

A muscular man with a focused expression is shown from the chest up, holding a thick black pipe. The background is dark blue with a subtle geometric pattern. The title 'HOT SHOT' is written in large, bold, blue letters with a textured, metallic appearance, overlaid on the man's chest and abdomen.

HOT SHOT

ORLANDO STORM SERIES

MARISSA JAMES

Hot Shot

An Orlando Storm Novel

Marissa James

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The following story contains sexual situations and strong language. It is intended for adult readers.

*This book is dedicated to anyone who thinks it's too late to
pursue their dreams.*

It's not. Trust me. I'm cheering you on.

Contents

[1. Hunter](#)

[2. Madison](#)

[3. Madison](#)

[4. Hunter](#)

[5. Madison & Hunter](#)

[6. Madison](#)

[7. Hunter](#)

[8. Madison](#)

[9. Hunter](#)

[10. Madison](#)

[11. Hunter](#)

[12. Madison](#)

[13. Hunter](#)

[14. Madison](#)

[15. Hunter](#)

16. Madison

17. Hunter

18. Madison

19. Hunter

20. Madison

21. Hunter

22. Madison

23. Hunter

24. Madison

25. Madison

26. Hunter

27. Madison

28. Hunter

29. Madison

30. Hunter

31. Madison

32. Madison

33. Hunter

34. Madison

35. Hunter

36. Madison

37. Madison

38. Hunter

[Epilogue](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[About the Author](#)

Synopsis

An NHL rookie.

A baker *not* looking for love.

And the secret that could break them.

Moving to Orlando was supposed to be about starting over. Figuring out a new life plan. One that didn't involve a relationship.

Then my car broke down and Hunter Rhodes showed up. He walked right up to my car, saw me climbing into the back seat, and caught a glimpse of my panties.

I promised myself I'd never fall for a professional athlete again, especially a hockey player.

But I can't resist Hunter's sweet and caring nature or the fact that he's effortlessly sexy. It messes with my heart *and* my willpower. Before I know it, I'm considering stepping out of the kitchen and taking a chance.

Even if I have a secret that could ruin us.

Content Warning: Mentions of death of family members, strained difficult family relationships, and parental abandonment.

Tropes: Sports (Hockey), Strangers to Friends to Lovers

Intended for audiences 18+

Chapter One

Hunter

Fuck, it's hot. The guys weren't kidding when they told me to be prepared for it to still be a million degrees out even in late August. The humidity makes the heat even worse. My shirt is already clinging to my body and I've only walked a block. Today is definitely going to be a two shower kind of day. But I don't have time to worry about that right now nor slow down my pace.

I'm running late for lunch with Wes, one of my teammates, because I couldn't find a parking on the street closer to the restaurant. Instead I had to pay an exorbitant amount to park in one of the city's garages.

As I hurry down the sidewalk lined with oak trees, thankful for the slightly cooler temperature in the shade, I catch movement out of the corner of my eye. Turning, I spot a parked car in front of the high-rise buildings, and pause midstep.

Are my eyes playing tricks on me?

I stare at the car, trying to figure out if I'm really seeing what I think I am. I pull my sunglasses down as if somehow that will make the scene clearer.

Is that a woman?

Climbing into her back seat?

I scrub a hand down my face, wiping the sweat away as I watch the scene play out. Yep, definitely a woman climbing across the center console of her car to get to the back seat.

Did she just?

Yeah, she flashed me.

Holy shit.

What the hell is going on?

My brain immediately goes to worst-case scenarios and my feet move down the sidewalk as if they have a mind of their own. When I get close enough, I can see that she's got the back seats down and is reaching into the trunk.

Is she hurt? Trapped? A prisoner?

Before I can spiral anymore, I tap on the driver's side window. She startles and turns my way. I lift a hand in greeting. Her face is red and she grimaces before she scrambles back over the center console and opens the door. The most beautiful hazel eyes peer up at me.

"Hi." My voice comes out hoarse. I clear my throat. "I happened to see you from over there." I gesture to where I

came from. “I wanted to make sure you were okay. Not hurt. Or ...” I shrug, studying her face.

“I’m good.” She climbs out of the car, holding a small bag in one hand and using the other to smooth down her dress. “Well, I’m not okay exactly.”

“Oh?” I raise my eyebrows as I get my first real look at her.

Well, the first one that isn’t her bare ass. I take a deep breath, trying not to replay that visual and hoping she can’t tell that my thoughts are not PG right now.

She’s probably somewhere around five-five or five-six if I had to guess, with shoulder-length curly brown hair that hangs free over her bare shoulders.

I take a step back to give her some room. I am, after all, a stranger. I don’t want to make her uncomfortable. I’m hoping she’ll fill in the blanks of her story as my eyes dart around looking for the cause of her problem.

“It’s been a day. My battery is dead. At least I hope it’s only a dead battery and not something else.”

“Do you need a jump? My truck is over there.” I point in the direction of the parking garage.

“I’ve got a jump box.” She lifts the bag in her hand. “I should be good. But thanks.” She flashes me a smile.

I nod, searching for a reason to stay because I’m drawn to her. I want to talk more.

Maybe because I'm lonely being in a new city, my only friends are the guys on the team.

"Do you want me to hang around in case it doesn't work?" The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them.

She doesn't know me. And Wes is waiting for me. But I'm not about to walk away from a beautiful woman in distress. He can wait.

"Okay. I guess," she says, tucking a stray piece of hair behind her ear. "I'm Madison." She puts out her hand.

"Hunter. Hunter Rhodes." I take her hand. It's soft and smooth like the fresh ice before anyone has skated on it.

The minute our hands connect, I feel a zing up my arm. Curious. I study her face, wondering if she felt it too, but she doesn't flinch.

"Do we know each other?" *Here we go. She's going to recognize me.* She studies me for a beat longer before shaking her head. "Actually, I don't think so. Sorry. You just looked familiar."

You idiot. She doesn't know who you are. You're not back home where everyone knows you as the former captain of Minnesota State's hockey team and wants an autograph. You're nobody here. You haven't even made your NHL debut. Even after I do, it's not like that'll mean anything. I'm just a rookie. A nobody.

"I get that a lot," I say, adjusting my hat.

She stares at me for another second before nodding and turning back to her car. Before she can unlatch the hood, I make quick work of getting it open and securing it in place. Putting my hand out, I tip my chin toward the bag in her hand.

“I wish I had some way to thank you,” Madison says after I’ve hooked up the jump box. “Oh, wait! I know.” Her face lights up as she opens the driver’s side door again and pulls out a white pastry box.

“Here.” She opens the box to display a gorgeous array of mouth-watering pastries. I spot a couple of scones, éclairs with cream perfectly piped on top, and cream puffs with powdered sugar. They’re almost too pretty to eat.

“Thank you. But I can’t,” I mumble. During the hockey season I watch what I eat. I tried eating whatever in college during my freshman season and ended up feeling sluggish all the time. I learned my lesson quickly, and I’m not about to test it out again. Not with my rookie season starting soon.

“Oh, shit. Are you diabetic? I’m sorry. I didn’t think about that.” She slams the box closed, pulling it closer to her.

“No. Nothing like that.” I chuckle. “I watch what I eat.”

“Okay.” She offers me a small smile. “I can respect that.”

I exhale. I’m glad she doesn’t ask any more questions.

“How about you try your car? See if it’ll start?”

With a nod she climbs in the car and it starts on the first try. I carefully shut the hood and lean down into the open door.

“Seems like your battery is dead. But you should probably get it checked out just in case something else is wrong.”

“Yeah.” She runs her hands through her hair. “I’ll take it to my mechanic.”

I nod and close the door for her.

Rolling down the window, she says, “Thanks, Hunter.”

“Bye, Madison.” I watch as she backs her car out of the spot. I stand there for a few moments lost in thought wondering why I didn’t ask for her number or give her mine. Life here is lonely. Outside of my coaches and teammates this is the longest conversation I’ve had with anyone in person since I’ve moved here. I could definitely do with some more friends.

Honking finally draws me out of my thoughts, and I realize there’s a car that wants the spot Madison vacated. With one last glance at the spot Madison’s car was in a few minutes ago I turn and continue on my way.

“Hey,” I greet Wes, who is leaning against the wall outside the restaurant peering at his phone. Weston “Wes” Reynolds and I have become fast friends the past few weeks, bonding over the fact that we’re the two rookies on the team, and we’re both from up north. He’s from Anchorage although he spent the past two years in upstate New York playing for the Mustangs, the Storm’s AHL team.

“You’re late,” he says, shoving his phone in his pocket and pushing his sunglasses up on top of his head so they hold back his long black hair.

“Yeah. Sorry dude. I stopped to help a woman whose car wouldn’t start.”

He raises his eyebrows but says nothing as we enter the restaurant. We order quickly at the counter and, once we have our food, find a booth in the back.

We eat in silence for a few minutes before Wes says, “I feel like there’s more to the story.”

I chuckle and launch into a recap of the events, skipping over the part where Madison flashed me because that’s something I plan to keep to myself.

“Did you get her number?” he asks between bites of his sandwich.

“No.” I shake my head.

“Damn, man. You should have. Never know if she was the one. She could have been your soulmate. Now you might never see her again and end up alone.”

I roll my eyes. Wes might be an intimidating defenseman on the ice, at six foot four and two-hundred-something pounds, but he’s a romantic at heart. The other day in the locker room after conditioning, I heard him helping Caleb, our captain, plan a surprise anniversary date night for his wife, Jenna.

“If she was my soulmate, don’t you think the universe will find another way for us to meet?”

“Fair enough.” Wes waves his hands around. “But I still think you’ve missed out. Should have told her you were an NHL player. Betcha that would have gotten you her number.”

I groan, choosing to ignore his comment and focus on my sandwich instead. We finish eating in silence.

Long after Wes and I have parted ways, I'm still thinking about what he said.

Is it crazy to think that maybe he's right? Maybe Madison is my soulmate and now I'll never know. I scrub a hand down my face and try to concentrate on the TV. But I can't.

You're not in the market for a relationship or to date anyone or even for a hookup. You're here to play hockey. To prove to everyone that you belong here. That you deserve a spot on the team.

Even though sometimes I think this is all some crazy dream that I'll wake up from. That I'll be back in St. Paul in my childhood home. I give myself a mental shake. But it doesn't help. Sighing, I focus on the television, which has now turned to some sort of baking show, and my mind wanders back to Madison and those pastries she offered me.

I should have taken one.

No, what I really should have done is given her my number.

If I ever see her again, I'm going to get her phone number or at least give her mine. As big as Orlando is I'm doubtful that happen, but having a plan makes me feel better.

Chapter Two

Madison

After getting my car started, I drove straight to the mechanic that my aunt Judy recommended. When I pulled in, they weren't busy and were able to take a look at my car right away. It's been a whirlwind of a day, and it's barely midafternoon.

My mind drifts back to Hunter, the tall handsome stranger with eyes as blue as the ocean that stopped to help me.

Who, now that I think about it, probably saw my naked ass as I was climbing around in my car. My face heats up at the thought.

But what the hell was I supposed to do? I can't unlock my trunk from the outside, there's no keyhole. Whoever made that design decision is an idiot.

The back doors can't be manually unlocked either. Another stupid decision.

I had to climb over the front seats to get into the trunk.

Worst day ever to be wearing a dress. But it is what it is.

Settling down in one of the chairs in the lobby of the mechanic's, I pull out my phone to see I have a text message from my friend and boss, Rachel. I called her on the way to the mechanic to fill her in on my morning and tell her about Hunter. She loved the story. Told me it sounded like the start of a romance book. I laughed.

Rachel: I still can't believe you flashed a guy.

Me: It's not like I did it on purpose.

Rachel: At least he was hot.

I shake my head and drop my phone back into my purse without responding.

Rachel and I met at pastry school. We sat next to each other the first day of classes and we've been friends ever since.

While I moved to Nashville after school to pursue my dreams, she moved back here, her hometown, and opened up her bakery—Sugar and Crumbs.

When I told her I was moving to Orlando, she offered me a job. Which was a lifesaver.

My last job ended disastrously. I'd been working for a start-up and had a pretty solid contract. Or so I thought. The agreement was simple: I work there for three months without pay to help them get the business going. In exchange I would get a franchise location for free and a hefty salary for the

months I'd worked with no pay at the end of the following year.

Except the worst possible thing happened—they lost their funding. I'm pretty sure they're still battling that contract breach in court. That left me without a job and with a nearly empty savings account.

A deep voice pulls me from my thoughts. "Ms. Harris."

The older mechanic, Curtis, is staring at me from the counter, and I wonder how long he's been calling my name.

"That's me." I jump to my feet.

"Your car's ready. Needed a new battery." He tells me the total and I dig through my purse and hand over my credit card.

"Thank you," I say with a smile when he hands me my keys.

I'm already heading for the door when he says, "Tell your aunt Curtis says hello and I'll give her a call tonight."

I glance over my shoulder at him. "Will do." *Interesting.*

I'll have to ask my aunt about that. I get into my car and I breathe a sigh of relief when it starts on the first try. I'm not sure what I thought was going to happen—Curtis just drove it from the garage bay, so clearly it started.

My car is getting up there in years and mileage. Something that EJ liked to remind me of all the time. He was always trying to get me to trade it in for something newer and fancier and I always refused.

Mostly because I don't want to have a car payment again, but also because I'm not ready to give up the first new car that I bought myself. He would have had a field day if he heard what happened today, but he's not in my life anymore so I don't have to hear his opinions. With a sigh I pull my seat belt on and put the car in gear to head home.



“Hey, sugar.” My aunt calls through her kitchen window as I'm getting out of my car.

I wave and head to her house instead of my apartment at the back of the property. I open the door and am promptly pulled into a hug.

Judy is a hugger and she always seems to know when a person needs one. I relax into her embrace feeling the weight of the day lifting.

“How about a snack? Dinner is probably going to be late tonight,” she says once I've been thoroughly hugged.

I chuckle because no matter how many times I've told her she doesn't have to cook for me, she insists.

Judy is my mom's older sister. She never married nor had kids, and I sometimes think she views me as her daughter instead of her niece.

Instead of arguing I accept the plate of cheese and crackers she hands me and sit down on one of the stools at her kitchen counter.

“So, what happened today?” she asks, patting her hands on a dish towel.

I huff out a breath and launch into the story of my car refusing to start this afternoon, how I had to climb into my back seat and ended up flashing the tall handsome stranger who walked by, and how he helped me.

“Did you get his number?”

“No, I didn’t.” I shake my head, shoving a piece of cheese and a cracker into my mouth.

“He sounds like a looker. Should have asked for his number in case your car breaks down again and you need rescuing. Or your engine needs tuning up.”

“Aunt Judy!” I laugh, shaking my head at her ridiculous innuendo.

I don’t need to drag someone else into the mess that is my life right now. It’s probably best that Hunter simply remains the nice guy who helped me with my car.

But then again.

Maybe I should have asked for his number or given him mine. Not that I’m ready to date anyone.

But you could have made a new friend, the little voice in the back of my head says. I sigh. I don’t have many friends—just my aunt and Rachel.

But I didn’t give him my number, and there’s nothing I can do about it now. I’m a firm believer in the idea that if the

universe wants something to work out, it'll work out. So if the universe wants Hunter and I to be friends, somehow we'll cross paths again. And if we don't, it wasn't meant to be.

“Come on, girlie, you gotta have a little bit of fun.” She shimmies her shoulders and winks at me.

“Curtis said to tell you hi and that he'll call tonight. Want to tell me what that's about?” I ask, desperate to change the subject.

“Let's just say he's under consideration to tune my engine up.” Judy pats her curly brown hair, a big grin on her face.

“For fuck's sake,” I mumble around a bite of cracker.

“What, dear? I'm in my midsixties, not dead. I still have needs. You can't tell me your engine doesn't need tuning up after the year you're having.” She punctuates each of her sentences with a raise of her eyebrows.

I shake my head and roll my eyes at her before focusing back on my snack.

I hope when I'm her age I look as good as she does. She doesn't look a day over thirty-five. A by-product of working out every day, maintaining her brown hair with regular appointments with her stylist, Botox—although she claims to never have had it—and dressing like she's in her thirties. Don't get me wrong, she looks fabulous.

I, on the other hand, found my first gray hair recently and am starting to get wrinkles. I make a mental note to ask Judy about her skincare routine since her skin is always amazing.

“Anyway, my car should be fixed now,” I say, changing the subject. Again.

My aunt means well, but I’m not interested in anything right now, even only an “engine tune up.” This year has been a whirlwind and I’d like to get through the rest of it without any more stress or drama in the form of relationships or hookups.

“Good. How’d your meeting go this morning?”

I sigh. I was hoping we wouldn’t get into this right now but here we are.

“It was okay. Even if I was fifteen minutes late because I couldn’t find any place that didn’t require me to parallel park.” I pause and Judy chuckles.

She knows how I feel—she’s heard me lament over it many times in the few months I’ve been here. The city sure loves its street parking. Which requires one to parallel park. A skill I’ve never mastered.

“The lawyer was great. Gave me a lot to think about. Asked a lot of questions I didn’t have the answers to. She referred me to an accountant and a commercial real estate agent. That is if I decide to follow through with the idea.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

I shrug and pick up the last piece of cheese, popping it into my mouth.

“I thought your dream was to open a custom cake shop. This is the first step.”

It is my dream but it's scary to think about investing all that money into a location, equipment, and staff, because it could fail. Most small businesses fail in their first couple of years. I've seen that firsthand recently.

I'm not sure if I'm ready to risk it. I don't know if I trust myself to take another chance. I took a couple of chances earlier this year and they left me with a broken friendship and my heart torn apart. Not to mention broke. I'm not sure if I'm ready for another risk.

"I don't know if I'm ready for it. I like my job at Sugar and Crumbs. I get to make cakes there."

"Whatever you decide, I'll support. I just don't want you to give up on your dream. You don't have to do this alone, you know."

"Thanks." I stare down at my empty plate.

"Before I forget, your father texted again."

My mouth goes dry, and I reach for the glass of water in front of me and take a sip. "What'd he say?" I finally ask, my heart racing.

"He said he hasn't heard from you. I thought you were going to talk to him and finally meet him. He wants to get to know you. Now that you're both in the same city, it's the perfect opportunity."

"I said I *might* agree to meet him. Why is he texting you? How does he even have your phone number?"

I huff out a breath, shaking my head. I don't know how he got my number, and he somehow also has Judy's? After all these years of radio silence, why does he suddenly want to communicate?

Judy tilts her head, making eye contact with me before saying, "Your mother wrote him letters a few years back. She left one with her lawyer to give to him when she passed away. It had both of our numbers in it. I think she felt guilty. He called me when he got the letter. That's how I know."

"Guilty?" I cross my arms. "What the hell did she have to feel guilty about?"

"Stopping you two from having a relationship. Taking the decision about you out of his hands. I think you should meet him, sweetie." Judy splays her hands on the counter, leaning toward me waiting for my response.

I know she probably has more to say on the subject, but she stays silent. Letting what she said sink in.

I should talk to my father, I know I should. Part of my hang-up is what he does for a living.

He's a retired hockey player turned head coach of an NHL team. Hockey and I don't exactly have a great relationship right now.

I know I shouldn't let the past stop me from getting to know him. I've wanted to know him my whole life.

I remember asking my mom about him all the time. She'd always be cagey about what happened between them except to

say he picked his career over us.

Never giving me the details. Now would be the perfect time to find out what really happened.

Hear his side of the story. But maybe I don't want to. I can't decide. This is an internal argument I've been having since the first time he contacted me.

"I'll think about it," I finally answer, getting to my feet. It's the best I can do right now. I pick up my empty plate, carrying it to the sink. "Thank you for the snack."

"Of course, dear. Dinner will be ready around seven," Judy says, thankfully letting the conversation die.

"You don't have to feed me every night, you know," I say as I head to the kitchen door.

"I know but I like to. Let me take care of you for a little while."

We've had this conversation at least once a week for the past few months and that's the answer she always gives me.

With a wave of my hand, I head out the door and cross the short stretch of grass to my apartment.

Aunt Judy said it was an art studio when she bought the house. She converted it into a small apartment with the intention of renting it out but never got around to it. It sat unused until I moved to town.

I push open the door and step inside. It's not much, but it suits me fine since I sold and gave away most of my

belongings when I left Nashville. I didn't even have a mattress when I moved in.

Aunt Judy happened to be redoing her guest bedroom and insisted I take the queen bed that she was getting rid of. The bed that looked brand new. I tried to argue with her but I lost that fight.

She also *found* me a couch. She told me a friend of hers was giving it away along with matching coffee tables and end tables. I called bullshit on that too. But the couch showed up the next day.

I grab a can of seltzer from the fridge before making my way over to the couch with my Kindle. After the events of the day, I'm ready to relax with a good book.

But before I can get lost in the story my phone pings with a message. I grab it, scowling when I see who it is.

EJ: Can we talk? I miss you.

Nope, no way.

I sent him countless text messages that he never responded to and now he decides it's time to reach out.

After all these months?

No thanks, EJ. You not only broke my heart, you broke our friendship. You were the straw that broke the camel's back and made me decide to come to Orlando.

Chapter Three

Madison

The buzz of the timer has me pausing midchapter in my romance book, which I hate to do, so I can check on the blueberry muffins that have been baking. A quick peek through the oven window confirms that they are perfectly golden brown and I pull them out replacing them with chocolate scones.

It's quiet, the only sounds coming from the oven creaking. Exactly how I like it.

Once the scones are in the oven, I pour myself another cup of coffee. This needs to be my last cup since it's already my second, or maybe third, and too much caffeine makes me jittery.

I should be used to waking up at three a.m. since I've been getting up early to do the morning baking at Sugar and Crumbs for months now, but I'm not. Even going to bed by eight I still need multiple cups of caffeine to make it through the day.

Taking a sip of coffee, I think about asking Rachel if I can work some of the later shifts. Having to go to bed so early every night makes it hard to have a social life or date.

Not that I'm ready to date yet but having a social life would be nice. But that would mean that I'd have to have someone to do something with, which unless you count my aunt or Rachel, I don't have.

