nipples. She looks up at me, massaging the come over her tits, making them glisten.

“Logan,” she whispers. “I think I might need to have another shower anyway.” She looks at the bed. “I mean, if you think you can...”

My cock is already getting hard again. “Thank God for pregnancy hormones,” I snarl, leaning down, picking her up, and holding her carefully for the baby. I lay her on the sheets at the end of the bed, waiting as she cutely wriggles her cushions into the position she likes.

I bring my tip to her pussy and rub it up and down her clit, toward her entrance.

“Do you still feel it?” Emma moans, looking up at me. “The fire?”

I push inside her. I feel the heat, the belonging. “Always,” I tell her. “Every. Single. Time.”

EPILOGUE

NINE YEARS LATER

Emma

“Look at Mikey being such a gentleman with Rosa,” Chrissy says, nudging me and nodding into the garden.

Our oldest son, Mikey, is helping Chrissy’s daughter, Rosa, in the sand pit, laughing when she tosses some into the air. All around them, the party is bustling. I’ve got friends from the literary agency down and, of course, Mom, Dad, and Marie. There’s Chuck and a few other old teammates of Logan.

“I know that look,” Chrissy says, laughing. “Is it that time again?”

I look at her, feeling a glow of love move through me. The music plays from the garden. We’re here to commandeer or clean more glasses. “I’m not pregnant. Just... isn’t this something? All of these people together?”

Looking out the window, I see Logan and Dad talking near the buffet table. Logan is wearing a fitted tee that makes his arms pop. He’s let his facial hair grow into a short silver beard, and his hair is almost entirely silver hair. He looks so dashing and handsome.

“Mommy,” Amelie says in her bright, excited voice. “Hey, Aunt Chris.”

I turn to find my seven-year-old beaming. She’s got a notebook in her hand and one long black braid over her shoulder. Of all the children, I think Amelie looks the most

like Logan. It's the blue of her eyes matched with the dark hair.

"Did you finish your story?" I ask.

"Yeah. I made Jacob and Liam ogres!"

Chrissy can't help but laugh. "You made your calm, sensible twin brothers into *ogres*?"

As if on cue, Liam and Jacob come wrestling into the kitchen. Both of them are laughing. They love it. They could wrestle every day if we let them, but preferably not in the kitchen.

"Boys," I call, but then Mom's there, deftly leaning down and sweeping them up, one in each arm. I think becoming a grandmother has made her much stronger.

She grins at me, flustered. She turns to Liam and then to Jacob. "*You* two are getting faster every day."

"Faster, faster," Jacob says, laughing.

"Who are these little terrors?" Logan says, striding into the kitchen. Jacob squirms to be in his dad's arms, but Liam is a grandmommy's boy and stays put.

Logan hugs Jacob and ruffles his hair. "So this is where the real party's at, huh?"

Jacob laughs and tries to crawl onto Logan's shoulders. He smiles at me. He doesn't have to say anything. I know what he's thinking. Marriage and four kids together will do that—make it so we don't have to talk. We both know what a miracle this is. We made it. We're here. Right where we belong, soaking up the love in our happily ever after.

THE END

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Turn the page to get a sneak peek of

Professor Ink>

PROFESSOR INK

CHAPTER ONE

Ellie

I shouldn't feel like it's the first day of high school as I stand outside the lecture hall. I hold my books, feeling like a dork while trying to seem completely relaxed. Everybody around me is talking in small clusters, or that's what it looks like.

Reminding myself I'm not a kid anymore, I force my gaze to scan the large entrance hall. There are around forty people in here. *Most* of them are already talking to people, but a few, like me, are hovering on the edges. Maybe they feel the same gnawing, whispering dread at the prospect of putting themselves out there.

None of them can know about *the incident*, as I've come to think of it. The evil, crazy thing that happened to me. Or maybe I caused it. I don't know. I've never been able to decide whether I should take some of the blame for myself.

A woman catches my eye and smiles with the same shakiness I recognize. It's like I can *feel* the shape of her smile on my lips and all the uncertainty that comes with it.

I'd call that artsy-fartsy pretentious bull crap, but this is English Lit. Somehow, I think artsy-fartsy, pretentious bull crap flies here. That's a private joke just for me. There's no way I'd say it out loud and offend somebody before the academic year even begins.

The woman is blond, tall, and on the leaner side. It's like somebody has drawn a picture of my exact opposite. She

shoulders her book bag, a green satchel with pins dotted all over it, and walks over to me.

“Uh, hey,” I say, annoyed at myself for the *uh*.

She raises her voice over the surrounding chatter. “I was standing over there thinking, well, here it is, my first year at college, and I’m alone, a real loser. Then I saw you looking. I thought, hey, maybe we can be losers together.”

She smiles tightly, then goes on, “That was a joke. My uncle said I should try to make a joke. Too blunt, right?”

I laugh, hoping I put her at ease a little. “Not too blunt at all. It’s nice to talk to somebody.”

“I’m way too blunt sometimes.”

I shake my head. “Seriously, it’s fine. I’m Ellie.”

She sticks her hand out. She has jittery energy, almost bobbing on the spot. I wonder if it’s her anxiety bubbling up in her, whereas mine folds inwards, disappears inside, and buries itself.

“I’m Chloe.”