My thoughts drift to Hunter. I wonder what his story is.

From what I could tell, yes I checked him out so sue me, he was in amazing shape—his arms and legs were corded with muscles.

Is he obsessive about workouts or is it something to do with what he does for a living? Is he some secret billionaire recluse who's going to meet a wild yoga instructor one day and fall in love? I laugh at the thought. I think I'm reading too many billionaire romance novels. Shaking my head and pushing away thoughts of the handsome stranger with a smile I can still picture when I close my eyes, I force myself to focus on my job.

The rest of the morning flies by and before I know it, Rachel is using her key to let herself in.

“Hey Madison. Morning.”

“Morning, Rachel. Everything's all set.” I turn off my Kindle and turn on the coffee machine for her and Brandon, the other employee who will be arriving soon.

“Perfect. Thanks. What are you reading?” She grabs her apron off the hooks by the back door and ties it around her waist.

Rachel and I both love romance novels, specifically those written by indie authors, and we often chat about books in the mornings while we open the bakery. I tell her about the book I’m reading, and she asks me to text her the title so she can add it to her TBR—To Be Read—list.

“Not that it isn’t long enough. But what’s one more book? Besides, you haven’t steered me wrong yet.”

I chuckle and pull out my phone to text her. “Sent. How can I help?”

Rachel glances at the clock on the wall. “We should take these out front. Brandon will be here soon.”

We busy ourselves setting up the display cases, and at six thirty on the dot Rachel changes the Closed sign to Open and unlocks the door as Brandon comes out from the kitchen.

Crinkling my forehead, I take in his royal-blue shirt with some sort of cloud or storm on the front. “What are you wearing?”

“This?” he asks, tugging on his shirt. “It’s the Orlando Storm, our hockey team. You don’t know them?” He furrows his brow at me.

Great. Just what I need.

Before I can say anything, he rambles on, waving his hands around. “They’re good. Won their third Cup in a row about

eight years ago. Haven't won since, but they've made it to the playoffs the past couple of years. I'm surprised you haven't heard of them, Madison."

"I-I don't care for hockey," I mumble, wanting this conversation to end. "Too violent. Too much fighting."

It's not true at all. I love hockey. But hockey and I are on the outs right now. Have been since earlier this year so I settle for a little white lie to hopefully stop him from asking questions.

I can't get a good read on the guy—he seems friendly enough, but he also has a penchant for gossip. When he found out I used to work in Nashville, he wanted to know which celebrities I'd made cakes for, if I'd ever gone to any celebrity parties, what tea I could spill.

Of which there was none. Even if there was, I wouldn't tell him. I think he spends too much time on TMZ's website. For all I know he reports for them.

"What are our drink specials today?" Rachel asks.

I breathe a sigh of relief as Brandon launches into a very animated explanation of his newest drink. Which apparently he's calling the Summer Storm.

He's a great barista. Customers are always raving about his drinks, and we usually sell a ton of whatever weekly special he comes up with. I just wish he wasn't so interested in gossip because if he found out who I was connected to here in Orlando I know the questions would never stop.

I take that as my cue to slip back into the kitchen to finish a gender reveal cake that's going to be picked up today.

A couple of hours later, I step back to admire my handiwork. The client—Jenna, a friend of the couple—had handed me a sealed envelope, telling me that the gender of the baby was in there and she wanted the inside of the cake to be either blue or pink, depending on the gender. She also told me that the party was hockey themed and she wanted the cake to go with the theme.

I'm proud of the final product. I made pucks out of chocolate covered Oreos and added a net and hockey sticks, all of which are edible. I used white chocolate icing for the ice and red and blue icing to draw the lines. The inside is a vanilla cake dyed blue.

“Madison.” Rachel peeks her head into the kitchen. “Your customer is here.”

“Perfect timing,” I say wiping my hands on my apron and stepping back to admire my decorating skills one last time before gently sliding the cake into a box and making my way out of the kitchen.

“Hi, Jenna,” I say, addressing the well-dressed blonde woman standing on the other side of the counter.

“Madison.” Her eyes light up when she peeks into the cake box. “Oh my goodness, it is perfect. Cole and Hannah are going to be thrilled when they see it tomorrow.”

“I’m glad.” I smile, happy that she’s satisfied with what I made. I was worried for a minute that it wouldn’t be good enough.

She pays for the cake and with a wave and a promise to send more business our way she picks up the cake and heads out the door.

“Holy shit,” Brandon mutters after Jenna is gone.

“What?” I spin around to face him. He’s standing with his mouth open, staring between me and the order sheet in his hand. “What’s wrong?”

“That was Jenna Cutter ... Cutter.” He repeats her last name like it means something.

“Yeah, I know.” I glance over at Rachel who shrugs her shoulders and starts helping a customer.

“No, that’s Jenna Cutter. Caleb Cutter’s wife.”

“Okay sure,” I say with a shake of my head.

What is he going on about now? I’m going to guess that Caleb is some local celebrity I should know but don’t.

“You really are clueless, aren’t you?” Brandon chuckles as he runs a hand through his curly blond hair.

“Please fill me in on what I’m missing.” I cross my arms, resting my hip against the counter.

“Caleb Cutter is the captain of the Orlando Storm. He was part of the group that won three straight Stanley Cups. He’s basically a legend in the hockey world. Which means. Holy

shit. That cake was for Cole and Hannah Ross. Cole plays defense for the Storm. He and Caleb have been playing together since the beginning of their careers and are close friends. You made a cake for an NHL player.” His eyes widen at the realization. I can’t help but chuckle at all the information he rattled off. Yep, definitely a hockey fan.

I shrug. *What do I care?* Jenna was nice. The only clues that she might be wealthy were the beautiful Louis Vuitton bag she carried and the way she didn’t flinch at the upcharge on the cake because it was a rush job. A lot of people have money around here so I didn’t think anything of it.

Brandon shakes his head, mumbling something that I can’t understand. Thankfully another customer comes in and he turns his attention to them.

Glancing at the clock, I see that my workday is over. The one perk of starting work before the sun is up is that I get done early. It gives me time to do all my errands during the day while other people are working. It also means I have time to take an afternoon nap, which is what I plan to do when I get home.

As I’m gathering my stuff to leave, my phone dings with a text. Assuming it’s my aunt, I pull my phone out of my pocket to see a message from my father.

Jake: Hi Madison. I never heard back from you. Would love to have coffee or go to dinner before the season starts.

Ugh. I shove my phone into my back pocket without answering him. I still haven't decided what to do.

Part of me wants to ignore him. Part of me wants to meet up with him, see if we can have a relationship.

My mom left me with unanswered questions about my father. Questions maybe he can answer.

Yawning, I gather my stuff, ready to head home and take a nap. A voice out in the shop has me pausing midstep, my hand on the doorknob.

Could it be? No way. There's no way he's here.

Chapter Four

Hunter

“Where are we going again?” I glance out the window of Wes’s Jeep as he pulls into a spot next to a row of stores.

“To Sugar and Crumbs. The bakery that Caleb was telling me about.” He cuts the engine and turns to me. “Did you not hear the conversation I had with him earlier?”

I shake my head because I was distracted by thoughts of a certain brown-haired, hazel-eyed beauty that I can’t seem to get out of my head. Someone I find myself thinking more and more about as the days go by.

The only times I can concentrate on something else is when I’m on the ice or in the weight room. Otherwise, she takes over my thoughts and has even made a few appearances in my dreams.

“Good grief, man. You feeling okay?” Wes takes his seat belt off. “Caleb said Jenna found when she was looking for a place to order a cake for Cole and Hannah’s baby thing. Apparently

they were super friendly and accommodating. I Googled it because I need a sweet fix.”

“You and your sweets.”

“It’s my cheat day,” Wes says by way of explanation as he gets out of the Jeep.

I run my hands through my hair before unbuckling my seat belt and following him down the sidewalk and into the shop.

A bell above the door announces our entrance and we’re greeted by a blond guy probably my age, who is wiping down the counter. I check out the small shop.

A refrigerated case sits to the left of the door, filled with cakes of all sizes including individual slices, cupcakes, and other prepackaged desserts. If it wasn’t hockey season, I’d be grabbing one for later.

A couple of small tables take up the space to the right of the door. Two pastry display cases sit to the left and right of a long counter holding a cash register, which Wes is currently leaning against, talking to the employee.

I take a step closer to see what’s available. As I move closer, I spot an espresso machine behind the counter. Suddenly I’m craving a hit of caffeine to get me through the rest of the day.

“Want anything?” Wes gestures at the pastry cases.

“I could go for a latte.”

“You got it,” the employee says. “Any particular flavoring you want added?”

“None, thanks.” I turn back to check out the rest of the display pastries and cakes.

“Hunter?” a voice says behind me, and my mouth falls open. Am I imagining her? Have I been thinking about her so much that now I’m hearing her voice.

“Madison.” I turn around to see the woman that’s been haunting my thoughts and dreams standing in front of me.

I bite my lip just hard enough to feel pain confirming that this is real and not a dream. I know I’m staring at her but I can’t help it.

She’s as gorgeous as I remember even with her brown hair swept into a bun at the top of her head and a light sheen of sweat on her forehead. Her hazel eyes dart back and forth as she takes me in.

“What are you doing here?” she whispers, her mouth falling open as she steps out from behind the counter.

Before I can answer, the barista sets down my latte. “Thanks,” I say, pulling out my wallet.

“I got it.” Wes tilts his head at me, his eyes flickering to Madison. I know I’ve got some explaining to do later. But for now, I ignore him and turn to Madison.

“Hi,” she says.

“Howdy,” I answer after a far too long silence. *Howdy?* Who the hell am I?

I clear my throat and try again. “Hi Madison. Fancy seeing you here.” I smile. *Okay, much better, Hunter.* I mentally pat myself on the back for pulling it together.

She giggles, the sound sweet and beautiful, if giggling can sound beautiful, and it does something to me. Huh? I’ll have to examine that later.

“I work here,” she says, shoving her hands into the pockets of her jean shorts. “What are you doing here?”

“Wes heard about this place and wanted to check it out.” I nod to where he’s paying at the counter. “He’s got a sweet tooth. I came along for the ride. You’re a baker?”

“I am.”

“I’ve always envied people who can bake. I’m lucky if I can make a box cake and have it turn out right.”

She laughs and I want to bottle up the sound and save it for later.

“You ready?” Wes interrupts, a bag in his hand.

“Can you give me a minute?” I ask, not ready to leave yet. Not before I get her number.

“Yeah, sure. I’ll meet you back at my Jeep.”

“Thanks.”

“Don’t take too long,” he says over his shoulder as he heads out the door.

With a quick glance around the bakery, I realize we’re alone. The other employee must have disappeared into the back.

Turning back to Madison, I ask, “How’s your car? Did you get it fixed?”

“Yeah. It was the battery like you thought.”

“I’m glad it wasn’t something more complicated.” Why the hell am I asking her about her car? I mean, yes, I hoped it was an easy fix but how is that all I can think to say?

“Me too. It’s good to see you again, Hunter.”

She starts to walk away, but I’m not leaving without a way to contact her again. I reach out and put a hand on her arm to stop her. The contact sends what feels like a bolt of electricity up my body. I jerk my hand away. She must have felt something too because she glances down at the spot where my hand just was.

“Wait. Can I get your phone number? Or give you mine? I kicked myself for not exchanging information before and now that I’ve seen you again I feel like it’s the universe giving me, us, a second chance so we should take it.” I’m rambling but I don’t care. “That is unless you have a boyfriend who won’t be too happy about you giving out your number to a random guy?”

“No. I don’t have a boyfriend.” She lets out a nervous chuckle. “Yeah. Okay.”

I pull my phone out of my back pocket and she rattles off her number. I save it and then send her a text. I hear a ding and she pulls her phone out. “I got it.”

“Good. Great,” I stammer. “I should probably get going. Wes is waiting for me.” I jerk my thumb over my shoulder like she needs reminding of who I’m talking about.

“It was nice to see you again, Hunter.”

“Text me,” I say, and she nods. With a wave I grab my latte and leave the shop, heading to Wes’s Jeep. I pull open the passenger door and get in.

“Was that her?” Wes asks, his mouth full of chocolate chip cookie, a shit-eating grin on his face.

“Yeah, it was.” I need to remember to thank Caleb. He won’t have any idea why I’m thanking him, but if it wasn’t for him telling Wes about this place, I wouldn’t have run into Madison again.

“So,” Wes says as he navigates the Jeep onto the highway, “did you give her your number this time?”

“Yep.”

“Good. Maybe now you’ll be able to wipe that dreamy expression off your face that you’ve been walking around wearing.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I mumble. I’m denying it but I know the expression he’s talking about.

Wes shakes his head. “Are you going to ask her out?”

Am I going to ask her out?

I never really thought past seeing her again and giving her my number. Up until now it seemed highly unlikely that I’d

run into her again, given how big the city is. I didn't even know if she lived here or if she was only visiting.

Now we have each other's numbers. What's my next move?

"I don't know. We've probably spent twenty minutes together. If that. I don't know what she's really like. What she's into."

"That's what dating is for. Getting to know each other. You two seemed like you had a connection."

I roll my eyes even though he can't see me. "Yeah, maybe. Should probably see if she actually texts me. Maybe she was simply being nice since we were at her work."

"Text her." Wes glances over at me quickly before focusing back on the road.

I sigh but do as he says, shifting in my seat to pull out my phone.

Me: It was great to see you again.

Almost immediately three dots appear, but as quickly as they appear they disappear again. As I'm about to put my phone away it dings with a message.

Madison: It was good to see you too. Thank you again for your help with my car. I don't know if I ever said that.

I chuckle at her rambly text message and quickly type a response.

Me: No problem. You seemed to be doing perfectly fine without me.

Madison: Thanks. I'm about to head home. I'll talk to you later.

The clock shows a little after one. I wonder what time she starts work if she's already done for the day. I make a mental note to ask her what hours she keeps so I don't text her too late.

"So," Wes says as he pulls up to my apartment building.

"So?" I parrot, unbuckling my seat belt.

"Did you ask her out?" he asks, turning to me.

Instead of answering him I open the door, grab my half-finished latte, and hop out. I hear him grumbling something about needing to know what's going on.

"Thanks for the ride. See you tomorrow at practice."

"Hunter—" I don't hear the rest of what he's saying because I've already closed the door.

I glance over my shoulder to see him scowling at me, his arms thrown up. I chuckle, shake my head, and make my way into the building.

This isn't the end of the conversation. I know I'll hear about it at practice tomorrow, but right now I don't care.

Chapter Five

Madison & Hunter

Monday

Hunter: What's your favorite nondessert food?

Madison: Well hello to you too. Happy Monday.

Hunter: Hi. What's your favorite food?

Madison: Tacos because Taco Tuesday is totally a thing. Haven't found a good place in Orlando though.

Hunter: Yes, I agree. I'd love to take you to my favorite taco place soon.

Madison: I'd like that.

Hunter: *thumbs up emoji* What's your favorite drink?

Madison: Is this twenty questions? It depends on the time of day but iced coffee with almond milk; water and sometimes a Diet Pepsi; Rye Old-Fashioned. What about you?

Hunter: Espresso or latte in the morning. Water or Gatorade if I'm working out. At night either a beer or a gin and tonic.

Madison: Espresso? That's hard core.



Tuesday

Madison: What kind of music do you like?

Hunter: Hi! How are you? I'm good. Thanks for asking.

Madison: LOL. See how it feels! *laughing emoji* Now answer the question. Please.

Hunter: Country music. I listen to it while I work out.

Madison: You work out a lot?

Hunter: Every day

Madison: Dedication

Hunter: You could say that. Same questions you asked me.

Madison: I love country music too. I used to run and go to yoga a couple of times a week, but since moving to Orlando I haven't had the time.

Hunter: Yoga is a great workout.

Madison: You've done it?

Hunter: Yeah.

Madison: This I have to see.

Hunter: Sure. Tell me when and where. As long as I'm free I'll be there.

Madison: It's a date.



Wednesday

Hunter: You up?

Madison: Was heading to bed.

Hunter: Okay. Night. Hope you're having a good week.

Madison: Thanks. You too.

Hunter: It's been long and it's only Wednesday. I'm exhausted.

Madison: Your job keeping you busy?

Hunter: Yeah.

Madison: I hope you get time to rest over the weekend.

Hunter: Me too. Sweet dreams.



Friday

Madison: Is Orlando your hometown?

Hunter: Nah. I moved here for work. I'm from Minnesota.

Madison: Oh, wow, that's a big change.

Hunter: Tell me about it. Where are you from?

Madison: Nashville. Well, I grew up just outside of Denver. I lived in Nashville for the past five years before moving here this year.

Hunter: No kidding? I was born in Steamboat Springs, Colorado. Do you know it?

Madison: I do actually. I've been there once or twice to go skiing.

Hunter: Small world.

Madison: It is.



Sunday

Madison: Haven't heard from you in a few days. Hope work is going well.



Friday

Hunter: Hey. Sorry, the week got away from me. Any fun plans for the weekend?

Madison: I might go to Disney Springs, but I haven't decided.

Hunter: Have you been to before?

Madison: Once when I was little, but I don't remember it. I've always wanted to go around Christmas to see the decorations. What about you?

Hunter: Nope. Too many people.

Madison: Any plans for the weekend?

Hunter: Sleeping. Dinner on Sunday with a couple of friends.

Madison: Sounds nice and relaxing.



Sunday

Hunter: Hope you had a good weekend. Did you go to Disney?

Madison: I didn't. It was too hot. Did you get to rest?

Hunter: Yeah.

Chapter Six

Madison

“Are you going to tell me about him?”

“What?” I startle at Judy’s voice and almost drop my phone on the tile floor.

“The guy you’re talking to.” Aunt Judy nods toward my phone.

“I’m not talking to a guy. What gave you that idea?” I tuck my phone into my pocket and turn back to the pot of chili on the stove.

“Bullshit. Every time I’ve seen you in the past two weeks, you’ve been checking your phone and texting whoever he is back. Plus you’ve been walking around with a big smile on your face, humming under your breath. There’s a pep in your step,” Aunt Judy counters.

I groan silently. She’s good. I’ll give her that. Aunt Judy isn’t one to beat around the bush, and she’s super perceptive.

I blow out a breath, realizing that continuing to deny it won’t do me any good—she’s like a dog with a bone. “Fine. Yes,

there's a guy."

"I knew it. You can't hide anything from me, dearie." She grins at me. "And?" She waves her hands around for me to continue.

I huff out a laugh. "It's Hunter. The guy who helped me with my car. He came into the bakery a few weeks ago. We've been texting. I don't really know what he is. Just a friend, I guess."

Judy's nodding as I speak, her grin growing bigger. "Madison Mae, he sounds like more than a friend. When am I going to get to meet him?"

Blushing, I shrug and try to change the subject. "Dinner will be ready shortly."

"Good. But seriously Mads, I'm happy for you. You're allowed to let yourself be happy. I hope you know that. I do want to meet this young man of yours so be sure to bring him around."

"Yes, Aunt Judy," I agree although I have no intention of introducing Hunter to my aunt anytime soon.

The perfect way to scare off a new friend—introduce them to my aunt who has no filter and would probably ask about our sex life. Which obviously doesn't exist because we're friends. Now I'm thinking about Hunter and sex. What it would feel like to be in his arms, be under him, or over him. My face heats up and I shake my head, trying to focus on dinner and not Hunter, naked. This feels wrong—I barely know the guy—but also right. *Fuck me.*

Judy pats my arm, bringing me out of my daydream, and proceeds to move around the kitchen grabbing what she needs to set the table.

Sunday night dinners at her house have been a tradition since I moved here. Not that I don't end up eating at her house most days of the week, but on Sunday nights, I cook for her.

It's nice to take time to flex my cooking muscles and make dinner for the person who's been here for me during everything.

"What's new with you?" I ask as we sit down at her small kitchen table with our chili and glasses of wine.

"Same old, same old, dear." She breaks off a piece of bread from the fresh loaf I baked this morning and dunks it in her bowl before taking a bite.

"Have you gone out with Curtis yet?" I ask, picking up my spoon and stirring in the melted cheese that I sprinkled on my chili.

"He's taking me out to dinner and a movie on Friday night."

"He finally asked you out?"

"Oh no, dear. I asked him out," Judy says nonchalantly.

"You did?" Of course she did. Judy's always been a grab life by the horns type of woman.

Perhaps that's why she and I have such a great relationship. She's always encouraged me to go for what I want.

She sets her spoon down, her expression serious all of a sudden. “Yes dear. You know what? I think you should ask your young man out. This is the twenty-first century, a woman can ask a man out. None of this waiting for him to make the first move.” She winks at me.

Throwing back my head, I let out a bark of laughter. “Aunt Judy. I don’t even know if he likes me that way. He’s new to the city too. Maybe he’s only looking for a friend. Plus, after everything ...” I trail off, not wanting to rehash all the pain and humiliation caused by the last guy I thought liked me.

“Dearie, EJ behaved like a jackass and didn’t deserve you. If you like this new guy, ask him out.”

“I-I don’t know. I’m probably reading too much into this. Like I was with EJ.”

I thought I’d read the signals right with him. That after all these years he wanted to be more than friends. We were both finally single at the same time so I’d leapt but he didn’t catch me.

“No, no, dearie. Not if he’s been texting you nonstop the last couple of weeks. I don’t think you’re misreading the signals.” She pats my hand before going back to her dinner.

She’s got a point. I guess. I mean, we haven’t texted nonstop, but close enough.

Do I want to go out with him? Or do I want to keep him in the safe friendship zone that we’ve established through text? I don’t know.

I think back to what she said earlier about how I deserve to let myself be happy. Have I been keeping myself from being happy? Is that what I'm doing now?

I stare down at my bowl, pushing my chili around with my spoon. The rest of dinner passes mostly in silence as if Judy knows that I need the time to think about what she said.

Later that night when I'm back in my apartment I still can't stop thinking about what Judy said. Maybe she's right—maybe I should ask Hunter out. What's the worst that he could say? *No*. Which would mean that once again I didn't read the signs right.

After everything that's happened this past year—losing not one job but two and having a lifelong friendship ruined—I don't think I trust my gut anymore.

Besides, I can use all the friends I can get. So I'll keep Hunter safely in the friend zone until he makes the first move, and even then I don't know if I'm ready to date.

My phone dings, pulling me from my thoughts, and I grab it off the coffee table hoping it's Hunter. He said he was having dinner with friends tonight so I didn't anticipate hearing from him, but maybe they got done early. I shake my head when I see who it is.

EJ: Mads can we talk, please? I hate that things are like this between us.

Nope. No, we can't talk. Part of me wants to respond and tell him no, another part of me wants to block his number and never talk to him again. But as much as he hurt me, it's hard to block the person you've been best friends with since childhood. Instead, I do nothing, ignoring yet another text from him.

Chapter Seven

Hunter

“You need to ask her out, dude,” Wes says from across the table.

We’re having Sunday night dinner in Holt’s apartment. Holt got traded to the team during the offseason when the Storm’s backup goalie decided to retire. This is his fifth year playing in the NHL, and while he’s not a rookie, he’s new to the team too. We’ve bonded over that and the three of us have become good friends.

“What if she says no? Besides, do I really have time to date with the season about to start?”

“What if she says yes and she’s your forever? But you’re too afraid to take the chance.” Wes shoves another forkful of grilled chicken into his mouth.

“Ever the romantic,” I mumble, picking up my phone and opening our text message thread. Smiling, I scroll through all the messages we’ve exchanged.

“She knows you play hockey, right?”

“Nope.”

“What! Why not?” he asks, his forkful of vegetables caught halfway between his mouth and his plate.

“It’s not exactly something you just blurt out when you meet someone. Hi, I’m Hunter and I’m an NHL player.” I shake my head at him.

“True, but you’ve been talking to her for how long now? You know what she does and she hasn’t asked you about your job?”

Chewing on my bottom lip, I run through our conversations. Did I purposely not tell her what I did for a living? Did she ask me? If she cared that much, wouldn’t she have asked? But what would I have told her? I shake my head slightly at the thought, pursing my lips.

“What’s that look for?” Wes points his fork at me, tilting his head to the side.

I take a deep breath. “I dated a girl in college for two years. I really liked her, loved her even. I thought she was really into me. Until I overheard her in the library telling a friend she was only with me because I was a hockey player headed to the NHL. I confronted her about it and that was the end of us. Turned out she was sleeping with her chemistry partner too.”

Wes raises an eyebrow. “I hope you got tested for STDs after that.”

I laugh, running a hand through my hair.

“I did.” I can laugh about it now but back then it hurt. A lot. Maybe that’s why I’m hesitant to tell Madison about what I do for a living until I get to know her.

“I can understand your hesitation,” Wes says gently. “But you need to tell her. She needs to know what she’s getting into before you start something with her.”

“I know. I will.” I pick up my fork and continue eating.

“I get it, but you should tell her soon before you both get even more invested in this relationship. Whatever it turns out to be.”

“What do you mean?” I ask looking up at him.

“Well, for starters, we’re gone a lot. Our season is hella long. Maybe someday in the future she’ll be out with you and you’ll be recognized as a professional hockey player. Plus, gossip columns might write things about you.” He waves his fork around. “Being a hockey player’s girlfriend or even friend is hard. Ask Caleb. I’m sure he’ll tell you.”

I nod. He’s right. I need to talk to Madison even if we’re only going to be friends.

Holt finally comes into the room with his plate and takes a seat at the table.

“Sorry, my sister called. What’d I miss?” he asks, digging into his plate of food.

“Hunter’s got a girl, but he’s too chicken shit to ask her out. She doesn’t know he’s a hockey player.” Wes fills him in between bites. I remain silent, concentrating on my food.

“She what?” Holt asks as he shovels a forkful of broccoli into his mouth.

“It’s not like I could drop that into a text message. I’ll tell her, I promise.”

“Damn right you will,” Holt says with a shake of his head. “Before it blows up in your face.”

“That’s what I said.” Wes points his finger at me.

“It won’t blow up in my face. Besides, she’s cool. I doubt she’ll care what I do for a living.”

“It’s not that she might or might not care. It’s that your life is about to be really busy and complicated,” Wes counters.

“If they keep me on the roster,” I interject, staring down at my plate and the piece of chicken I’m currently pushing around with my fork.

“What do you mean? Of course you’ll be on the roster,” Wes says.

I glance up in time to see him and Holt exchanging looks.

“Something going on, man?” Holt asks.

“No. I just ...” I shrug, putting my fork down and taking a deep breath. “It’s hard to believe that the Storm want me on the team.”

“Dude, they drafted you,” Holt says.

“Yeah, I know. But I chose to go to college instead of signing a contract. Now here I am at twenty-four on an entry-

level contract when guys my age have been playing for years.” I rake a hand through my hair.

How do I tell these guys that part of me thinks I only have a spot on the roster because three of our players are still recovering from offseason surgeries.

That I’ll get sent down to the Mustangs once they’re back. The other part of me thinks it’s a fluke. That I’ll wake up tomorrow and someone will say, “Only kidding, Rhodes. We don’t want you.”

Sadly, that’s been the story of my life in more ways than one. First my father didn’t want me. Then my mother. Then I found out the girl I thought I was going to marry was only with me because of the fame and money that came with being in the NHL.

“Want to talk about it?” Wes asks, tilting his head, his eyebrows drawn together.

I shake my head. Wes studies me for a beat longer before nodding and going back to his meal.

We eat in silence for a while before Holt says, “I think you should ask her out. But tell her about the whole hockey thing. It’s kind of important.”

“Maybe now’s not a good time to start something new. Our schedules are about to get really busy.”

“Don’t blame us when you come to your senses in a few months and find out she’s dating someone else,” Wes says with a shake of his head.

“I saw her. She’s gorgeous. I’m assuming she’s easy to talk to since you’ve been texting nonstop. Won’t be long before some other guy has the balls to ask her out and she’s no longer single. Wait, she is single right?”

My mouth opens and closes a couple of times as I try to picture Madison dating, kissing, being with some other guy. *Nope. Not happening.*

“Yes, she’s single,” I growl. “I wouldn’t be contemplating asking out another guy’s girl.”

My hands shake and I mistype my passcode a couple of times. Finally, my phone is unlocked, and I stare at our text thread. “What do I say?”

“Hi. What’s her name?” Wes asks, leaning across the table.

“Madison.”

“Say ‘Hi Madison. I have tomorrow night off. Wondered if you wanted to go out for dinner or drinks.’”

“Or ask her out for coffee before practice on Tuesday. Get to know her a little bit more. Keep things casual between you two. Less pressure,” Holt suggests.

“Yeah. I like that idea,” I agree.

It makes sense to get to know her more before asking her on a date. We’ve talked but we haven’t spent much time together. What if she’s not into me like I’m into her? Although I saw the way her face lit up when she realized it was me at the bakery. We could have no chemistry. Although I swear I’ve felt

something the few times we've touched. A coffee date does feel like less pressure.

Me: Hey. Was wondering if you wanted to grab coffee Tuesday.

Me: I know you're busy so whichever one works for you. Or if Tuesday doesn't work we can figure out another day.

Shit. Now I sound like a desperate fuck. I set my phone down. *Way to be smooth, Hunter.* Before I can go too far down the rabbit hole of how I fucked things up, my phone chimes with a text message.

Madison: I'd love to get coffee with you. What time and where?

I mentally throw my hands up in celebration that she said yes. Now to figure out where to take her.

"I take it she said yes, based on your expression," Wes says.

"Yeah, she did." I nod, a huge grin on my face.

"See, nothing to worry about," Holt says. "Now can we talk about something else besides your love life, Hunter?"

"Where should I take her? What's good around here?" I swivel my head between the two of them, hoping one has a suggestion.

“There’s a great coffee shop on Fairview Avenue. Sugar Cubes,” Holt suggests. “It’s attached to a bookstore, but it’s been quiet when I’ve been in.”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.” I text Madison back with the location and a time to meet. I stare at my phone, waiting for a response.

“Maybe she’s busy. Are we going to hang out or talk about your woman problems?” Holt gets to his feet, picking up his empty plate, and walks to the kitchen.

“Fine. Fine. Let’s hang out.” I shove my phone into my pocket, grab my plate, and follow him.

“Let’s play some Xbox,” Wes suggests.

I internally groan. Video games are not my favorite. Holt and Wes always want to play *Madden NHL*. Just what I want to do on a night off—play more hockey. Not.

“There’s a wild card game on,” Holt suggests with a small nod, silently telling me he knows I’d rather not play video games.

“Who’s playing?” Wes asks.

“Tampa and Cleveland.”

“Sounds good to me,” I say, leading the way into the living room. I’m not a huge baseball fan, every sport seems slow after living and breathing hockey for so long, but at least we’re not playing video games.



A few hours later I let myself into my apartment. I left Holt and Wes playing video games, using the excuse that I was tired and wanted to get some extra sleep before morning conditioning.

But really, I needed some peace and quiet after listening to those two bicker about which baseball team was better.

They each decided to root for a different team so there was a lot of yelling. I'm not even sure if either of them really cared who won or if they wanted an excuse to heckle each other.

My phone dings interrupting my thoughts and I see I have a text from Madison.

Madison: Sorry I was busy. That sounds good. I'll see you Tuesday.

Me: Can't wait. Have a good night.

Madison: Night Hunter.

There's a pep in my step as I start getting ready for bed. I'm glad I listened to Wes and Holt and asked Madison out. Although there's no way in hell that I'd tell the two of them that—I'd never hear the end of it. As I'm crawling into bed, my phone dings with another text. Hoping it's Madison, I grab it off my nightstand, my mouth falling open when I read the message.

Unknown: Hey Hunter. It's Elias. Can we talk?

I close my eyes for a second and when I open them I half expect the text to not be there. But it is.

How'd he get my number? Better question is, after fifteen years of radio silence, why is he reaching out to me now? Sighing, I lock my phone and set it back on the nightstand.

That's a problem for future Hunter.

Chapter Eight

Madison

This morning, I woke up excited for my coffee date with Hunter. I'm excited to spend time with someone new.

Someone I'm hoping will be a new friend, another person to add to my extremely small circle. I'm hoping that it's as easy to talk to him as it is to text him. I hurry through the morning baking, trying to keep myself busy so I don't keep glancing at the clock. At ten on the dot Rachel shows up to cover for me.

“Thank you for agreeing to this. I really appreciate it.”

“It's no big deal, Mads. I told you that last night. Where are you headed?”

“Well.” I hesitate. “I have a coffee date. It's not exactly a date. We're just friends. New friends.”

“Is this the guy you were talking to a few weeks ago? The hunky one who came in with another guy.”

I nod, staring down at the countertop and tracing the pattern in the tiles with my finger.

“Good for you! That’s awesome. I’m happy for you.”

She’s grinning and I find myself smiling too. “Thanks. I’m going to change so I’m not late.” I hook a thumb toward the bathroom.

“Have fun,” Rachel says.

When I walk up to the coffee shop twenty minutes later I spot Hunter leaning against the brick wall outside the entrance, sunglasses and a hat with a logo I don’t recognize pulled down low on his head.

I take a moment to check him out as I approach. He’s wearing black cargo shorts that seem like they were made for him, paired with a blue T-shirt that shows off his sculpted arms.

I wonder if the rest of him is as muscular and chiseled as his arms and legs. *Calm down, Madison. Now is not the time or place.*

I take a deep breath, trying to stop thinking about Hunter and his muscular body. Nope. Not possible.

“Hi,” I say when I reach him.

He pulls off his sunglasses, his blue eyes sparkling. “Hey. These are for you.” He hands me a bouquet of multicolored flowers, which I hadn’t noticed. *Because you were too busy checking him out*, I scold myself. “I didn’t know what your favorite flowers were, but I saw these and thought they were pretty.” A slight blush tints his cheeks. *Cute.*

“Tulips,” I answer. “My favorite flowers are tulips. But thank you for these. They’re beautiful.” I lean down, smelling the flowers to hide the huge grin on my face, internally squealing.

He bought me flowers.

Flowers.

The last time a guy bought me flowers was my boyfriend in high school.

“Let’s go in.” Hunter reaches for the door and holds it open for me. I’m hit by the smell of coffee brewing and freshly baked pastries, two of my favorite things, the second we enter.

“Have you been here before?” I ask, glancing around at the dimly lit interior.

“No. My buddy Holt suggested this place. He comes here pretty often. There’s a bookstore attached apparently.”

I make a mental note to stop in before I leave. Not that I need any more books, but I can never resist a bookstore.

“Welcome in! Take your time. Let me know when you’re ready,” the cashier says when we step up to the counter.

We study the menu in silence for a couple of minutes before ordering—an iced coffee with almond milk for me and an espresso for Hunter. After we get our drinks, he leads me to a small table tucked in the back of the nearly empty shop.

“This place is cute.” I glance around at the different seating options.

There's even a couch along one wall. Another wall is all windows and through it I see a small courtyard filled with tables. Quite a few of the tables outside are taken although I think it's too hot to sit in the sun, but I bet it would be nice in the winter with a cup of hot coffee and a good book. I should come back when it's cooler so I can enjoy the patio.

"Yeah, it is. If the coffee is as good as it smells, I'll be back," Hunter says, taking a sip of his espresso.

I take a drink of my iced coffee, noting the dark chocolate and nutty flavors in the blend I chose.

"Mine's good. How's yours?"

"Amazing." He takes another sip of his espresso, letting out a small sigh as he swallows his drink. I can't help but stare at him, watching his Adam's apple bob as he swallows. *What has gotten into you, Madison?*

"So ..." Why has it suddenly become awkward to talk to him when we spent two weeks texting back and forth? "How are you?" I ask, settling for an easy question.

He sets his drink down, staring into it for a beat before answering. "Good. Tired. Busy. How are you?"

"Tired too. The bakery keeps me busy. What do you like to do for fun? You can't say work out." I pause, realizing how random that question was. I take a deep breath and swallow.

"I'm sorry. I swear I can carry on a normal conversation that doesn't revolve around asking twenty questions." I glance down at the table. "I'm nervous."

Hunter chuckles. “It’s fine, Madison. I get it. I’m nervous too.” I look up to see him staring at me, a smile on his face. “To answer your question,” he continues, “I love to read. Not sure if that’s a hobby, but my job takes up a lot of time and it doesn’t leave much room for anything else.”

I want to ask him what he does that keeps him so busy but also lets him have time for coffee on a random Tuesday morning, but I don’t. If he wants to tell me more about his job, he will. Instead, I settle for saying, “I love to read too.”

“Oh really.” He grins and leans forward, crossing his arms on the table. “What do you like to read?”

I take a deep breath, getting a whiff of his cologne, a heady mix of pine and cedar. Of course he smells good. *Focus on the question, Madison.*

“Romance. I like reading romance books.” I hold my breath waiting for a comment about how he only reads nonfiction books that make him a better person. But he doesn’t say that. Which really shouldn’t surprise me considering our interactions, brief as they have been, point to him being polite and thoughtful.

“Cool.” He picks up his coffee cup. “I’m more of a science fiction guy myself, but occasionally I’ll pick up a romance book.”

Well color me shocked. “Really?”

“Yeah.” He shrugs. “Romance is the best-selling genre for a reason. Gotta know what the ladies are into. Although I don’t

understand the appeal of ... What do they call it?" He pauses for a second, running a hand through his hair. "Morally gray men. But to each their own, I guess."

I throw my head back, laughing. I'm not sure what to say to that. Part of me wants to ask if he's learned anything new from the romance books he's read, and part of me wants to suggest books for his TBR list.

I glance over at him to see him studying me, his lips quivering like he's holding in a laugh.

"Oh, come on," I tease. "You can laugh."

"I'm being serious. I don't understand why women love morally gray men. Would it make me more appealing if I was one?" He gestures at himself, his head tilted, waiting for my answer.

"Are you fishing for compliments?" I ask with a smirk.

He chuckles, a deliciously deep low sound that makes me shiver. "Are you cold?"

"I'm fine. Probably the iced coffee that's making me cold." I shake my half-empty cup, the ice rattling around.

He smirks and extends his arms out in front of him as he leans back against his chair. "Should have gotten a hot drink like I did."

I take a sip of my coffee to hide that I'm ogling his forearms. He's got cords of muscle that are sharpened and toned from what must be hours of work in the gym.

In the romance novels I read the heroes always have sexy forearms that make the heroines' thighs clench together. I never understood how it was possible for forearms to turn a woman on, until now.

Because hot damn, Hunter has nice arms. I wonder what the rest of his body looks like.

"You like what you see?" Hunter flexes his arms even more.

"I-I," I sputter, choking on air.

Hunter runs a hand through his hair, his face turning red. "Shit. Sorry. I didn't mean to make you choke."

"I'm good," I mumble, taking a deep breath and willing my lady parts to settle down.

"What about you? What do you like to do for fun?" Hunter asks.

"I read a lot like I said. I occasionally enjoy doing puzzles." I shrug. "Honestly I live a pretty boring life."

"Boring?"

"Yeah. I get up early, work, go home, nap, hang out with my aunt, and repeat the next day. Nothing super exciting."

Hunter gazes at me like he wants to say something, but before he can I change the subject.

"If you could have any job in the world, what would you want to do?" I ask before taking a sip of my coffee, studying him as he stares down at the table for a couple of seconds before answering.

“Play professional hockey.”

Well fuck me.

Chapter Nine

Hunter

Shit. Shit. Shit. Well, that's one way to have this conversation.

“That’s interesting. Have you ever played hockey? I’ve seen a few games. Seems like a grueling sport.” Madison tilts her head, studying me.

“Yeah, I’ve played before. Actually I have something to tell you since we’re on the topic of jobs.”

She studies the coffee cup in her hands. “Okay.”

I take a deep breath and glance around to make sure there’s no one else nearby who’ll hear what I have to say. “IplayprofessionalhockeyfortheOrlandoStorm.” The words come out in a rush and are likely incoherent, but at least they’re out there.

She visibly swallows and the alarm bells start going off in my head, but I wait for her to say something. Anything.

She blows out a breath. “You what?”

I take a sip of my espresso before setting it back on the table. With a deep breath I will myself to slow down and announce. “I. Play. Professional. Hockey. For the Orlando Storm.”

“Oh,” she mumbles and a look crosses her face that I can’t quite distinguish.

“Madison.” I hesitate. “I wanted to tell you before, but it didn’t seem like the kind of thing I could tell you in a text.”

She’s studying her hands like she’s going to find the answer to curing cancer or ending world hunger in them. “Madison?” I lean forward trying to catch her gaze. I want to know what she’s thinking. What’s going through her head.

She pulls back from me and grabs her purse. “I-I can’t do this.” She scrambles to her feet and hurries out of the coffee shop.

Well, shit.

I expected her to ask me a million questions about what it was like to be a professional athlete or even be a little mad that I didn’t tell her sooner or have her not believe me. I definitely didn’t expect her to run out on our date.

Taking a deep breath, I stare at the forgotten bouquet of flowers on the table for a beat. *Fuck.* I jump to my feet, grab the flowers, toss our empty coffee cups in the garbage, and hurry after her.

As I step out onto the sidewalk, I’m shocked to see her sitting on a bench on the other side of the street.

I exhale. At least now I can ask her what she meant.

I cross the street hoping she'll talk to me. Does she need time to process what I told her or does she not want anything to do with me? Why did she have such a big reaction to my revelation of what I do for a living?

"Madison," I say when I'm standing directly in front of her. She inhales deeply before meeting my gaze "What's going on?" I drop to the seat next to her.

"I'm sorry, Hunter," she whispers. "I like you. I like talking to you."

"I like you too," I admit wondering where this is going.

She stares down at her hands folded in her lap. "I don't want to lead you on. It was nice to have coffee today. To talk with you, but if you want to go out again or date. I can't."

"Is it because of what I do?" I lean closer to her.

"I— Yes," she mumbles.

"I promise that if we start something there won't be any other women. I know sometimes professional athletes have a reputation of being players and sleeping around, partying, doing who knows what. But that's not me." I'm rambling. I can't help it. I want to do anything and everything to reassure her that I'm not like other athletes—or what the media portrays athletes to be like.

I'm different. I'm a normal person like she is, except I play hockey for a living and have the potential to make millions in one year. Okay, so not exactly like a normal person, but close enough.

“That’s not it.” She takes a deep breath and I brace myself for what she’s about to say. “I can’t get involved with a professional hockey player— A professional athlete.” She corrects herself but I wonder if it’s specific to hockey players. “Plus you play for the Storm ...”

I want to ask her why. Why she said she can’t instead of she doesn’t want to. An ex-boyfriend perhaps? Did she date someone else on the team?

I mentally run through our roster. But there’s no one that I can think of that used to play for the Nashville Fury. Regardless of whether it’s an ex-boyfriend or not, I can damn well guarantee that I’m different. I’d never hurt her like he did. But I don’t say that.

I pull on the bill of my cap. “Then let’s go back to being friends. Friends get coffee together. They hang out. What do you think?”

I hold my breath, hoping she says yes. Is friendship all I want from her? Nope, but at this point I’ll take what I can get. Baby steps.

“I-I don’t know, Hunter.”

“Why, Madison?”

She tilts her head, chewing on her bottom lip. “I moved here to start over. To get away from complicated things, at least for a while.”

I raise an eyebrow. I want to ask her why her life was complicated but before I can she continues. “You’d make

things complicated for me.”

“Why?” I ask.

She hesitates before saying, “You’re a professional hockey player, Hunter. You’re bound to be in the news at some point. Which would drag whoever you’re dating into the news as well.”

I open my mouth to tell her that that’s not the case. That I’m only a rookie. A nobody. That the media won’t care about me, but I realize that no matter what I tell her, she won’t change her mind. I’m starting to look desperate.

“I understand, Madison. It’s not the answer I was hoping for, but I respect your decision. If you change your mind, text me.”

She gives me a small smile. “Bye, Hunter.”