We shake hands, and she leans against the wall beside me. “Have you heard about Max Stellar? *Professor* Stellar, I should say.”

“The man who’s keeping us waiting?” I say, glancing at the clock.

She grins. “That eager to get started, are you?”

“Honestly, yeah. I’ve been building this up in my head all summer. The first class and all the ways it could go wrong.”

“Jeez, sounds like being in my head. We really are two peas in a pod, Ellie.”

I laugh when she playfully nudges my shoulder, feeling lucky she walked over, lucky this conversation feels so easy. It’s far more effortless than my first conversations with people usually are.

“Have you heard, though?” she goes on. “He’s a real hunk, apparently. I’ve never been much of a Casanovia. You know, the female version of Casanova.”

“Did you just make that up?”

She beams. “Maybe, but the point is, be on your guard. Supposedly, he makes people *swoon*.”

I’m about to say I don’t believe her. I’m about to say it doesn’t matter because I’m here to learn and nothing else. I had too much drama before when everything went wrong, and all the bull crap stacked up and fell on my head.

Then I see it: women—and some men—swooning over Professor Stellar. I don’t see *him* at first, just the effect he’s having. Several women nudge their friends and nod over at him, blushing like they’re ashamed of how hot he is.

“I’m going to screw him by the end of the year,” I hear a woman say. Then she and her friend laugh loudly. She has a cheerleader look about her. Maybe she’s right. Maybe she will.

I turn, following their gazes, and then I know none of them can ever touch him. None of them get to stroke their hands up his large, muscular arms. His tattoos are just about visible beneath his white shirt. His broad chest and the lines in his abs are visible too. Or is that my imagination, my hunger?

He’s got black hair with flecks of silver, swept to the side and kept there with some product. His dark ink flashes through his shirt when he strides through the path of the overhead light.

He pauses. I swear, for a second, nobody else exists. He’s looking *right* at me. He’s staring into my soul like he wants a piece. I can hardly believe he’s doing this in front of everybody, just staring. I don’t understand why. He just looks at me, like he’s locked in place, and then quickly walks toward the door.

“Do you know him?” Chloe asks.

“No,” I murmur, my heart pounding too hard for no reason.

“He was really eyeing you up.”

“He wasn’t,” I say, blatantly lying, even to myself.

“Let’s get started, ladies and gentlemen,” Professor Stellar calls across the room.

He pushes the door open and walks toward the lectern like he has a vendetta against it. Chloe and I file in, my instincts guiding me toward the back of the class. That way, I can shrink into my seat, slump down, and try not to think about those clear, blue eyes staring *into* me. Then Chloe takes my arm and leads me to the front.

“I want to hear everything,” she says.

“Okay. Fine. Cool.”

My mouth is too dry, considering I drank about ten thousand gallons of water this morning. My lips stick together. When I move my tongue over them, Professor Stellar looks at me again. He towers over the lectern. When he grabs it, I’m sure I can hear the wood straining. His inked forearms are almost bulging out of his shirt.

“Let’s get settled down,” he says, his voice booming even when he doesn’t raise it.

There’s no mic. It’s just how he speaks, with confidence and power.

Finally, everybody is quiet. Professor Stellar leans against the lectern, looking over the classroom. I get the sense he looks at every student except me, but that’s probably just paranoia.

“What is love?” he says. “And, please, nobody say, *baby, don’t hurt me.*”

A few of us laugh—those who recognize the song he’s referring to. There’s something almost hypnotic about him when he speaks, keeping my gaze fixed firmly. I can sense Chloe glancing at *me* as if she can tell the effect he’s having.

Everything is getting hot. My body tingles, and my thighs ache. I push them together, ignoring the deeper ache, the shiver moving through me.

“That’s a question we must ask ourselves when studying the Shakespearean sonnets,” he says. “The nature and the shape of love. ‘My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun.’ That’s not a

compliment, but... Well, let me ask you—those who did the reading—what does *that* say about love?”

In typical first-class-of-the-year fashion, everybody looks around the classroom. There’s an atmosphere of not wanting to answer, a vague sense of judgment coming along with it, and the fear of *being a nerd*.

Max smiles, but his blue eyes stay cold. Or maybe that’s more imagining. “Anybody? There are no wrong answers. Well, some, but I’ll let you all believe you’re perfect for a few weeks.”

I laugh... way too loud, it turns out. Everybody turns to me for a moment. Ah, crap.

Max’s smile changes shape. It becomes something of a smirk. Is he making fun of me?

“Do you have any ideas...” he trails off, looking directly at me.

“Ellie,” I say, filling it in for him.

“Ellie?”

I swallow, my throat feeling raw. Talking in front of forty people is not a small thing, especially when I still have those high school holdups clinging to me. But high school is over, and it’s time to move on and be the person I want to be.

“The sun is unattainable,” I say softly.

Max nods. “Yes...”

“Especially to Shakespeare. He knew so little about it, historically speaking. It’s this impossible, magical thing. It can’t be possessed or controlled. Shakespeare is specifically saying his love is *real*. It’s so real that it has *nothing* to do with the fake, the impossible. It’s the complete opposite.”

I lick my lips. My heartbeat has picked up even more. It’s like my body thinks I’m running flat out from a mugger.

“Excellent,” Max says, voice quiet, eyes locked on me.

[>One-click Professor Ink<](#)

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