“Bye, Madison,” I whisper, standing. With one last backward glance at her I force myself to walk toward my truck and climb in.

Today did not turn out how I wanted it to, that’s for sure, but telling Madison what I do for a living was the right move. Especially with how she reacted. I can only imagine what would have happened if I’d waited to tell her.



“You with us, Hunter?” Caleb calls as I miss yet another pass from one of the other forwards on my line. This is the third time today I’ve missed a play I normally wouldn’t.

“Sorry, Cap,” I yell, shaking myself out of the stupor that I seem to be in this afternoon.

“That’s all for today,” Coach Weaver yells a few minutes later. “Hit the showers.”

I heave a sigh of relief. Today’s practice was grueling and I’m ready for an afternoon off.

“You okay?” Brody skates up to me.

He’s one of the veterans on the team and one of my linemates. He’s been playing for fifteen years, all of them with the Storm, and is one of the alternate captains. In the short time we’ve been playing together he’s already taught me quite a few things and has helped boost my confidence.

I’m not sure if we’ll end up on the same line during the season—from his skill I’d assume he’ll be on the top forward line with Caleb—but I’ll take any playing time with him I can get.

“Fine. Just tired.”

“You sure?” Brody asks as we head to the locker room.

I take a pull from my water bottle before answering his question. Not sure how much, or what, I want to tell him.

“What’s going on?” Wes asks, coming up on the other side of me and saving me from Brody’s question.

“Nothing.” I narrow my eyes at Wes and shake my head, hoping he gets the hint to drop it.

“Bullshit, I’ve seen the way you’ve been at practice today.”

“It’s nothing. I’m tired. Leave it.” I say through gritted teeth as I yank open the door.

“Hunter,” Wes repeats, following me to our stalls, which unfortunately are next to each other.

“I’m fine,” I repeat, sitting down on the bench.

“What’s going on?” Holt asks, dropping down next to me.

“For fuck’s sake. Can’t a guy have an off day,” I bark out, yanking off a skate. My voice comes out louder than I meant it to, and half the locker room turns to stare at me.

Shit.

“Nothing.” I wave my hand around. “Ignore me.” Most of the team thankfully go back to their conversations but Caleb and Brody walk up.

“You okay?” Caleb asks.

I pull off my other skate with a sigh. What do I tell these guys? I know they mean well, but I really don’t feel like getting into it right now.

“It’s ...” I lean my head back against the wall, closing my eyes.

“Problems with your woman?” Wes supplies, watching me.

“You could say that. But she’s not my woman,” I mumble, staring down at my hands but not before I catch Caleb and Brody exchanging glances.

“What happened?” Holt asks joining the conversation.

“I told her I play for the Storm. That didn’t go well. She has a thing against hockey players,” I say, tugging my practice jersey over my head.

“She has a thing against hockey players?” Caleb scratches his head. “Did she say why?”

“Not really.”

“That sucks, man,” Wes says, clapping me on the shoulder. “Maybe I was wrong and she isn’t your one.”

“If it was meant to be, it’ll work itself out,” Holt adds, turning back to his stall.

“If you want to talk, I’m here,” Caleb says. “Not sure I can help you with this particular situation, but Jenna and I had a rough start and we worked out. Like Holt says, if it’s meant to be, it’ll figure itself out.”

Brody mumbles something about understanding unrequited love. I want to ask him what he means, but he’s already walking away. I sigh and finish undressing. Grabbing my towel, I head for the showers.

“Are you sure you’re okay? Want to come over for dinner?” Wes asks from behind me.

“I’ll be alright. Thanks. I think I’m going to lay low tonight.” I step into the shower and let the hot water flow over my body, hoping that maybe it will help wash away the pain of Madison’s rejection.

Fifteen minutes later, I step out of the shower. I purposely took my time in hopes that everyone—or at least everyone that

wanted to talk to me—would be gone and thankfully they are. I don't know why I'm this upset over some woman. I barely knew her.

But you felt something for her, and she liked you for you. She liked you before she knew you played hockey.

I pull on my clothes, trying to ignore the voice in my head. There's not a whole lot else I can do now. It's all up to Madison. If she changes her mind, which I really hope she does, I'd happily spend time with her. I wasn't lying when I told her that I'd be happy with being friends. I don't have a lot of them. Being a professional hockey player makes it tough to make real friends.

Do I want to get to know her better and date her? Of course I do.

As I'm gathering my bag ready to head out to my truck, my phone dings, and my heart skips a beat. Maybe she changed her mind.

Elias: Hey. Can we talk? I feel like we need to clear the air.

I shake my head and lock my phone without responding. When is he going to get the hint? I don't want to talk to him. I don't want to have anything to do with him.

We may be half brothers but that doesn't mean we need to have a relationship. We haven't spoken in almost fifteen years, why start now?

Chapter Ten

Madison

“What’s going on, dearie?” Judy breaks the silence that has encompassed most of our Sunday night dinner.

“Nothing. Tired,” I mumble, fiddling with my napkin.

“Bullshit, Madison. Try again. You’ve been quiet and mopey all week.”

“It’s been a long week,” I answer, dropping my hands into my lap, picking at the hem of my shirt.

“Madison.” Judy fixes me with a stare, crossing her arms.

“Fine.” I reach for my wineglass and taking a long sip before saying, “I went out with Hunter earlier this week.”

“Did it not go well? I thought you were excited to go out with him. Last Sunday you were walking on sunshine.” She gestures around the kitchen as if to remind me how excited I was.

I suck in a breath. I know I was. I was happy for the first time in a long time. I’d been excited to spend time with Hunter

in person.

“He-he told me what he does for a living.”

“It’s a deal breaker? Is he a drug dealer? Work at a strip joint? Although that could make for good times in the bedroom.” Judy wiggles her eyebrows at me.

“No. He plays professional hockey. I don’t want to be a distraction.” I stare down at my half-eaten dinner.

“And?”

“He plays for the Storm. I can’t date him, Aunt Judy. You know that.”

“Have you spoken to your father?”

“No, why would I do that?” I grab my wineglass and take a healthy sip.

“I don’t think your hang-up with your young man is only about what happened with you and EJ.”

“It is.” I set my now-empty wineglass down.

“Madison Mae, seriously? I’m not an idiot. What team did you say he plays for?”

I swallow, my mouth suddenly feeling dry. “The Orlando Storm.”

“Who’s their head coach?”

“I-I,” I stutter. She’s got me there. My father, Jake Weaver, is their head coach.

“Are you really worried about that or is it that he’s one of your father’s players?”

Shit.

I grab the wine bottle and fill my glass up. My mind spins as I contemplate her question.

She’s got a point but at the same time I do think I’ll be a distraction to Hunter. EJ told me I caused him to not be able to focus on his career, was the reason he got hurt, and we’ve known each other most of our lives. If I can do that to him, wouldn’t it make sense that I’d also be a distraction to someone who doesn’t know me well.

The last thing I want to do is pull Hunter’s attention from his career. Cause him to get hurt.

“Both.” I pinch the bridge of my nose and squeeze my eyes shut.

“Why haven’t you talked to your father?”

“I don’t know,” I mumble into my wineglass before taking a sip.

“You should. Figure out if you want to get to know him. Tell Hunter that his coach is your father and that’s your real hang-up. The poor boy probably thinks there’s something wrong with him.”

“Judy,” I protest but she’s right. I know she is.

I saw the look on Hunter’s face when he came to speak to me after I ran out on him. I may have overreacted a tad.

I don't know if he believed me when I said I didn't want anything complicated. And while it is true that he is complicated, it's not just because he's a professional hockey player but also because he plays for my father's team.

I'm sure that'll go over well with his teammates. I'm sure being friends with or dating the coach's estranged daughter is the last thing he wants to do.

But I didn't give him the chance to choose whether he still wanted to be associated with me knowing who I am.

I suck in a breath, frowning. It wasn't fair to him for me to make the choice based on what I think he'd want. Was it?

I didn't give him all the facts. Not that I have all the facts myself, because maybe my father won't want to have a relationship with me. Or I won't actually want to know him.

First things first, though, I need to actually talk to my father. Stop avoiding his text messages.

My mind made up, I say, "Okay. I'll text him back. Talk to him."

"Madison, I want you to be happy. I don't want you to have regrets when you're my age. Especially not related to love. Don't be me. Don't hold a grudge so long that even if you want to forgive the person and make up, you can't." She clears her throat and blinks rapidly.

I furrow my eyebrows. It feels like she's speaking from experience. I nod, unsure of what to say.

“Good, now let’s eat before it gets cold.” Judy picks up her fork and takes a bite of her chicken pot pie.

The rest of the meal passes quickly. She tells me about her and Curtis’s latest date. It seems to be going well for the two of them and I’m happy for her.

A couple of hours later, I’m back in my apartment, relaxing, when my mind wanders to Hunter. I wonder what he’s doing right now.

Knowing that I need to figure out things with my father first I open the thread of messages from him and type a response, hitting send before I can talk myself out of it.

Me: Hi. I’m sorry I haven’t responded sooner. I’d like to talk if you have time. Maybe we can meet for coffee?

I take a deep breath and stare at my phone, willing him to answer quickly so I don’t spiral down a rabbit hole of “is this the right thing or should I have said something else.” My prayers are answered because three dots pop up.

Jake: Thank you, Madison. I have time tomorrow morning at nine before a team meeting.

Me: I’m off tomorrow so I can do that. There’s a place on Fairview Avenue called Sugar Cubes. If that’s not too far I can meet you there. Unless there’s somewhere else you’d prefer.

Jake: Sounds good. I'll be out front wearing a gray Storm shirt and jeans.

Me: OK.

Jake: Thank you, Madison. This means a lot to me.



At exactly nine the next morning I'm getting out of my car and heading toward the coffee shop. My stomach is in knots and I barely slept last night thinking about today.

The only thing getting me through is that after this I'll hopefully have answers to questions I've wondered about my whole life. I just hope I'll be able to easily figure out who my father is based what he said he'd be wearing.

Sure enough, standing on the sidewalk near the door is a man, probably about six foot, six foot two, gray hair, wearing a gray shirt and jeans, with his back to me.

I clear my throat, hoping this is him. "Jake?"

He turns around, pulling down his sunglasses, and I don't doubt it's my father—we have the same hazel eyes.

"Madison," he says, putting out his hand.

"Hi." I glance at his hand briefly before taking it and shaking it.

"Sorry, I'm nervous," he says with a chuckle. "I didn't think this day would actually come."

“Me too,” I admit. “Why don’t we go inside out of the heat and get some coffee.”

“Sounds good.” He holds the door open for me.

We order quickly and within a few minutes he’s leading me to a table in the corner.

“Thank you again, Madison, for agreeing to meet me.” His hands shake as he runs them through his hair.

“You’re welcome.”

I fiddle with my empty straw wrapper, glancing anywhere but at Jake because it still feels odd sitting across from him.

I make eye contact with a guy sitting a few tables over, a book in one hand, a coffee in the other. His face goes red when we lock eyes, and he drops his gaze back to his book.

Kind of odd but I am here with the head coach of the Orlando Storm, so maybe the guy recognized him. I give myself a mental shake and try to focus on the man across from me.

“Why’d you never want to be in my life?” I blurt out.

Jake’s face turns red and he pulls on the collar of his shirt.

Shit, I probably shouldn’t have said that but it’s been on my mind since he contacted me.

Jake takes a sip of his black coffee before answering. “I didn’t know you existed. Your mother and I dated for a while. I was in love with her and I thought she was in love with me. But one day she abruptly broke up with me. Left Florida.” He

waves his hand around. “Moved to Colorado as I’ve now figured out.”

“Oh.” I fiddle with my headband, taking it out and repositioning it. “Wait. You didn’t know I existed? That’s not—she told me ...”

“She left one day and wouldn’t answer my phone calls. I tried to find her. For weeks. Her parents wouldn’t tell me anything except that she was safe and I needed to respect her desire for no communication. After that I gave up.”

I take a sip of my coffee studying him. I don’t know what to make of him, of this. My mom always told me that he didn’t want me, want us. But now he’s here telling me that’s not the case.

“You believe that I’m your daughter? Without any proof?” I blurt out. It’s been bothering me since he first contacted me. Neither of us have proof that I’m actually his daughter unless my mom somehow had him take a paternity test that I don’t know about.

“Your mom wrote to me a few years back. I saw the name on the envelope and got angry. After all these years she finally decided to contact me? I ignored the letters. Until it was too late.” He grimaces, running a hand over his face.

“She died.” I stare down at the table unable to meet his gaze.

“I’m sorry. If I could go back in time, I would have opened those letters. Got in touch with her. But I didn’t.” He takes a deep breath. “Your mom’s lawyer called me after she passed. I

finally opened those envelopes and found pictures of you as a little kid and her explanation of what happened. I couldn't be in denial anymore.”

“Do you want to do a DNA test? I mean if you—“

“Madison,” he interrupts me. “Taking one look at you answered any remaining doubt I had. Heck, seeing your baby pictures answered it. It was like staring at myself as a baby. You have my eyes.”

What he's saying makes sense. If he spoke to my aunt, spoke to my mom's lawyer then maybe his story is true. I do wish my mom was still here so I could ask her why she did it. Why she lied to me my whole life but she's not.

“Yeah.” I reach up to adjust my headband again.

“If you want a DNA test to be sure, I'll do it, but I don't need it to know I'm your father. Plus the timeline matches up. It all makes sense. I'm sorry I didn't answer her when she first contacted me. I'm sorry I've missed out on you growing up.”

“I don't need a test to know either.” I pick up my coffee and take a sip. “I see the resemblance too. I-I've spent my life not having a father. I'm grown now so it's not like I necessarily need a father. But I think I'd like to get to know you, have you in my life.”

“I'd like that, Madison.”

We spend the next hour talking and getting to know each other. He tells me about his hockey career and how he

transitioned into coaching. I tell him about pastry school and moving to Orlando.

Glancing at his phone, Jake says, “I’m sorry Madison. I have to go.”

“I understand. It was nice to see you, get to know you.”

“Likewise. Maybe we can do this again soon. Or have dinner. I’d love to have you come to a game or two if you want.”

Dinner would be a good next step in getting to know him. Going to a hockey game? Now that’s another story altogether. I’m not sure if I’m ready for it.

“How about we get dinner one day this week or next?”

“Sounds good.”

We toss our trash in the garbage and head out the door, exchanging a somewhat awkward goodbye on the sidewalk. As I’m heading to my car, my phone pings with a text message. Thinking it’s Jake I pull my phone out of my bag to read it.

EJ: I miss you. I need to talk to you. Please call me, text me, email me. Something.

I shove my phone back in my purse and get in my car. EJ may have been my best friend for years but his behavior earlier this year was uncalled for and something that I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive

Chapter Eleven

Hunter

I hop out of my truck and wipe my sweaty palms on my jeans. This afternoon is the Storm's annual start of the season barbecue at Caleb's house.

An event I should be excited to go to.

Except I've been dreading it since it was announced a few weeks back. Don't get me wrong, the guys are friendly. I've hung out with most of them, but I still feel like an outsider.

Like I don't belong.

Like I'm biding my time until I get sent down to the Mustangs.

"Hey." Holt walks up to where I'm standing next to my truck.

"Hey man. What's up?"

He shoves his hands in his pockets. "You'll never guess who I saw at the coffee shop the other day."

"I don't know."

“Coach. He was on a date. With a much younger girl,” he whispers as we make our way up the driveway.

“And?” What do I care what Coach Weaver does in his off time?

“She was like half his age.”

“Who was half his age? Who are we talking about?” Wes asks as he comes up to us.

Holt glances around. “I saw Coach at the coffee shop with a much younger woman.”

“Maybe it was a friend,” I offer with a shrug.

“Do you think she was over twenty-one? Heck, over eighteen?” Wes asks.

“Yeah, I’d say she was probably mid to late twenties. Cute. Curly brown hair.”

“Why do you think he was on a date?” I ask.

“They were giving off that first date vibe. You know, where you’re super nervous but also excited. She kept glancing around the coffee shop and fidgeting with her hair.”

“What’s the big deal? Maybe he likes dating younger women. Besides, isn’t Coach allowed to have a life outside of hockey? Good for him if he’s dating someone,” I say.

Before either of them can answer, the front door swings open and we’re greeted by Caleb.

“Hey guys. Come on in. Everyone’s out back.” He holds the door open and we file inside.

Holt asks some questions about the house, but I tune them out, looking around as we move through the house.

We pass through a huge living room with black leather couches that face a large television that's mounted on one wall. Vaulted ceilings make the room feel even bigger.

Caleb opens one of the sliding glass doors and we step out onto the patio surrounding a pool and Jacuzzi.

“Hi. I'm Jenna. Caleb's wife,” says a blonde woman as she strolls up to us and wraps her arm around Caleb's waist.

Introductions are made.

I glance around the backyard, taking in the team, their spouses, and kids spread around the spacious outdoor space.

A tall privacy fence lines three sides of the yard dotted with oak and palm trees. The fourth side of the backyard doesn't need a fence as it leads to a lake.

I gaze out, slightly jealous, at the dock where a boat and a couple of Jet Skis are.

“We'll have to take it out one weekend,” Caleb says. “The boat,” he adds as if I didn't know what he meant.

“Sounds great.”

“Hey,” Brody says, ambling up to our group.

Caleb excuses himself to go check on Aleksi, who is manning the grill. Apparently, he's not only an excellent goaltender, some say the best in the league, but he's got a passion for grilling.

We make our way to one of the big umbrellas strategically placed around the patio, because even though it's October it's still hot out.

I stare longingly at the pool. I should have brought my bathing suit. Caleb mentioned it but I forgot to grab it.

"There she is!" Holt says, breaking into my thoughts.

"Who?" Brody asks.

"Coach's girlfriend. Over there by the back door talking to Jenna. Which must mean Coach is here somewhere." Holt inclines his head toward where I assume Jenna and the mystery woman are, then glances around the backyard.

I turn around, curiosity getting the best of me. It takes a second for me to register who I'm seeing. *Holy shit*. Madison?

"Wait, wait. That's your Madison?" Holt asks, his mouth dropping open as he looks from me to her and back again.

Guess I said that out loud. I nod, too stunned to answer.

"Why was she having coffee with Coach?"

I don't answer, instead I walk to where they're standing in the shade of one of the big oak trees. I hear rustling behind me and realize I'm not alone. This should be interesting.

"Hunter," Jenna says with a smile as I make my way up to her. "You brought some of the guys with you. Great. I want to introduce you to—"

"Madison," I say, staring at the woman in front of me.

Is this why she couldn't date me? Because of Coach?

I don't really believe Holt's assumption that they're dating. But why was she having coffee with him? Maybe Holt was wrong and it was only someone that looked like her. But at the same time, I can't deny the possibility that it was her.

"Hi," she says, blinking slowly, her face flushed.

Yeah, I'm as shocked as you are.

"What are you doing here?" I ask.

"I—" She swallows, clearly trying to collect herself but Jenna interrupts.

"Madison made the cakes for today's barbecue. I was trying to convince her to stay since, as always, we have way too much food."

"I don't want to intrude," Madison says, her eyes never straying from mine.

"Please stay, Madison," Jenna says with a hand on her shoulder. "How do you and Hunter know each other?"

Madison's face flushes, then she lets out a small gasp that if I wasn't standing right next to her I would have missed. I don't have to wait long to know what she saw.

"Hey team," comes a booming voice.

"Well, this got interesting," Holt mutters behind me as Coach Weaver strolls over.

Madison looks like she wants to melt into the ground. I see the surprise on Coach's face as he notices her, but he quickly masks it with a smile. Maybe Holt was on to something.

“Hey, Coach,” Caleb says, joining us.

“Jake. For fuck’s sake, when we’re not on the ice, it’s Jake. You should know that by now,” Coach says with a shake of his head. “The same goes for the rest of you.” He points at each of us.

“Nice to see you, Jake,” Jenna says, leaning in. “I was introducing the fabulous woman who made the cakes for today’s event. Who I’ve deemed the Storm’s official cake maker. You hear that?” She raises her voice. “Anyone needs a cake for an event, you see Madison.”

What the fuck is going on?

I mean, I guess at least she’s comfortable with the team. But something is clearly going on between her and Coach. I no longer doubt Holt that they were at the coffee shop together the other day.

Although why is still a mystery.

Chapter Twelve

Madison

Kill me now.

Not only am I standing here with Hunter and what feels like half his team but my father had to walk up too.

This is why I can't get involved with Hunter. I should have tried harder to say no to Jenna's invitation to stay. I only came to drop off the cakes she ordered—something that I normally wouldn't do, especially on my day off—but she's a repeat customer so when she asked, I said yes. I was shocked when she asked me to stay. She acted like it was a natural thing to invite me. Like somehow I belonged at the party.

But I don't.

Before I can make an excuse to leave, a petite blonde woman with the slightest baby bump walks up to me.

“Madison? The woman who made my gender reveal cake? Oh, I have to hug you!” When I nod she engulfs me in a hug. Pulling back, she smiles at me. “I'm Hannah. This is Cole, my husband.” She gestures at the guy hovering behind her.

“Hann, baby. Please sit down.”

“Cole, I’m fine,” she says, swatting his hand away. “I want to thank this fabulous woman who made the best cake I have ever had.” She pauses, glancing around. “Aleksi seems like he needs help at the grill. Maybe you should go help him.” She waves a hand in the direction of the guy, who seems like he’s managing just fine, and I can’t help but laugh.

Cole grumbles something but I don’t hear what because Hannah has slipped her arm through mine and is guiding me away from the group. When we’re out of earshot she says, “So you and Hunter?”

“What? No.” I shake my head but when I glance over my shoulder, I see Hunter watching me.

She raises an eyebrow at me as she steers me over to two other women, sitting under a massive umbrella near the edge of the pool.

“Ladies. We have a new friend. This is Madison. She made my gender reveal cake. Madison, this is Abby, Winston’s wife.” Hannah gestures to the first woman, a redhead. I’m not sure who Winston is, I assume he’s another player, but I couldn’t pick him out of a lineup.

I don’t say that though. I simply nod. Abby grins at me and says hello.

“This is Savannah, Jenna’s sister.” Hannah gestures to the blonde woman reclining in one of the loungers who takes her sunglasses off and greets me when Hannah says her name.

I offer a quick wave before turning on my heel, hoping to make a quick getaway. I feel like I'm intruding on a very private event. In fact, I know I am.

"Oh no you don't." Jenna comes up behind me and takes a seat. "Sit." She points at the only free chair. "Tell us how you know Hunter. Is something going on between the two of you? Because I saw the way he was looking at you."

I swallow, sitting down. "There's nothing to tell."

Jenna leans forward. "But you want there to be something."

"It's complicated," I answer, glancing around, my eyes pausing on Jake, who is deep in conversation with some players. He glances my way and gives me a small smile.

And that's why I can't do this with Hunter. How would it look if it came out that the coach's daughter was dating one of his players?

I'm grateful that Jake didn't say that we knew each other earlier, because that would have been a disaster.

"And here he comes," Jenna whispers, leaning closer to me. "Only took him two minutes. About what it would have taken Caleb if the situation was different. He has it bad."

I open my mouth to respond but before I can get the words out, I feel Hunter's presence behind me.

"Can I borrow Madison for a minute, ladies?" Hunter's deep voice booms behind me, and a shiver races down my spine at the delicious way he says my name.

Yep, I'm screwed. I peek over my shoulder. He beckons for me to follow him. I get to my feet and follow him back to the house. He pulls me around the corner of the house, out of sight of the party.

“What’s going on, Hunter?” I lean against the house, crossing my arms.

“I just—“ He runs a hand through his hair while pacing in circles.

“Hunter, you’re making me dizzy. What’s going on?” I place a hand on his arm. He comes to a halt, staring at my hand for a beat.

“Do you know Coach?” Hunter asks.

“No. Not really.”

“What do you mean not really?”

“I mean I know he’s your head coach and that he used to play hockey before he retired. That’s all.” I hate that I’m lying to him, but this is not the time nor the place to get into it.

“Did you look us up?” Hunter asks with a cocky grin.

“Maybe.” I grin and shrug in a way I hope comes off as nonchalant and cool.

Because, yes, I did, but not in the way he thinks. After I talked to my aunt and then had coffee with Jake I couldn’t help it.

“Hunter, I overreacted the other day. It all took me by surprise. I don’t know if I can offer you anything more than

friendship right now, or maybe even ever. If that's not what you want, I understand." I stare down at the grass unable to meet his gaze, afraid of what I might find there—disappointment, hurt, or something else.

After a few seconds of silence Hunter says, "I could use another friend. Plus it'll be nice to talk about something that isn't hockey all the damn time."

"Okay." I peek up at him and hold out my hand. "Friends?"

"Friends." He takes my hand in his and I relish the feel of his calloused hand wrapped around mine.

"We should probably get back before the rumors start."

"The rumors have already started," Hunter says with a chuckle, letting go of me and tucking his hands into his pockets. "I was surprised to see you here."

"Jenna all but tied me up and refused to let me leave when I came to deliver the cakes. What was I supposed to say? No?" I throw my hands up in mock frustration as we head back to the party. "Gotta keep the customers happy. Especially the repeat customers."

"Well, I'm glad she shanghaied you into staying," he says simply. And I find myself silently agreeing, much to my dismay.

The rest of the party passes without incident. My father leaves shortly after I return to the party with Hunter so I don't have to worry about dodging him.

I spend most of the afternoon hanging out with Jenna and the other ladies, although Hunter and I do talk for a while.

I swear his friend Holt keeps giving me weird looks like he knows something's up with me. But I brush it off. Tell myself he's a goalie and goalies are a breed of their own.

I breathe out a sigh of relief when I'm safely back in my car. I know I need to come clean to Hunter about my father, but today didn't seem like the right time.

I didn't lie, exactly—I don't know Jake very well—but I didn't exactly tell the truth either.

Chapter Thirteen

Hunter

A ringing jolts me awake. With a groan I rub the sleep from my eyes as I try to orient myself.

What day is it? What time is it?

My bedroom is dark and it dawns on me that my nap lasted far longer than I anticipated. I'd only intended to sleep for an hour when I lay down when we got back to town.

Clearly my body had other plans because it's pitch-black outside now. I finally find my phone on the pillow—no wonder it was so loud—and answer it without even checking to see who's calling.

“Hello.”

“Hey, Hunter.”

“Madison?” I sit up, wide awake.

I wasn't expecting to hear from her tonight. We've texted here and there the past week but between her early mornings

and the time difference with the team being on the West Coast we haven't actually talked on the phone.

"I know you just got home and you're probably tired, but my car won't start. I'm stuck at the bakery. Rachel isn't answering her phone and my aunt is out. Is there any way you can come pick me up? I'm sorry to bother you. I'm sure the last thing you want to do is go out tonight."

"Hey, it's fine. Let me throw on some clothes and I'll be right there." I'm already on my feet, switching on the light.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, Madison. I'll be right there." I grab a pair of jeans and pull them on.

"Okay. Thank you, Hunter."

"And Madison," I say before she can hang up.

"Yeah?" she mumbles.

"Promise me you'll wait inside the bakery and not by your car. And lock the door."

"I will."

A short while later I'm pulling up in front of the bakery. I fire off a text message letting her know I'm outside.

"Hey," I say when she opens the door to my truck.

"Hi. What happened to you?" She leans closer to me, pointing at my face where I'm sure I have a bruise coming in to accent the cut on my cheek.

"You should see the other guy."

“Hunter, that’s not funny. Are you okay?” she asks, her eyes raking over my body.

I know she’s looking for signs of other injuries, but I can’t help noticing how her gaze heats as she checks me out.

“I’m fine, Madison. Really. Wrong place at the wrong time with a stick. The other player got a double minor for this. We scored the game-winning goal during that power play.” I point at my face. “But otherwise I’m fine. I still have all my teeth so I’d say that’s a win.” I smile, showing her my teeth.

“Not funny, Hunter.”

“Come here.” I open my arms and she leans over to let me hug her.

I take a deep breath, inhaling her scent—a mix of sugar cookies and cake batter. Of course she would smell sweet.

She relaxes into my arms, and I realize that I, too, feel more relaxed. I probably shouldn’t be hugging her. But friends hug all the time so it’s okay, right?

“Better?” I ask when she pulls away. I miss her warmth and scent immediately. I am so screwed when it comes to this woman.

“Yeah.”

“What’s wrong with your car?” I ask as I put my truck in gear and follow the directions she gives me.

“No idea. Wouldn’t start. I’ll have to get it towed in the morning.”

“I didn’t think you worked this late.”

“I usually don’t. I had a couple of cakes to finish up for tomorrow that I didn’t get to earlier. I was exhausted so I opted to go home, take a nap, and then came back to finish them. Which in hindsight probably wasn’t a great idea since it left me stranded. But I’m off tomorrow. Hopefully whatever’s wrong with my car can be fixed in a day. Otherwise, I’ll have to see if I can borrow my aunt’s car for work.”

I perk up when I hear that she’s off tomorrow. “I’m off tomorrow too.” I glance over at her before focusing back on the road.

“You are?”

“Yeah.” I hesitate before saying, “Do you want to hang out? Unless you have plans.”

“I’d love to hang out with you, Hunter. As friends.” I’m not sure if she adds that last bit in for her benefit or mine.

I wasn’t lying when I told her I’d take a relationship with her any way I could get it—as friends or as more—but if I had my choice, I’d pick being more than friends.

“Good.” I pull into the driveway. “Nice place.” I put my truck in park and peer through the windshield at a cute older-style house that fits in with the neighborhood.

“It’s my aunt’s. I’m staying in the apartment in the back. Do you want to come in? I know it’s late for dinner, but I’ve got a roast in the Crock-Pot if you’re hungry.”

“I could eat. Are you sure there’s enough for me?” I turn the truck off and unbuckle my seat belt. “Am I okay to leave my truck here? Should I move it to the street?”

“Here’s fine. There’s plenty of food. I made extra so I could have it for lunch this week.” She reaches for the door handle.

“Don’t move. I’ll get it.” I hop out of the truck.

“I could have done it myself,” she protests when I open her door.

“Just because we’re friends doesn’t mean I’m not going to open your door for you.”

She doesn’t say anything, simply smiles at me and leads the way to her apartment.

“Welcome to my humble abode. It’s not much but it’s home,” she says when we walk in.

“It’s nice,” I say glancing around. “Smells great in here, too.” My stomach rumbles as the scent of garlic and onions hits my nose. Madison laughs and I can’t help but chuckle as well.

“I’m going to go change and then we can eat. Make yourself at home. There are drinks in the fridge. Help yourself.” She points toward the kitchen area before disappearing into what I assume is her bedroom.

“Okay.” I take in her apartment, an open-concept floor plan with the living room and kitchen combined. It might be a quarter of the size of my place, but it feels so much homier and not at all cramped.

Probably because she has actually decorated. A plush gray sofa that looks way more comfortable than the one in my apartment is pushed against one wall, blankets thrown over the back.

On either side of the sofa are two small side tables with mismatched lamps and pictures in frames. I move closer so I can see who is in the pictures. The first is of her and an older woman with her arm thrown around Madison's shoulders. The woman looks like her so I assume it's her mom.

Another photo is of a group of people dressed in matching chef's uniforms. Her classmates, I'd bet. I turn my attention to the rest of the room and see the coffee table stacked with books and magazines in front of the couch. A television mounted on the opposite wall. A peek into the kitchen shows a small but functional space.

Before I have time to check out more of Madison's apartment, the bedroom door opens, and she steps into view, dressed in black leggings and an oversized shirt, her long brown hair swept into a bun on the top of her head.

She's gorgeous. I scrub a hand over my face and take a deep breath. I swear she could be dressed in a paper bag and still be beautiful.

"Hey." My voice cracks and I clear my throat, trying again. "Nice place."

Madison walks past me into the kitchen, furrowing her brows as she does. "Everything okay?"

“Fine. Fine.”

She nods and takes bowls from the cabinet.

“Can I do anything to help?”

“Here.” Madison passes me a bowl of roast, potatoes, and carrots before dishing out her own from the Crock-Pot sitting on the counter. “Can you grab some utensils? They’re in that drawer over there.” She points to the other side of the oven.

“Thanks. Smells amazing,” I say as I take the bowl she hands me and grab two forks. My stomach rumbles again in agreement.

“Water okay?” Madison asks, standing in front of the fridge with two empty glasses in her hand.

“Perfect.”

“Are you okay with sitting on the sofa? I don’t have a table. There’s no room.” She gestures around the space. “I usually eat standing up at the counter or on the couch. When I’m not eating at Judy’s that is.”

“The couch is fine. Judy’s your aunt, right?” I ask once we’re seated on the couch with our food.

“Yeah. She’s my mom’s older sister. It was only the two of them and Judy doesn’t have any kids. So it’s just us now. What’s your family like?”

“I have a lot of family back home in Minnesota. Aunts, uncles, cousins.” I spear a piece of meat with my fork and take

a bite. I can't help but moan at how tender and delicious everything is.

I notice the smirk on Madison's face.

"Your parents?" she asks.

I swallow the bite of food, trying to figure out how much to tell her about them. I set my fork and bowl down and lean back against the cushions.

"Last I knew my mom was traveling with her new husband in Europe. My dad." I shrug because what's there to say about the piece of shit. "I haven't seen him since I was ten."

"Oh. I'm sorry." Madison frowns, staring down at her bowl.

"It is what it is. My aunts and uncles are super supportive of me. Plus all my cousins. At least I have them. You said you were living in Nashville? That's a far cry from Denver. Did you go to school there?" I ask.

I'm desperate to get off the subject of my parents. Talking about them always makes me uncomfortable. I hate the questions that always come up about my relationship, or lack thereof, with them.

"No. My best friend ..." She frowns, shaking her head. I wonder what that's about. Before I can ask she continues. "My best friend lives in Nashville, and I wanted to be close to someone I knew after I finished school. My mom was traveling at that time so there was no reason to move back to Denver. Nashville was great for a while but eventually I

decided I wanted to be closer to my family, well my aunt, which is why I'm here."

"Oh?" I want to ask her what happened, but I don't, hoping she volunteers the information.

She tilts her head, studying me for a minute before changing the subject. "So how long have you been playing hockey?"

"Since I could walk. I've always enjoyed it, and I wasn't a half-bad player."

"Half-bad? You're a professional." Madison shakes her head. "I'd say you have to be better than not half-bad to get that far."

"Yeah, I guess." I blow out a breath, staring down at my now-empty bowl.

"You okay?" Madison asks.

"Yeah." I shrug, not wanting to meet her eyes. "I keep thinking that I'm going to wake up one day and someone's going to say 'we're kidding, Hunter, we don't want you on the team.' Like how did I get so lucky?"

"Oh, Hunter." She places her hand on my arm. I lean into her touch, instantly feeling better. *What is it about this woman that does this to me?*

Chapter Fourteen

Madison

My heart breaks at what Hunter confesses to me about how he doubts his talent. I know how much talent someone has to have to make it to the professional level.

I want to ask who hurt him. Who said mean things to him so that I can go find them and give them a piece of my mind.

Since that's not feasible I settle on saying, "Not everyone can play professional hockey. You have to have a lot of skill to play at the level you're playing at. There's a reason you're on the team."

"I'm old for a rookie," he says after a few minutes of silence.

I run my hand up and down his arm, waiting for him to expand on his comment. I might be imagining it, but I swear he leans into my touch.

"Being a rookie at twenty-four is a big risk," he whispers finally.

My eyes widen at the fact that he's only twenty-four. I guess I hadn't realized how young he was when we met, and it

hadn't come up in our conversation. Not that six years is that big of an age gap.

Besides, friends don't have to be the same age.

I force myself to focus on what he said and not the age difference. "Why?"

"Most guys are in their third or fourth season, some have been playing in the NHL even longer. I chose to go to college. The Storm wanted me to play for them two years ago, but I wanted to finish my degree. I'm thankful they signed me to a contract this year, but they could still change their minds. They could send me down to the AHL."

"You finished college?" Most professional hockey players choose to either skip college altogether and play at the junior levels until the team that drafted them calls them up, or they go to college but leave the minute they get an entry-level contract. Some get lucky and start playing the year they're drafted.

He gives me a small smile. "Yeah, I took a couple of years off to play at the junior levels. Hence why I graduated at twenty-four."

"Oh." In the past year I've purposely tried to forget everything I knew about hockey, but as he speaks, I can't help but be transported back in time and remember how young EJ was when he first started playing in the NHL.

"My ex-best friend is a hockey player." The words come tumbling out of my mouth before I can stop them. "That's the

other reason I fled when you told me you played hockey. Our friendship ended because of it. Not saying I think what happened between him and me is what's going to happen to us, but I thought I should tell you."

Hunter squints at me. "How old are you, Madison?" His face turns red. "Wait, that's probably rude to ask, never mind."

That's what he chooses to focus on? Not that I told him my ex-best friend is a hockey player.

Okay, sure.

"Thirty. Friends don't have to be the same age, do they? Does it bother you that I'm older than you?"

His eyes twinkle as he says, "No, it doesn't bother me. Besides, like you said, *friends* don't have to be the same age."

"Hunter." I shake my head at him in mock outrage.

"What?" With a chuckle he throws his arms up. "Would your opinion change if we were dating?"

"No. Plus a younger guy would be able to keep up with me." As soon as the words come out it dawns on me what I said, and I slam a hand over my mouth. *I can't believe I said that.*

I stare at Hunter, waiting for him to answer. After a couple of seconds he lets out a deep laugh, the sound hitting me between my legs.

"Fuck, Madison." He scrubs a hand over his face. "I'm also a hockey player. We're known for our stamina on and off the ice." He smirks and wags his eyebrows at me.

“That escalated quickly,” I mumble, my face heating up.
“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize. I like a woman who’s up-front.”

I shake my head as I stand up, desperate to change the subject. “Are you still hungry? If not, I’ll clean up.”

“I can help. It was delicious by the way.” He gets to his feet, taking the bowls from my hands before sauntering into the kitchen.

“I can do them. I don’t have a dishwasher.” I try to step around him and up to the sink.

“Nonsense. You cooked. I can do the dishes.” He insists not budging from his spot in front of the sink.

“I hardly call serving dinner from the Crock-Pot that I put on this morning cooking.”

“Go sit,” Hunter commands, pointing at the couch as he turns the faucet on and grabs the sponge.

“Fine. Fine,” I concede, going to the fridge and pulling out a bottle of wine. “Do you want a glass?”

Hunter runs a hand through his hair and glances down at the floor for a few seconds before looking back at me. “Maybe a small one. I don’t usually drink during the season.”

“You don’t have to.” Shit. *Way to fuck up, Madison.*

It didn’t even dawn on me that he might not drink during the season. Probably because it never stopped EJ. If anything, he drank more during the season. “I shouldn’t have offered.”

“It’s fine. I drink during the season when the occasion calls for me. I’ll have a small glass.”

I nod before stepping up next to him and grabbing two wineglasses from the cabinet. My boob grazes his arm as we both move in the small space.

His breath hitches, but when I glance over at him, he’s vigorously scrubbing at one of the bowls.

“You alright?” I ask.

“Trying to be a gentleman here and respect you wanting to *just* be friends.”

“Sorry,” I mumble. I know I should step away from him, put distance between us but my feet refuse to move.

“Madison.” Hunter turns the water off and faces me. “Did you need something? You’ve *got* my attention now.”

“I-I,” I stutter. “The boob graze was an accident.” I step back.

What the fuck is going on with me? *Friends*, I remind myself for what feels like the millionth time tonight.

But staring up at him I wonder what it would be like if he caged me in, my back pressed against the countertop, our wine and the dishes forgotten as he kissed me.

But we can’t go there.

My father is his coach.

Us being together would complicate things.

People would talk.

His teammates would talk. They'd think he only got a spot on the team because of me.

That he only gets ice time because of who he's dating. I don't want that.

I don't want to tarnish his rookie season with whispers and gossip that maybe he doesn't belong on the team, especially not when he already doubts himself.

I refuse to be a distraction to him, so I keep my mouth shut and shove down the thought of what kissing him would feel like.

"Madison." Hunter's voice is soft as he reaches for my hand, and I let him take it. "What's going on in your head?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry, Hunter. I'm going to pour us some wine and go into the living room." I go to pull away from him, but he surprises me by taking the bottle of wine and setting it on the counter before pulling me into his arms.

At first I'm stiff, but when he starts to stroke my back I sink into his embrace. He holds me for a couple of minutes, and like the hug in his truck earlier, it feels like we've been hugging for years.

Pulling back, he tilts my chin up so I have no choice but to look him in the eyes. "Never feel stupid for telling me what you're thinking. I can't read your mind."

I nod, getting lost in his deep-blue eyes. The way he's staring at me makes me feel like he can see me.

Can see into the depths of my soul. With anyone else that would make me nervous, but with him it doesn't.

Hunter points at the sink. "I'm going to get back to the dishes. How about you pour us some wine. What do you want to do with the leftovers?"

I step out of his embrace. "We can leave them out for a while to cool."

"I can do it. Go sit." He shoos me toward the living room.

I do as he says and pour us each a glass of wine. Taking a long sip I lean back against the couch, closing my eyes.

Today was a whirlwind and it's starting to catch up to me. I'm grateful that I don't have to get up early tomorrow because I don't know if I could.

"You okay?"

My eyes fly open, and I see Hunter standing next to the coffee table studying me. When did he walk in here?

"Yeah, I'm good."

"I can go if you're tired. I'm sure you had a long day."

"I'm good. Come sit." I pat the cushion next to me.

He studies me for a minute before taking a seat. His thigh brushes against mine and I shiver.

"You cold?" Hunter grabs one of the blankets I keep folded over the back of the couch and hands it to me.

"Thanks." Even though I'm not really cold I take it and drape it across my legs, needing something to do.

“I was thinking we could go ice-skating tomorrow. If you still want to hang out. Then I’ll take you to my favorite taco place.”

“That sounds good. I’ll have to deal with my car in the morning.” I sigh, running a hand over my face.

“Do you need a ride? I can take you over there in the morning. Wait with you for a tow.” Hunter asks, picking up his wineglass.

“It’s fine,” I say with a wave of my hand. “I’m sure Judy will let me borrow her car.”

“Okay, but if that doesn’t work out, text me.”

“Thank you. Want to watch something?” I ask as I pick up the remote and pull up Netflix.

Hunter admits that he likes reality cooking shows like I do, so we settle on a new show neither of us have seen called *Pressure Cooker*.

At some point between the second and third episode we shift closer to each other, and Hunter’s arm comes around me, pulling me even closer.

My eyes start to feel heavy, and I have to fight to keep them open.

I should go to bed since it’s late and I was up at three, but I’m having a good time. I’m not ready for this night to end. One more episode can’t hurt.

Famous last words.

Chapter Fifteen

Hunter

My eyes spring open, my heart racing. I take a deep breath trying to figure out what woke me up. Whatever it was, it's probably for the best, I'm sure I would have regretted sleeping on the couch in the morning. Netflix asking me if I'm still watching.

Shit.

My eyes flicker around in the dimly lit room for the remote. That's when I realize that I'm not even on my own couch and the weight against my right arm is Madison, asleep.

I'm at Madison's. I guess the long week of travel and games, paired with the wine, caught up with me.

How long have we been out?

I glance down at her again, surprised she hasn't woken yet. I grab my phone from its spot on the armrest next to me and see that it's a little after midnight. I try to piece together how long we've been asleep for, but my brain is too groggy for math right now.

“Madison.” I gently shake her.

“Mmmm,” she mumbles, snuggling in closer, which makes me chuckle. How is she still asleep? She must be more tired than me.

“Sweets, we fell asleep,” I say, trying again to wake her.

The nickname slips out, and I hope she didn’t hear it because I’m not sure how she’d react.

Friends don’t give each other nicknames, do they? At least not ones that sound more like terms of endearment.

“Wh-what?” She sits up and looks around.

“Come on.” I get to my feet with a grimace. Yeah, sleeping on the couch was not a smart idea. “Let’s get you to bed.” I put my hand out and help her up. I shut off the TV and lead her to her bedroom, both of us yawning.

Yeah, my drive back to my place is going to be long.

I pause at the threshold of her room, not wanting to invade her space.

“You should stay.” She flips on the light next to the bed as she steps into the room.

“Excuse me?”

Madison wants me to stay here? She said it so nonchalantly, like when she asked me to stay for dinner.

I glance toward the living room and her couch. I’m tired, heck, I’m exhausted, but it doesn’t seem like a great place to sleep.

She turns around to face me, a pair of shorts and a shirt, her pajamas I assume, in her hand. “There’s room for both of us.” She gestures at her bed.

My brain short circuits, “I—What? Madison?” I scratch my head, shifting back and forth and glancing over at the bed.

“There’s plenty of room.” She steps closer to me. “I trust you. Plus you’re not going to be comfortable on the couch.”

“Are you sure?” This is crossing a line, isn’t it? I shouldn’t stay. Friends don’t sleep in each other’s beds.

At least I don’t think they do. I would never do this with Holt or Wes. Why am I even considering it with Madison?

As if reading my mind, she steps even closer to me, and her sweet scent wraps itself around me. I take a deep breath, reminding myself for the umpteenth time that she only wants to be friends, even though all I want to do is pull her into my arms and kiss her senseless. It’s what I’ve wanted to do all night.

“I trust you, Hunter,” she whispers, placing a hand on my arm.

Standing here in her bedroom doorway is hard. I can’t imagine focusing on the road at this point. The idea of being able to go to bed right now is very appealing.

But I’m afraid I’ll cross some line in the middle of the night and she’ll never forgive me.

“Stay. Please. You’re exhausted. Look at you.” She waves her hand at me and I nod. “It’s fine. We’re adults,” she

continues.

“Okay.” I point toward the living room. “I’ll go make sure the doors are locked and the lights are off.”

Before she can protest, I turn and stride out of the room. What the hell am I getting myself into? This feels like a bad idea. But the alternative doesn’t seem appealing either.

As I walk back into the main room, I hear a door close—the bathroom I decide. I take my time making sure everything is locked up.

Running a hand down my face, I take a deep breath and head back to her bedroom.

Stepping into the room, I see she left the light on for me, but she’s burrowed under the covers.

I use the bathroom, wash my hands, and brush my teeth with the new toothbrush she left out for me.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I pull off my shirt and socks, opting to keep my jeans on. Pushing the covers back, I go to lie down.

“You’re not really going to sleep in your jeans?” she asks, peering up at me from under the covers that are pulled up to her chin.

“I didn’t want to make you uncomfortable. It’s fine, Madison,” I insist.

“Hunter. Take your damn jeans off. You’ll be hot.”

“Madison,” I argue, although I’m not sure why. She’s right, I will be hot and uncomfortable.

I left them on because taking them off feels even more like we’re crossing a line.

But it’s a line she set down, not you, so if she’s telling you to take your jeans off and sleep in her bed, shouldn’t you listen?

“That is unless you’re going commando and don’t want me to know.”

“No, Madison, I’m not.” Standing up, I feel her eyes on me so I flex my muscles as I take my jeans off. I hear her inhale sharply behind me.

“Enjoying the show?” I ask, winking at her over my shoulder.

By the way her pupils are dilated and her breathing is coming out in little pants, I’d say she was more than enjoying the view.

I turn off the light and climb into bed, taking a few deep breaths as I do to calm myself down. All I want to do is pull her into my arms and kiss the living shit out of her.

Touch her. Find out what makes her feel good. Hear the noises she makes when she comes.

But I’ll respect her wish to simply be friends.

I’ll stay over here on my side and not touch her.

Even if the most stunning woman I’ve ever seen is lying a few feet away from me. Based on the look on her face while

she watched me take my clothes off, I have a feeling she's starting to regret wanting to be *just friends*, but until she says otherwise, I won't make a move.

"Night, Hunter," Madison whispers, shifting in the bed. Before I can respond, her lips press against my cheek.

Don't turn into her. Don't do it, Hunter.

"Night, Madison," I say, willing sleep to come quickly so I don't do something stupid like pull her into my arms.

Chapter Sixteen

Madison

I don't remember my pillows or bed being this comfortable or warm. Maybe I turned the heat on last night or forgot to turn the fan on.

Last night.

Memories creep back in.

My car not starting.

Calling Hunter. Asking him to stay for dinner. Watching Netflix. Falling asleep on the couch with him.

That's when it hits me that the warm pillow I'm snuggling is in fact not a pillow but Hunter's very naked and very muscular chest.

Because you insisted he stay the night.

I peek down. Yep. That's Hunter's chest. Does he have a six pack or is that an eight pack?

Focus Madison. I squeeze my eyes shut.

At some point in the night, I became a spider monkey and draped myself over him. As I try to figure out how to untangle myself without waking him, he starts to chuckle, his chest shaking beneath my face.

What must he think of me?

He continues to laugh, a deep low rumble that causes my nipples to pebble beneath my shirt, and it's all I can do to hold back a groan.

Is this what it would feel like to wake up with him every morning? All warm and comfortable. My mind wanders to what it would feel like to have him hovering over me, covering me with his heat and weight.

Taking a deep breath, I lift my head to see Hunter staring down at me, his lips tipped up into a sexy grin that I'm realizing I like seeing very much.

"Morning," I croak.

"Good morning. Sleep well?"

"Sorry." I untangle myself from him and sit up.

"I don't mind." He shoves his hands behind his head and watches me.

My face heats up at the way he's blatantly staring at me. I can't meet his eyes, too embarrassed about waking up on top of him, instead I use the moment to check him out. Yep definitely a six pack.

My gaze wanders lower to where the blanket is covering his lower body and I wonder if it's as sculpted as his upper body.

What does he look like naked? What makes him moan?

What has gotten into me? I give myself a mental shake. We're supposed to be friends. Friends don't ogle each other like that. *If you hadn't friend zoned him, you'd be free to stare all you want, Madison.*

"I'm going to go brush my teeth." I jump out of bed and all but run to the bathroom.

Closing the door behind me, I brace myself against the sink and take a couple of deep breaths. My mind is spinning.

Last night I got the best sleep in months. Usually I wake up a couple of times in the night but last night I didn't.

Was my good sleep simply due to being so tired? Did it somehow have to do with the man sharing my bed?

And last night, last night it felt great hanging out with Hunter. I didn't realize how much I would enjoy his company.

I've never felt this way with a guy. Well maybe once upon a time with EJ but never like *that*—watching Netflix and talking. EJ always wanted to be out doing something when we hung out.

We're better off as friends, right?

My life is a complicated mess at the moment. I swore when I left Nashville that I'd figure myself out first before getting into a relationship.

But what happens when the perfect guy falls into your lap? I shake my head. Now's not the time for that.

I scrub a hand over my face and push all the complicated thoughts out of my head. I use the toilet, wash my hands and face, and brush my teeth.

Opening the door, I see Hunter still lying in bed. *Damn him and his gorgeous body.*

“Are you going to get dressed or just lay there like that?” I ask.

“Wasn't sure if you were done taking in the view, but if you are, yeah, I'm gonna get dressed.”

When the door to the bathroom clicks shut, I let out the breath that I was holding and quickly change into a pair of jeans and a maroon T-shirt.

“After you take care of your car, we're going ice-skating. That is if you still want to hang out.”

“Ice-skating?” I furrow my brow at him. “In the light of day, I'm regretting agreeing to that.”

Hunter chuckles. “Come on now, it'll be fun. You grew up in Colorado. Didn't you go ice-skating?”

“Fun.” I raise an eyebrow. “Maybe for you, Mr. Hockey Player, but not me. I can ski, but ice-skate, no way. How about some coffee while we figure out what we're going to do today?”

“Sounds good, but it’ll be fun. I promise not to let you fall.” He follows me out of the bedroom and into the kitchen, where I start the coffee machine.

Our conversation is interrupted by a knock on the front door. Opening it I find my aunt on the other side.

Oh.

“Dearie, sorry to bother you so early. I wasn’t sure whose truck that was.” Her eyes get wide as she glances over my shoulder, and I know she’s spotted Hunter.

“Hi.” He reaches around me to put his hand out. “You must be Madison’s aunt. I’m Hunter. Nice to meet you. That’s my truck. If it’s in your way I can move it, ma’am.”

“Nice to meet you, too. Judy, dear, none of that ma’am stuff. Your truck is fine where it is.” She shakes his hand. “Well, since that mystery is solved, did you want to come up to the house for breakfast?” She points over her shoulder at her house. “I have fresh bagels from the deli.”

“No thanks, Judy. We’re going to have something quick here and then go deal with my car. It wouldn’t start. Again. Hunter came rescue me last night.”

“Bagels sound good,” Hunter pipes up.

I raise my eyebrows at him in a silent “what are you doing” before turning back to my aunt. “We have to deal with my car,” I repeat.

“Well how about I fix some for you to take with you? Do you like cream cheese?” Judy directs her question at Hunter.

“I’m good with that. If it’s not too much trouble.” His eyes flicker toward me.

“It’s no trouble at all. Plus, any friend of Madison’s is welcome here. Especially the kind that stay the night.” She lowers her voice and leans closer to Hunter. “Not that there have been any of those since she moved here. Thank goodness she’s finally over everything that EJ put her through.”

“Aunt Judy,” I scold, putting a hand over my face. “We’ll come over to get the bagels in a few minutes.” I all but shut the door on her, but not before I hear her laughing on the other side.

“Who’s EJ?”

Here we go. “My ex–best friend in Nashville,” I answer as stroll back into the kitchen and switch off the coffee pot, pouring us each a mug. “How do you like your coffee? I have almond milk and sugar. Judy probably has other creamer.”

“Black is fine,” he says, taking the mug from me.

I fix my coffee and take a sip before continuing with the story. “EJ was my best friend. We’ve known each other our whole lives. Well, practically our whole lives.”

“The friend you said is a hockey player?” Hunter frowns as if he’s putting the pieces together.

“Yeah.” I trail off, lost in thought, trying to decide how much to tell him.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Hunter says quietly as if he can read my mind and knows how difficult this is for me.

“I know but I feel like I should be straight with you.” I pick up my coffee and walk over to the couch taking a seat.

“I thought we were going to be a thing, a couple. You know the whole friends-to-lovers trope that’s popular in romance novels? Yeah, I thought that would be us,” I say with a sad smile. “I swear all the signs were there over the years. Earlier this year, I got tired of waiting and confronted him about it.”

I shrug, trying to push down the tears that want to slip out. “He told me I was mistaken. Our friendship fell apart after that.” I stare down at my untouched coffee in my hands. I hate talking about what happened between EJ and me.

“Asshole. Where is he now?”

“Settle down, tiger.” I pat his arm. Yep, definitely can’t tell Hunter that EJ is an NHL player or which team he plays for. That would not end well. For either of them.

Hunter startles me when he pulls me into his arms. “Thank you for telling me.”

I nod, letting myself sink into his embrace. Trying to will away the tears that are still threatening to fall.

I wonder if I’ll ever be able to talk or even think about what happened between EJ and me without feeling like I’m going to fall apart all over again.

“My parents were never married,” he blurts out after a few moments of silence. “They had an affair.”

I look up at him, waiting to see what else he says.

“My father was married at the time. Hell, still is for all I know. My mother didn’t want me. I was an oops. She had an affair with a coworker—my father—and got pregnant. She was already almost forty and hadn’t planned to have kids. Yet here I am. We lived in Steamboat Springs for years because that’s where she was working when she got pregnant with me.”

“Fuck, Hunter,” I whisper.

“I’ve never told anyone that.” He swallows and I lean into him, trying to comfort him like he comforted me. “When we moved to Minneapolis, it was so my mom could dump me with her family to raise me.”

“Why didn’t you stay with your father in Colorado?”

He runs a hand through his hair. “He didn’t want me. Mom was done being trapped by parenthood. I was ten. Ten. My aunt and uncle raised me.” He lets out a bark of laughter. “Technically my cousin and his wife. My mom was the youngest in her family. Having me at forty meant that her older siblings’ kids, her nieces and nephews, were already grown.”

Hunter sighs and I reach up to stroke his face, staying quiet. I can’t even imagine what it feels like to know neither of your parents wanted you.

It was hard enough thinking my father didn’t want me most of my life. I can’t even imagine what it would have been like if my mom didn’t want me either.

“They’re the ones who encouraged me to skate and play hockey. I’d played in Colorado but mostly recreationally. I loved it. They’re the ones who noticed. Who paid for private coaches, traveling teams. I wasn’t even their son but it didn’t matter to them. I wouldn’t be here without Amanda and Mark.” His voice trails off and he clears his throat.

Fuck. My heart breaks for him. “That’s rough, Hunter. I can’t even imagine. I don’t—“

“It’s okay.” He pulls me closer. “We should go see your aunt. She’s expecting us.”

“Yeah, okay. Thank you for telling me. And for listening to me.” I stand, putting my hand out for Hunter. He takes it and gets to his feet.

“Always. I’ll always be here if you need to talk.”

We keep holding hands as we make our way to Judy’s.

Friends hold hands, right?

Maybe I need to stop overthinking and see where things go because for the first time in a long time, I feel relaxed and settled.

Like I’m right where I’m supposed to be.

Which strangely enough doesn’t scare me.

Chapter Seventeen

Hunter

“I don’t know about this, Hunter. I don’t think I can.”

“You can. I have faith in you. Like I showed you. I won’t let you fall.” I skate slowly backward, trying to coax her off the boards.

After breakfast, I dropped Madison off at the bakery so she could get her car towed while I went home to shower and change.

Now we’re at the practice rink that sits tucked behind the arena we play our games at. The lot was empty when we pulled in and for that I was thankful.

I hear laughter behind me and over my shoulder I see Wes, Holt, and Brody lacing up their skates. *Shit*. I was hoping we’d have the ice to ourselves.

“Hey, Hunter,” Wes yells and I half turn to wave at him.

“Wanna skate some drills?” Holt asks.

I shake my head, turning back to Madison.

“Should we go?” She glances over my shoulder at the guys.

“No, it’s fine. Now come on, I know you can do it. I’m right here, I won’t let you fall.”

She shakes her head at me but finally pushes off the wall and slowly skates in my direction.

“What are you doing?” Wes skates toward me.

“Don’t—“ I yell, but he’s coming at full speed, and I only manage to get out of the way at the last second as he slams on the brakes, throwing ice all over me. *Asshole*.

“Oh shit.” Holt skates up to us, making a face I can’t quite place when he notices Madison.

I send up a silent prayer that he doesn’t ask her about knowing Coach or if she went out with him. He hasn’t said anything about it since the barbecue although it didn’t seem like he believed her answer when I told him what she’d said.

“Yeah. Oh shit is right.” I brush the ice off me.

“Sorry, dude.” Wes’s face turns red when he glances over and sees Madison. “My bad.”

I nod, accepting his apology. “What are you guys doing here?”

“Running some drills with Brody. Come practice with us.” Holt gestures to the opposite end of the rink where Brody’s setting up markers on the ice.

“Maybe next time.”

“Hey guys. Ready?” Brody skates over to us.

Since when does he hang out with those two? I know he's friends with Caleb and Cole because I've seen them leave practice together, but otherwise he usually keeps to himself.

He's not much of a conversationalist outside of the locker room and even then it usually revolves around the game. I don't know much about him. All I know is that he's played for the Storm his entire career, hockey is his life, and he's from Florida.

He's always the first to grab the iPad when we get back to the bench after a shift on the ice, to study our play and our opponents—trying to figure out what we can do better the next time.

“You sure you don't want to join us?” Wes asks.

“I'm good here,” I say.

The guys wave and finally skate away.

“Sorry about them.” I turn back to Madison to see her smirking at me.

“Seems like they're a fun bunch. I can sit down for a while if you want to run drills with them.” She hooks her thumb over her shoulder in the direction of the bench.

I wave off her suggestion. No way do I want to give up spending time with Madison to hang out with the guys who I see every day for hours on end.

“I'm good. They're entertaining, that's for sure.” I watch Wes and Holt skate through the markers Brody has set on the ice, passing pucks back just out of each other's reach so the

person receiving the pass has to reach his stick out to make contact with the puck.

I'm confused as to why Holt is skating drills like that when he's a goalie but whatever makes him happy.

I gesture toward them. "Brody and I have been playing on the same line this season. I was kind of shocked when Coach kept us together after the preseason. He's been playing with the Storm for a long time, and I figured he'd be on the top line with Caleb and Winston. He had over a hundred points last season."

I shrug. "Wes is another rookie although he played for the Mustangs last season. He's a defender. Holt's our backup goalie, and he's been playing for a couple of years. He got traded to the Storm in the offseason."

Madison studies me for a minute and then looks at the guys and back to me. "I'm going to go out on a limb here and say you're a right winger. Does that make Brody a center? Because he's a righty too," she says, watching Brody who's got a puck on his stick taking shots at the goal while Holt and Wes act as defenders trying to block his shots. "Or, wait, he prefers playing on his offhand side which makes him a left winger. Right?"

I stare at her, opening and closing my mouth a couple of times.

"What?" She breaks out into a big grin. "Surprised I picked up on that?"

“Yes.” Holy shit can she be any more perfect?

Not only is she smart, sweet, and funny but she also knows hockey. Talk about a turn on.

“Do you want to come to a game?” I ask, picturing her wearing my name and number on her back. Cheering me on from the stands. I haven’t had any family or friends come watch me play in the NHL yet.

I’ll have to special order a jersey for her if I want her to wear my name and number, which I do. It’ll take a couple of weeks but that’s fine, just means she’ll have to come to multiple games. The thought of having Madison in the stands wearing my name is thrilling.

Like I’m claiming her. Like she’s telling everyone else that she’s mine. I know we’re only friends but a guy can dream.

“I’d like that. If it’s not too much trouble.”

“No trouble.” I hold out my hand.

She takes it and we skate around the ice for a while longer, avoiding the area where Holt and Wes are screwing around. They’re racing up and down the ice and checking each other into the boards.

I shake my head every time we pass them, hoping no one gets hurt. Brody yells at them to focus a couple of times, but it’s no use.

“Ready to go?” I ask a half hour later, as we make it around the ice again.

Madison's been doing well on the skates after she got over her hesitation, although she's still holding tightly to my hand which I don't mind.

"Yeah. I think so. But wait, before we go."

"Yeah?" I turn to face her, wondering what she's going to say now. Is she going to surprise me with her hockey knowledge again?

"Are you going to show me what you got?" She wiggles her eyebrows and gestures toward the rink behind me.

I chuckle and take off. I pick up my pace after my first lap, turning to skate backward when I'm halfway around a second time. I love the rush of being on the ice. The feel of the cold air rushing over my face and through my hair. The feel of my skate blades gliding over the smooth surface. It's exhilarating.

At the last minute I turn, spraying ice along the boards as I come to a stop in front of Madison.

She throws back her head, laughing, and claps her hands. "You are so graceful. Like you were born to skate. I can't wait to see you play."

I preen and take a mock bow. "Thank you m'lady. Thank you."

She laughs and claps some more. I'm smiling from ear to ear. This is the most fun I've had in a long time, and it's all thanks to this wonderful woman.

She meets my gaze and it's almost as if she can hear what I'm thinking because her tongue darts out, swiping at her

bottom lip, and her gaze darts to my mouth.

I want to kiss her so badly.

I've wanted to since I woke up to her snuggled on my chest. But we're *just* friends. I won't break her trust and try something she doesn't want.

I'm starting to wonder if she's having second thoughts about only being friends. Last night she seemed like she wanted to say something when she invited me to stay. This morning too.

I'd be thrilled if she wanted more.

I want more.

I want to taste her lips. See if she tastes as sweet as she smells.

Pepper every inch of her body with kisses.

But I'll respect her wishes to only be friends until she gives me an indication of wanting more. And then I'll worship her like the goddess she is.

Chapter Eighteen

Madison

The way Hunter is staring at me, I'm certain he's going to kiss me, but he doesn't.

Because we're friends.

I know I said that's what I wanted, but the more time we spend together, the more I regret that decision.

One part of me says it was the right decision to make, but the other part of me, the one that wants to enjoy life and the man in front of me, wonders if it really was.

Am I holding myself back from what could be a great relationship because I'm afraid? Am I afraid of getting hurt like I was hurt by EJ?

He and I were never more than friends though. His rejection stung because I wanted more and he didn't.

Hunter clearly wants more. He wants to date me. There won't be any rejection there. It's still a scary thought.

What happens if I take the risk and us dating ends up being a distraction to Hunter's rookie season? I'd never forgive myself if something happened to him because of me.

"You ready?" Hunter asks.

"Yeah." I follow him off the ice to the bench so we can change into our sneakers.

A few minutes later Hunter stands, holding out his hand for me. He's been doing that a lot today.

Granted, most of it was when we were on the ice and I needed his help to not fall on my ass but now, now I don't need his hand to stay upright. I take it anyway.

It feels right.

"Want a tour of the arena before we go?" Hunter asks. I blink at him. "A tour?" He repeats, gesturing around.

I glance around. When we got here the parking lot was empty, and I breathed a sigh of relief that no one else was here, especially not my father. It crossed my mind a few times on the drive over that he might be here today.

That we might run into him, and he might say something that clued Hunter in on our relationship. Now Hunter's offering to give me a tour of the arena.

Where my father's office is and where there's even more of a chance that we could run into him.

"No, that's okay." I shake my head.

“You sure?” He asks as he leads me away from the ice. “I could show you our locker rooms, the weight room, everything you’d ever want to see. A VIP tour.”

I contemplate it. While I’d love to see the arena, it feels like it’s asking for my father to show up. “Maybe next time. I’m pretty hungry.”

“Okay, next time it is. Still want tacos?”

“Yes please. What’s the place called?”

“Locos Tacos. It’s a tiny hole-in-the-wall about ten minutes from my place. Have you been?”

“Nope.” I step out the door Hunter’s holding open for me.

“You’re in for a real treat. Their tacos are the best,” he says as he opens the passenger’s-side door of his truck and helps me in.

I peel my sweatshirt off the minute I’m inside. It might technically be fall but apparently Florida doesn’t know what that is, evidenced by the sweat clinging to my back.

“What’s with that look?” Hunter asks as he climbs into the truck and cranks on the air conditioner.

“Wishing I’d thought to bring shorts to change into.” I pull my shirt away from my body, leaning forward to adjust the air vents so they’re blowing on me.

“Want to swing by your place before lunch?”

“No, it’s fine.” Before Hunter can say anything, my phone rings. “I need to take this. It’s the mechanic.”

Hunter nods and starts driving. “What’d he say?” he asks once I’ve hung up the phone.

“The alternator died. He should have it done by the end of the day.”

“That’s great. I mean, it’s not great that it’s the alternator but that he can get it done so quickly. I can drive you over there when it’s ready.” As he’s speaking, he places one hand on my thigh and even through my jeans, I can feel the heat from his touch.

I should move his hand, but I don’t. I like it being there.

“I’m sure you’ve got something to do this evening. I can get my aunt to take me,” I mumble, staring down at his hand, wondering what it would feel like if he put it on other parts of my body. I shift in my seat, trying to dull the ache that’s building as I think about his hands on me.

“Madison. I offered.” Hunter gently strokes my leg with his thumb as he drives.

Does he know what he’s doing to me?

That he’s slowly pushing me toward the edge of the cliff that is our friendship and I’m about ready to dive off and say the hell with it.

I clear my throat. “If you’re sure.”

“I am.” Hunter puts on his blinker and turns onto the highway.

Before I can answer, my phone dings with a text message. I glance down quickly and my stomach bottoms out when I see who's texting me.

EJ: Mads, I need to talk to you. I'm an idiot. Is that what you want me to say? I hate how we left things.

I clench my jaw. This isn't the first time that EJ has said something like this. Acted like he was apologizing except it wasn't a genuine apology. In the past, I'd accept it and ignore how the delivery made me feel.

But not now. Now I'm done with his shit.

He needs to give me more than this half-assed apology for what he said, how he treated me. I lock my phone and shove it back into my purse.

"You said you're from Minnesota? What's that like?" I ask, turning my attention back to Hunter.

"Cold. Snowy. Pretty."

"This must be a shock to your system. That it's November and still hot."

He chuckles. "It is but I definitely won't miss having to shovel or scrape ice off my car. Or getting up earlier so I can run out to start my car so it warms up in time." He removes his hand from my leg as he pulls the truck into a parking spot, and I immediately miss the feeling of it.

Get a hold of yourself. I give myself a mental shake as I get out of the truck.

“This is it?” I ask when I’m standing next to him.

“Yeah, the entrance is on the other side. Through that alleyway there,” he says pointing.

I follow him through the gravel-covered lot and down the short alleyway. We come out the other end in front of a row of bars and restaurants. The roar of a low-flying plane has me realizing we’re near Orlando Executive Airport.

“This way.” Hunter points at a small building with a sign hanging above the door proclaiming it to be Locos Tacos. I gasp at the long line that snakes out the door.

“Don’t worry. It always moves quickly.” Hunter motions for me to get in line in front of him.

I nod, excited to try a new taco restaurant. I haven’t found a good one yet and have missed quite a few Taco Tuesdays because of it.

“Whatcha thinking?” Hunter steps closer to me, and even though it’s a million degrees out, I like the heat of his body close to me. I feel safe. Something I haven’t felt in a really long time.

“Hoping this place is as good as you say it is.”

“It is. I promise.”

Once we’ve made it to the doorway, I peer inside while Hunter reaches around me to grab a menu from the holder.

“Here,” he says, handing it to me. “The chicken street tacos are my favorite. Highly recommend them.” I nod and study the menu.

“Welcome to Locos Tacos. How can I help you?” The guy behind the counter greets us as we step into the restaurant. The entryway is so narrow we have to squeeze against the counter when someone exits the way we just entered.

“Hey, Chris,” Hunter greets the guy.

“Hey, Hunter. The usual?”

“Yeah, and whatever she wants.” He tips his head toward me. I put in my order for two chicken street tacos, extra salsa, no onions. Chris nods and starts making our tacos.

While we wait, I take in our surroundings. The open kitchen where the staff take orders and make the food takes up half the restaurant.

The rest of the space, at the back, is taken up by soda machines, and there are a couple of doors on the opposite wall that are probably the bathrooms.

I can see straight through the back of the restaurant to a patio, which is the only place to sit since the inside is so narrow.

While he makes our food, Chris says, “Saw your game the other day. You’re playing really well. It’s only a matter of time before you score your first goal.”

Out of the corner of my eye I see Hunter swallow and bite his bottom lip, a grimace appearing on his face momentarily

before he plasters on a smile. “Appreciate that, man.”

After paying, we take our food and go out the back door.

“You good to eat at my place?” Hunter pauses on the patio.

That’s when I notice all the tables are taken. Even if they weren’t, I don’t really want to sit outside and sweat. “Sounds perfect to me.” I follow Hunter back to his truck and the air conditioning.

Ten minutes later, he turns into a garage next to a high-rise apartment building and parks his truck.

The doorman greets him by name, and we take the elevator up to the tenth floor.

“This way.” Hunter leads me down a hallway to the last apartment. He unlocks the door and holds it open for me before following me in.

He takes off his sneakers in the entrance way and I do the same. I glance around as we step farther into the apartment.

The furniture is a mixture of mid modern pieces with simple lines in light brown wood. It reminds me of the decor from homes in the show *Mad Men*.

It’s not the style I’d expected for Hunter’s apartment.

I’d pictured a well-worn leather couch and dark furniture, but I’m greeted by a beige sectional that seems stiff and uncomfortable.

“It’s as comfortable as it looks,” Hunter says as if reading my mind.

“It wasn’t what I was expecting. I mean, it’s nice, fancy, but ...” I’m not trying to knock his taste because if that’s the style of furniture he likes, who am I to judge?

“It’s a furnished short-term rental. I didn’t pick the furniture. If I had, I would not have picked that couch,” Hunter says. “Let’s go sit in the kitchen.” He gestures for me to follow him deeper into his apartment.

A short-term rental? That makes more sense but leaves me with more unanswered questions. Why is he still living in temporary housing?

He sets our food on the table and tells me to make myself comfortable. I decide to sit on the side of the table that faces the rest of the kitchen, my back to the living room we just walked through.

“Is water good?” Hunter asks, standing in front of the fridge with two glasses in his hand.

“Perfect.”

While he gets our drinks I pull our tacos, chips, and salsa out of the bag. My mouth waters as the smell of the lime and cilantro mixed with warm tortillas hits my nose. I sure hope it’s as good as it smells.

“Short-term rental?” I ask before taking a sip of water as Hunter joins me at the table.

He pulls his tacos out of the bag and peels back the wrapper on one. “Yeah, I wasn’t sure how long I’d be here.”

“I thought you had a contract.” I fiddle with the paper around my tacos.

“I do, but it’s only a one-year contract. The Storm could decide they want to reassign me to the Mustangs, who aren’t local.”

“Oh.” I don’t know what to say. I know that Hunter was a rookie and that sometimes teams send players down to the AHL but I guess I just assumed that Hunter was here to stay.

What happens if he has to leave? We’re just getting to know each other. I like spending time with him. I push those thoughts aside and take a bite of my taco, moaning as I do. *Holy shit this is good.*

“Don’t do that,” Hunter growls.

“Do what?” I ask.

He leans closer to me, his voice low. “Moan like that. I know we’re friends, but it does things to me, Madison, when you do that.”

My taco suddenly becomes very interesting and I hope like hell I’m not blushing.

“Sorry,” I mumble before going back to my food. Keeping my sounds to myself.

He nods and starts to eat his own lunch.

“I’m stuffed,” I say a few minutes later, leaning back in my seat and surveying my empty wrappers.

Hunter pops the last chip into his mouth, and I can't help but watch, mesmerized, as his tongue slips out, licking the last of the salt from his lips.

What would it feel like to have that tongue and those lips all over me? I start to blush at the thought.

“What are you thinking?” Hunter asks, cocking his head at me.

“Nothing,” I mumble, picking up my glass and draining it. Hoping the cold water will cool me off. Or at least distract me from the thoughts I'm having about him

“Madison.” He levels me with a look but before he can say anything else, I'm out of my seat.

“I need more water,” I rasp out, my throat suddenly dry even though I just drank half a glass of water.

I feel his gaze on me as I head over to the sink and fill my glass. I take a drink, keeping my back to him. I hear the scrape of his chair on the hardwood floor, but before I can move away, he's behind me.

The heat from his body radiates over me. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my racing heart, but now all I smell is him, a mix of cedar and pine.

He leans down and whispers in my ear, “What's going on, Madison?” His warm breath sends shivers down my spine.

I don't answer.

I can't form words right now.

Instead, I turn around to face him, setting my glass down next to me with shaky hands.

Hunter watches me. “Madison?” he whispers, as he tips my chin up so I can meet his gaze.

His hand lingers on my chin, and it takes everything in me not to lean into his touch.

Before I can answer, he pulls me into his chest, wrapping his arms around me. “Tell me you don’t want this and I’ll stop.”

“Friends hug, right?” I whisper, leaning against him, taking a deep breath. Hunter sighs against me, and I relax into his arms.

I would much rather he kiss me, but this is nice too.

That line I drew in the sand, the boundary I put around our relationship, is beginning to seem like a mistake.

“What are you thinking?” I ask after a few beats of silence trying to distract myself from the feelings and thoughts rattling around in my head about our relationship.

“I’m nervous that the Storm will decide I’m not good enough for them and send me down to the Mustangs. Or worse, not offer me another contract,” he whispers into my hair.

“What?” I pull back a little so I can look up at him. That was not at all what I expected him to say.

He gives me a small shrug, refusing to meet my eyes. “My ice time is increasing but I haven’t scored a goal yet.”

“Isn’t it a good sign that you’re on the ice more? Doesn’t it mean they like how you play?”

“Yeah, I guess,” he mumbles. “We’ll see how it goes this next road trip. It’s the first one where all the guys that were out recovering from surgeries will be back. If my ice time goes down, I guess I’ll have my answer.”

“Don’t doubt yourself. I’m sure you’re a good skater. If you weren’t, you wouldn’t have a spot on the team, right? You’ll score a goal eventually.”

“I suppose.” Hunter pulls me closer into his arms.

I want to say more, reassure him, but I don’t know how so I just hug him tighter.

Eventually, he takes a deep breath, drops his arms, and steps back. “I shouldn’t have dumped all that on you. I-I don’t know.” He runs a hand through his hair, making some of it stand up. “I feel comfortable telling you. I’m sorry if I crossed a line touching you. Holding you like that.”

“I’m always happy to listen.”

My phone chimes with a text message.

He steps away from me and nods toward my phone on the table. “You should see who that is. Maybe it’s about your car.”

I sigh when I see a text from my father. For a moment, I’d forgotten about that complication.

Jake: Do you want to go to dinner this week?

“It was spam,” I say, locking my phone without responding. I’ll answer Jake later.

The lie rolls off my tongue. This would have been a great time to tell Hunter about my father. But I’d hate to ruin the good day we’re having.

At this point, what does it matter if I wait another day or week to tell him?

Chapter Nineteen

Hunter

“Want to see the rest of the place?” I ask when Madison comes back to where I’m still leaning against the counter.

I can’t believe I dumped that on her. It’s been weighing on me for a while, and it sort of came out when she asked me what I was thinking.

The doubt that’s been swirling around in my head has been growing larger the longer I go without scoring my first goal. For whatever reason, my brain thinks that that’s the mark that means I’ve made it in the NHL.

Realistically, it isn’t.

The team could decide to send me down for conditioning or development. They did it with another player who is in his second season with the NHL and has scored a dozen goals. Granted, he wasn’t getting the ice time I am, but if it happened to him, it could happen to me.

I don’t know why, but something about standing here, in my kitchen with Madison, made me feel like I could tell her about

it.

Now I feel like a weight has been lifted off my chest. I didn't realize how much it was stressing me out.

Not that talking about it suddenly means it's not still a source of anxiety, but it feels good telling someone.

"Yeah," she says.

"You've seen the kitchen and living room. I'll show you the rest." I lead her around the apartment, pointing out my bedroom, the guest room, which I haven't used, and the bathrooms. I end the tour in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows in the living room, my favorite part of this place.

I love drinking my coffee every morning and watching all the people hurrying down the street heading to work in the office buildings downtown. I enjoy watching all the cars and buses going by on the streets below.

My favorite time of day to stand at the windows, though, is late at night when the city is asleep. A calm blankets the usual noise. It's peaceful. If I crane my neck just right, I can see the lakes that surround downtown. Sometimes I can even see a boat or Jet Ski out on the water.

"This view is magnificent." Madison stares out the window.

"It sure is." Although the view I'm talking about isn't the same one that she is. It's her I'm looking at and her beauty I'm admiring.

She's gorgeous in her tight, fitted jeans that hug her ass, a maroon shirt that somehow makes her eyes seem brighter, and

with her curly hair loose along her shoulders, mussed from being in a bun while we were ice skating.

As if she feels my gaze on her, she peers at me over her shoulder, smiling shyly.

I want to kiss her so badly.

As if she hears my thoughts, her tongue peeks out and wets her lips. She glances down at my lips for a second before lifting her gaze back to mine.

Stepping closer, I spin her gently so we're chest to chest. I lean in closer until her exhales become my inhales. My heart races, pounding in my ears.

Her breath comes in shaky pants. A blush spreads along her face and down her neck.

"Madison." I ghost my fingers along her cheek, reaching to tuck a stray piece of hair behind her ear before dropping my hand back to my side.

"Hunter." My name is a plea on her lips.

I rest my forehead against hers, inhaling a shaky breath. "We're friends."

It's more of a reminder to myself than to her before I cross a line I shouldn't. Even though I very much want to.

"Fuck that," she whispers before she crashes her lips to mine.

My shock lasts a heartbeat before I bring one of my hands up to tangle in her hair and wrap the other one around her waist,

pulling her closer. I feel her tongue against my lips, and with a groan, I open for her. She tastes like cake and sugar with a hint of lime and salt.

Fuck me.

She sinks her fingers into my scalp, eliciting a growl from me. My dick hardens. I shift slightly, not wanting to startle her with how aroused I am since who the hell knows what we're doing here, but I don't get a chance as Madison rubs against me, moaning into my mouth. I take over the kiss, guiding her head where I want it, darting my tongue into her mouth. I can't get enough of her. *She's addicting.*

"Madison," I say, pulling back from her, my heart hammering in my chest.

"Yes." She grins up at me, her lips swollen from our kisses.

"You're gorgeous."

She opens her mouth to say something but we're interrupted by her phone ringing. *Damn it.*

I reluctantly let her go and take a seat on the couch. I take a deep breath, trying to calm my urge to march into the other room where she's on the phone, toss her over my shoulder, and take her to my bedroom.

My phone dings with a text. Thinking it might be one of the guys, I pull it out of my pocket.

Elias: Hey. Was hoping we could talk when you're in town in a couple of weeks. Maybe get lunch.

I'm so tired of him. Doesn't he get the message?

I lock my phone and toss it on the coffee table before dropping my head into my hands. I forgot that we're playing the Nashville Fury during this upcoming road trip.

"Hey." Madison steps back into the room. I look up at her and frown. She's standing at the edge of the living room, her arms wrapped around her middle, refusing to look at me. *Shit.*

"Madison." I jump to my feet. "What is it?" My mind races with possibilities. Did something happen to her aunt? Was the phone call bad news about her car?

"What did we do, Hunter?" she whispers, staring at the floor.

My stomach drops.

It wasn't the phone call. She's regretting the kiss. Regretting me.

"We kissed." It's the only thing I can think of to say.

"We're friends, Hunter. *Friends.*" She finally looks up at me.

"I know." I pull on the back of my neck, trying to figure out what's going on here.

"I'm not blaming you for crossing the line. It was all me. I got caught up in the moment and gave in to how I was feeling. You were the one trying to keep the line drawn."

"Madison." I start to reach for her, but then think better of it and shove my hands into my pockets. "I wanted to cross that line with you. I don't regret that kiss. What happened?"

“Nothing.” She shakes her head. “Reality caught up to me, and I realized we can’t do this. I need us to only be friends.”

“Why?” I search her face for some sign, some explanation as to why she changed her mind. What is she not telling me?

“We need to stay friends. Trust me, it’s for the best. My car’s ready.” She stares down at her hands, picking at her nails.

“We can go get it now if you want.”

I want to ask her why she only wants to be friends when she clearly has feelings for me. I know she was enjoying our kiss.

You can’t fake the reactions she was having. I need to figure out how to get her to lower her walls and tell me what’s really going on.

What’s really holding her back. What she’s afraid of.

I’m just not sure how to do that yet.

Chapter Twenty

Madison

After we picked up my car, I told Hunter I had a headache and wanted to go home and take a nap. It was a lie and I think he knew, but thankfully he didn't call me on it.

He texted me later that night to ask how I was, and I told him I was better. When he texted me the next day I told him the bakery was really busy, another lie, but I needed time to sort out my feelings.

He didn't question it, and while we've texted some, it hasn't been nearly as much as it was before.

The kiss messed with my head. I'm so torn between what I want to do and what I know is the right thing to do, so I'm not doing anything. Maybe that makes me a coward. But what if I make the wrong decision?

Even being friends with him feels dangerous. Dangerous to his career and dangerous to my budding relationship with my father.

Why can't things be simpler? Why can't Hunter be some guy I met at the grocery store and not a hockey player for the team that my father coaches?

I push those thoughts away as I follow behind the hostess to a table in the corner of the Greek restaurant where I'm having dinner with my father.

"Hey, Madison," Jake says.

"Hi, Da—Jake." I stumble over what to call him. In my head I refer to him as "my father" or "Jake," but what do I call him to his face?

He gives me a tight-lipped smile as I take a seat.

"You okay?" I ask when the hostess leaves.

"Fine. It's been a long week. And we leave again tomorrow for a week. It's only the beginning of the season, but it seems to be wearing on me quicker than previous ones. I guess it comes with age."

"Where are you traveling to?" I glance at him over the top of my menu.

"Nashville, Dallas, and Denver."

Nashville. My stomach sinks at the name of the city I used to call home. "Oh."

Before I can say anything else, the waitress comes to take our drink orders—a glass of white wine for me and a Greek beer that I don't quite catch the name of for Jake. She nods and

leaves us to look over the menu. I decide on the Greek salad with gyro meat.

While Jake studies the menu, I glance around at the other patrons—mostly couples, but there are a few families scattered around enjoying their Tuesday night dinner.

The waitress reappears with our drinks and takes our order. I take a long drink of my wine when she leaves before grabbing a piece of fresh pita bread from the basket she left.

“Are you okay?” Jake asks after I finish chewing. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you look tired. Or stressed. Did something happen?”

“Haven’t been sleeping well,” I admit.

It’s the truth. Every time I close my eyes the kiss between Hunter and I replays in my mind. Followed quickly by the expression on his face when I told him it was a mistake.

“Something on your mind? I know we don’t have a relationship really—”

“We’re starting to.”

“Okay, we have the beginnings of a relationship. One that’s not the normal father-daughter relationship. But if something’s on your mind, I’m happy to listen.” He picks up his beer, taking a sip and giving me time to answer.

“You didn’t know I existed for most of my life,” I whisper, taking a huge swig of my wine. *I should have ordered something stronger.*

He plays with the utensils in front of him for a minute before answering. “I know. I could have known you sooner if only I’d read the letters your mom sent me. But I didn’t. That’s something I’m going to regret for the rest of my life, but now we’re here and I know you. I’m getting a second chance to have a family, a daughter. I know this is probably strange for you. You grew up never having a father, and suddenly here I am.”

“Yeah, it is,” I admit.

Before I can say anything else the waitress reappears with our meals. I mull over what Jake said and whether I want to confide in him.

How I could confide in him without telling him it’s Hunter I’m talking about. I haven’t spoken to Judy because I know what she’d say—don’t fight it, give in, see what happens.

After a few minutes of silently eating, Jake puts his fork down and says, “When I spoke to your aunt I asked her if she knew why your mom never told me she was pregnant with you. Why she never contacted me when she found out. I would have done anything I could to help her with you, I hope you know that. Judy told me that Clea didn’t want to come between me and hockey. She knew how much I loved the game. It was actually a couple of weeks before I got called up to play in the NHL that she broke up with me and left Florida. I’m pretty sure, looking back on it, that it was right after she found out she was pregnant.”

“I’d always wondered what really happened. All I knew about you growing up was that you played hockey, loved the game, and that she couldn’t come between you and your first love—the ice. That you picked hockey over her. Why’d she lie to me?” The last part comes out as a whisper.

“Madison, I’m sorry you thought that.” He runs a hand through his hair.

“That must have been hard, growing up thinking your father picked his career over you.” He shakes his head. “I don’t know why she told you that. Maybe that’s what she thought was going to happen. But I wish she’d told me about you. Let me make the decision.”

My eyes sting with tears as I think about the younger version of myself and how I’d always wished for a father when I blew out the candles on my birthday.

I take a deep breath, trying to pull myself together.

Jake must sense something’s wrong because he leans over the table and puts a hand on my arm. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I was only trying to tell you that I would have wanted you in my life. It wouldn’t have been easy. The life of a professional hockey player is rough with all the traveling and the grueling schedule of practice, games, and conditioning. But if I’d been given the choice, I would have picked you and your mom. I want you in my life now in whatever capacity I can. Whether it’s the occasional dinners and text messages or it’s something more. I’m here in whatever way you want.”

“I am having a rough week,” I confess.

“Want to talk about it?”

“I met a guy,” I mumble, staring down at my salad.

“That’s great. What’s he like?” His smile drops and his eyebrows draw together when he notices my expression. “Something happen? I have a team full of guys who would do anything I ask. Need me to put the fear of God in someone?”

I sputter a laugh, shaking my head. “I don’t know if us being together is a good thing. His career is demanding. I don’t want to be the cause of him not doing well at it. He works hard and I’m afraid I’ll be a distraction.”

It’s not the entire story, but I can’t exactly blurt out that Hunter plays for the Storm.

“Has he said this to you?”

“No.” I shake my head, picking up my glass and drinking the rest of my wine.

“You should let him make that decision. That choice. Don’t take that away from him. If you really like him and want to see where things go, then tell him and let him decide. I’m sure he knows what he would or wouldn’t have to sacrifice in his career to also be with you. Don’t make the decision for him.”

I bite my lip, staring down at my plate as I contemplate what he said.

Deep down I know he’s right. I should give Hunter the choice to decide whether I’ll be a distraction or not.

There's still the fact that Jake is his head coach. I'm not sure how well that's going to go over.

"You're right," I agree, picking up my fork and taking a bite of my salad. I should talk to Hunter. Tell him where my head really is at. He deserves to know that at least. That is, if he still wants to talk to me.

The conversation shifts and we finish our dinner. After Jake pays the bill, he insists on walking me to my car.

"It was good to see you, Madison. I hope we can get together again soon," he says, shifting back and forth on his feet.

"It was good to see you too, Jake." I put out my arms for a hug and hope he hugs me back.

He pauses for a moment, and I wonder if he's not going to, but then he steps forward. It's awkward but after all these years, it's nice to get a hug from my father, something I thought would never happen.

He pats me on the back before stepping away. "I hope you'll watch our games. Cheer on your dad and his boys."

"Of course."

"Bye, Madison," he says.

I get in my car and start the engine. Thankfully it hums to life. Buckling my seat belt, I lean back and close my eyes for a moment. I know what I need to do. I need to talk to Hunter when they get back from this road trip.

I send up a silent prayer that I didn't blow my chances with him before putting the car in reverse and heading back to my apartment.

Chapter Twenty-One

Hunter

“Hey, Cap. You got a minute?” I ask Caleb as we’re walking toward the plane to Nashville, the first stop on this week-long road trip. I’d rather not have this conversation at all, but since we’re playing the Nashville Fury tomorrow, I need to give him a heads-up. And I’d rather talk before we get on the plane so we can have some privacy.

“Yeah.” He steps out of the way so the guys behind us can board. “What’s up?”

Wes raises his eyebrows at me as he walks up to us. I shake my head at him. He pauses and I hold my breath, hoping he isn’t going to say anything, but he finally shrugs and heads up the stairs.

I’m sure I’ll have to answer twenty questions about what I talked to Caleb about once I get on the plane, but I can’t focus on that right now.

“I need to give you a heads-up about something before our game tomorrow.” I fiddle with the strap of my duffel bag

hanging over my shoulder.

“Okay.” Caleb sets his bag on the tarmac and turns to face me.

“Stoneheart and I have history.”

“Stoneheart, as in the Fury’s forward?” He furrows his brows.

“Yeah,” I huff out. *This is fucking hard.* I hate talking about him.

“Stoneheart, as in the alternate captain for Nashville? That Stoneheart?” Caleb asks.

“Yep,” I say, popping the *p*, “that Stoneheart.”

“What kind of history?” He looks me up and down as if he’ll find the answer written on my body. “Like he’s going to punch you in the face history?”

I shrug because who the hell knows what Elias is going to do when he sees me.

“You need to give me something to work with so I can clue the others in, Hunter. I don’t need all the details, but I need to know what to expect when we’re out on the ice.”

I blow out a breath. “He’s my brother.”

Caleb stares at me without saying anything. *Yeah, me too man, me too.* “Half brother,” I amend.

“Let me get this straight. Elias Stoneheart is your half brother?”

“Yeah,” I say.

Caleb scratches his head. “Well, damn. I was not expecting that.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“No. No. Not like that.” He puts a hand on my shoulder. “I meant that you two don’t share a last name, and you’ve never mentioned a brother who plays hockey.”

“Half brother,” I grit out.

“I see there’s no love lost between the two of you,” he says with a shake of his head. “Alright, well, I’ll make sure the team knows to watch your back tomorrow.” He picks up his bag and starts toward the plane.

“Can you not mention the whole half brother thing?” I follow him up the stairs. The front office knows and I’m sure Coach does too, but I don’t exactly want to yell from the rooftops that Elias is my brother.

Pausing halfway up, he turns back to me. “Sure. They won’t hear it from me. Don’t expect them to not figure something is up. Or not ask a million questions.”

He gives me a half smile and a shrug. “Might be easier if you told them.” He doesn’t give me time to answer, instead continuing up the stairs and boarding the plane. I follow silently behind him.

Ready to get the show on the road.



Walking back into the locker room after the game, I'm riding the high of my first goal.

Which also happened to be the game-winning goal.

If I'd been asked earlier today if I thought I'd score my first goal of my NHL career here in Nashville, I would have said no. If someone had told me it would be the goal that gave us the lead late in the third period after we'd been tied since early in the game, I would have thought they were crazy.

Staring at the puck in my hand I grin, feeling the weight that's been sitting on my chest about this milestone finally lift.

Coach presented it a few minutes ago while the team photographer snapped pictures that I'm sure are already all over social media.

For once I had the media asking me questions when they usually don't even glance my way. Thankfully, that's all done and over with.

Now I can finally take a shower and get out of my wet uniform.

A commotion pulls me out of my thoughts, and someone calls my name. I sigh, hoping it's not more media, and get up from the bench. I round the corner, and my face falls as I see him—my half brother—standing in the doorway. Caleb and Wes are in front of him, their arms crossed, blocking him from getting farther inside.

Caleb turns to me as I walk up. "He says he came to congratulate you. What do you want us to do? I have no

problem throwing him out.”

Running my hands through my damp hair, I take a deep breath. Surprisingly, Elias didn't come after me like I thought he would, like I expected him to. I figured he'd hate to see his little brother on the ice. He never liked it when I tagged along with him as a kid and wanted to play with him and his friends.

I don't know if he left me alone tonight because Caleb had words with him during their first shift on the ice together or if he didn't care enough about me to risk a penalty. Whatever the reason, I'm grateful that my team had my back.

“It's fine. Let him in, guys.”

Caleb and Wes exchange glances before stepping back. They move past me, patting me on the shoulder as they do.

“If you need anything, holler for us,” Wes says.

Caleb turns back to Elias and points a finger at him. “Don't start shit.”

Elias nods and my teammates disappear.

“What do you want?” I grit out, crossing my arms and leaning against the wall.

“To congratulate you.” Elias steps closer to me.

“Thanks.”

“You deserve it. I'm glad I got to witness your first goal. Definitely something you'll always remember.” Elias shoves his hands in the pockets of his slacks.

I stare at him, opening and closing my mouth a couple of times, at a loss for words.

He knows it was my first goal? He's proud of me? He's glad he was there to see it?

Who is this guy and what has he done with my half brother?

"I-I thought you hated me," I finally say. *Where'd that come from?*

"I don't hate you. I always thought you hated me," he mutters, rocking back on his heels.

I rear back. "Why would I hate you?"

"Because that's what Dad told me when I'd ask if you were coming back to visit. He said that you hated being in Colorado. Hated us."

"No one ever asked me if I wanted to go back." I scrunch up my forehead. "I figured you were happier without me. It was clear he didn't love me. I guess I assumed the same from you when I didn't hear from either of you." I turn, ready to walk away.

I don't know what else to say. It's a lot to process—that he asked about me when we were kids and wondered why I didn't come back. Here I spent years assuming he was happy I was gone so he could have our father's full attention.

"Hunter, wait," Elias says.

I pause but don't turn back around.

“I tried to call you a couple of times after you moved to Minnesota. It always went to voicemail. I never understood it when I was younger but now, looking back, I think your mom blocked our father’s number. Thought it was him calling her. I left voicemails but you never called me. I wanted us to stay in touch.

“I tried to find you after I got drafted and started playing in the AHL, but the number wasn’t in service anymore. I couldn’t find an address for your mom in Minnesota. I figured you’d moved. It wasn’t until a couple of years ago I happened to be scrolling through the sports channels and stumbled upon the Frozen Four. Minnesota State was playing, and there you were.” He takes a deep breath.

I swallow, his words sinking in. Maybe he wasn’t the shit half brother I always thought he was. He was a kid, a teenager, the last time I saw him.

Maybe he deserves a chance.

“I wanted to reach out to you, but I didn’t know how. I couldn’t find you on social media. Besides, what was I going to say? Then the Storm announced they’d signed you to an entry-level contract this season. I knew I should reach out. Our paths were bound to cross.”

Over my shoulder I see him standing there, hunched over, his shoulders almost to his ears. “Oh.”

“I know you all are probably headed to the airport after this, but the next time you’re in town or we’re down there, maybe

we can get a bite to eat? Get to know each other as adults? I want you in my life, Hunter.”

I turn around, crossing my arms. “This is all a lot to process, Elias. For years I’ve thought that not only did our father not want me around but neither did you. I wrote you letters. You never wrote me back.”

He tilts his head, studying me. “I never got any letters. I would have written back. I’m sorry I didn’t contact you sooner. Neither of us can change the past but I want us to get to know each other as adults. Please.”

We stare at each other for a beat before I let out a breath and say, “Okay.”

“Okay, good.” Elias smiles and nods. “I’ll let you get a shower in. Congrats again, brother.”

“Thanks.”

Well, that was awkward.

I take a couple of deep breaths before heading back to my stall so I can finally shower.

“What was that about?” Wes leans toward me.

“A really awkward conversation with my half brother. Not sure how much of it was bullshit and how much of it was the truth. But it is what it is.” I pull off the Storm shirt I threw on over my pads so I could do interviews.

“Shit,” Wes mumbles. “Wait. Hold up. He’s your half brother?” he asks, his voice much louder than I’d like.

“Yes. Be quiet,” I hiss, waving my hands at him. “I don’t need the whole team knowing.” Not that it’ll matter. I’m sure they’ll all know by this time tomorrow—gossip travels fast around this group.

“You okay?” Caleb asks from across the room.

I give him a thumbs up and go back to taking off my uniform so I can shower.

Wes lets the conversation go, at least for now, and soon we’re heading out to the bus. The ride to the airport is short and quiet since everyone is exhausted.

I pull out my phone when I’m seated on the plane and see I have over a hundred texts from random people congratulating me on my first goal. My old college coach. A few former teammates. Some classmates from college and high school that I haven’t talked to in years. I ignore them all when I see that Madison texted me.

Finally.

I haven’t talked to her since our kiss. I texted and called a couple of times, and her one response was to tell me the bakery was really busy. It felt like an excuse to me.

I wanted to go over there and confront her. Ask her why she said our kiss was a mistake when she clearly enjoyed it.

Wes talked me out of it. His advice was to give her space. That it sounded like something spooked her after our kiss. Maybe she needed time to come around.

So reluctantly, that's what I did. It helped that we were so busy with games and practices.

Madison: I know you're playing and won't see this until later. Can we talk when you get back?

Madison: I watched the game! Congrats Hunter. You deserve it.

"Naked pictures?" Wes asks, leaning over and trying to see what's on my phone, a shit-eating grin on his face.

"Madison was texting me that she watched the game. She was congratulating me. Along with every other person I've ever met who still has my phone number."

"I told you she would come around. And she watched the game. Even better." Wes pushes his hair out of his face. "Prepare to be bombarded with text messages from everyone you ever knew, and even those you didn't really know, for quite a while."

I groan, set my phone to Airplane Mode, and shove it back in my bag as the plane starts to taxi down the runway. I lean my head against the window to try and get some sleep, but all I can see is Elias's face when I told him that it wasn't my choice to not come back to Colorado. That I wrote him letters.

I don't know what kind of relationship my half brother and I are going to have, but at least we each said our piece.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Madison

“Hey.” Rachel peeks her head into the kitchen late Monday morning as I’m putting the finishing touches on a cake.

“Hey, Rach.”

“You’ve got a visitor out here.”

A visitor? I furrow my brow. Who’s here to visit me? “Okay.” I set the piping bag on the table. “I’m done with the cake so—“

She interrupts me as she steps into the kitchen. “Great. How about I clean up here and put the cake away? You go. It’s almost noon. Call it a day. You didn’t take a break today, did you?” She frowns at me.

“I was busy,” I mumble.

She shoos me away from the counter. “This cake is beautiful, Mads,” she says. “Your customer is going to be thrilled.”

“Thanks. See you tomorrow.”

She waves as I head out the kitchen door. I blow out a breath when I see Hunter talking to Brandon at the counter.

For a few seconds, I'd been worried my visitor was EJ. Not that he knows where I work, but I wouldn't put it past him to figure it out.

My heart starts racing as I walk over to Hunter. When he sees me, he pushes off the display case he's leaning on.

I take a deep breath, trying to calm down. "Hi," I whisper.

He grins at me and opens his arms. I step into his embrace. "Hi," he whispers back into my hair. "I missed you."

"I missed you too. Want to get out of here?" I ask, pulling back to look up at him.

"Are you done for the day?"

I nod.

"Good. I'm done too. Where do you want to go?"

Are we going to ignore the elephant in the room? I glance over and see Brandon wiping off the counters. Is this because we have an audience?

There are a million things I want to say. That I want to ask. But not here.

"Maybe we can go to your place?" I stare at him, hoping he can see all the things I'm silently trying to tell him.

"Okay. Yeah, let's do that. Come on." He holds the door open for me, and we step out into the cool afternoon air. "Do you remember where it is, or do you want to follow me?"

“I think I remember. I’ll meet you in the lobby.”

Twenty minutes later, I’m pulling into the parking garage of Hunter’s apartment building.

I did not, in fact, remember where it was and had to frantically call him and ask for the address. I was close but off by a couple of blocks.

Grabbing my purse, I head to the lobby where I find Hunter chatting animatedly with the doorman. When he sees me his eyes light up and he ends his conversation.

He takes my hand the minute I’m by his side and we walk to the elevators. The entire ride up to his apartment is silent.

“I’m sorry,” I blurt out the minute his apartment door closes behind us.

He doesn’t say anything, simply takes off his shoes, walks into the living room, and takes a seat on the couch. I bite my lower lip as I pull off my shoes and follow him.

“Madison, whatever you feel like you need to apologize for, don’t worry about it. We can go back to being friends without everything being weird between us. It’s fine. I understand.” He winces as he speaks but gives me a small smile.

“No, you don’t understand, Hunter,” I say, shifting to face him. “I’m sorry for freaking out, for telling you I just want to be friends. For ghosting you for a week. I didn’t handle the situation right.”

His face lights up. “What are you saying?”

“I’m saying.” I blow out a breath. *Time to take a chance.* It’s now or never. “I like you, Hunter. I liked kissing you. I want to be more than friends with you if you still want that. I was afraid I was going to be a distraction for you. I don’t want to take your attention from hockey, but I never stopped to actually give you a choice. I took that decision away from you and for that I’m sorry.”

“I want to be more than friends with you too.” He reaches over and threads his fingers through mine. “Can I ask what changed your mind?”

I glance down at our joined hands and take a deep breath.

“I had dinner with my father last week. I never knew him growing up. My mom always told me he picked his career over us. Turns out he didn’t, he had no idea I existed. She never gave him the chance to choose whether or not to be in our lives. When he told me that I realized I was doing something similar to you. I didn’t give you a chance to make your own decision when it came to us. I decided for us. I’m sorry, Hunter.”

Hunter tilts his head to the side, studying me. “You’re sure that what your father told you isn’t a crock of shit?”

I jerk back a little. I wasn’t expecting him to say that, but it’s a valid question.

“I talked to my aunt about it. Apparently she and Mom had a conversation before my mom passed where she confessed to what she’d done. Cut him off without so much as a ‘hey, I’m pregnant and it’s yours.’ I wish I knew why she did it. I’d like

to think she thought she was protecting both of them from heartbreak.”

“I’m sorry your mom isn’t here anymore for you to ask. That you’ll never get that question answered. I’m glad you’re getting to finally know your dad, though,” He says after a few minutes of silence.

“Me too.”

“I like you.” He pauses and I nod. “I want to see where this thing goes with us. I know it’s going to be tough with me being on the road a lot. It’s going to get worse the second half of the season. I’m not sure how much free time I’ll have, but what little I get, I want to spend with you.”

“I understand.” And I do. I remember EJ being gone all the time after the All-Star break.

“It’s settled then. We see where this thing goes between us.”

“I’d like that.”

“Me too. But one more thing, Madison.”

My heart rate spikes. What’s he going to say? My mind races. Does he know that his coach is my father and he’s going to call me on it?

“I don’t share, sweets. If we’re together”—he gestures between us—“this, us, whatever it is, however slow we go, we’re exclusive.”

“I don’t share either.”

“Good.” He glances at my lips. “I’m going to kiss you now.”

“Yes please,” I whisper as his lips crash into mine.

I groan when he sinks his tongue into my mouth. Hunter tears his mouth from mine all too soon and I whine, missing the feel of his lips.

I’m addicted to him and it’s only our second kiss.

“Me too, sweets. Me too,” he mumbles, smiling at me. His lips are swollen from our kisses, and it makes him even hotter and more delicious-looking.

“Why do you call me that?”

He studies me for a beat. “You taste and smell sweet. Like the cakes and pastries you’re around all day, so it seemed fitting. Plus, you’re sweet so ...” He gives me a boyish grin, blushing a little, like he’s proud but also slightly embarrassed by his observation.

“I like it.” And I do. It’s sweet, no pun intended. It’s not one of the typical nicknames I’ve been called by past boyfriends, like babe or hun.

It’s special. Like him.



The next night I pull into the garage at the arena over an hour early for the Storm’s game against the Calgary Heat. As I’m grabbing my purse from the back seat, I realize I don’t even know Hunter’s number.

I’m a bad girlfriend. I rear back at that thought.

Are we boyfriend and girlfriend?

We didn't put a name on our relationship, except to agree that we're exclusive, but I guess that means we are boyfriend and girlfriend. I like the thought of that. I haven't been someone's girlfriend in a long time, and it feels nice. I quickly send Hunter a text.

Me: I realized that I have no idea what number you are.

Hunter: All good sweets. I'm sixty-eight.

Me: Can't wait to watch you play tonight.

Hunter: You're still coming over after?

Me: Yep. I packed a bag. I don't have to work tomorrow either.

Hunter sends back a thumbs up and a heart emoji. I lock my phone to prevent me from obsessing about his response and head to the arena and the pro shop to find a Storm shirt.

Once I'm done shopping, I pick up my ticket from will call. I wander around the lower level, checking out the other stores and the food options to kill time.

The taco place Hunter took me to, Locos Tacos, has a location in the arena. I make a mental note to come and get some tacos during one of the intermissions.

Deciding it's time to find my seat so I can watch warm-ups, I make my way to my section.

Walking down the flight of stairs I discover I'm only a couple of rows behind the glass to the side of the Heat's net. I

have the perfect view of the Storm's bench and the side of the ice they'll be attacking twice. Can't really get any better than this unless you're sitting on the bench with the team. I take my seat and pull out my phone to snap a quick selfie to send to my aunt and Rachel.

Soon both teams make their way out onto the ice, and I put my phone away and look for Hunter.

He raises his hand in greeting when he sees me. I watch the guys warm up, excited to see my first hockey game in a long time. As people continue to stream into the arena, the energy increases.

I took a few minutes earlier today to look up the Heat to see how they're playing, and they're doing well this season. Which means the game is probably going to be fast-paced and close. The Heat are also a physical team, judging by some clips I saw, which should make for an interesting game.

Finally, the puck is dropped at center ice and play starts. We gain possession of the puck quickly. As I predicted, it's a fast-paced period. Their goalie is great and manages to knock aside all the shots that come his way.

With under a minute to go in the first period there's still no score. Hunter's line takes the ice again. They go on the attack, and Brody manages to score the first goal as the buzzer sounds, signaling the end of period. I clap and cheer with the rest of the crowd as both teams make their way off the ice for intermission.

Fifteen minutes later, I've procured tacos and a beer and am back in my seat as the second period starts.

The first ten minutes are uneventful with both teams battling for the puck but no goals. Once again, Hunter's line is on the ice.

I can't take my eyes off him. He's mesmerizing. The way he skates and handles the puck is like nothing I've ever seen. You'd never know this is his first season in the NHL. He fits right in with the team.

He takes a backhand pass from number fifty and with some skilled stick work, shoots a goal. I'm on my feet yelling in excitement with the rest of the fans. He spots me in the crowd and winks at me. I cheer and wave.

They complete a change and the puck's dropped at center ice.

The period continues and the Heat score a goal. Hunter's line comes back out. There's some pushing and shoving after the whistle is blown for an offsides call. The game resumes with no penalties. Suddenly, a Heat player checks Hunter into the boards.

Hard.

I grimace. Play moves back down the opposite side of the ice, toward the Storm's goal, but I can't take my eyes off Hunter who slowly gets to his feet.

Something's wrong.

I can see it in the way he skates over to the bench. A lump forms in my throat and my palms start to sweat. *Shit.* He shakes his head at the trainer who comes over to him.

I let out a breath, hoping that whatever hurts will start feeling better soon. The lines change and the game continues. But Hunter doesn't go back on the ice.

Finally, the buzzer sounds indicating the end of the second period.

I'm a ball of nerves the entire fifteen minutes of intermission, pacing around wishing I could talk to Hunter and make sure he's okay. I contemplate texting him, but I doubt he'll see the message.

They take hits like that all the time, Madison.

He'll be fine.

He walked off with the rest of the team.

Didn't immediately go down the tunnel to the locker room after it happened.

Intermission feels three hours long. Finally, both teams come back out onto the ice. I scan the Storm bench looking for Hunter, but he isn't there. Now I'm really worried.

You distracted him and now he's injured.

Why did I listen to the advice my father gave me?

My father.

That thought has me glancing over to where he's standing behind the bench. Our eyes lock and he gives me a look I can't

quite place. He has to have seen Hunter saying hi to me before the game, right? He has to know.

Great.

I'll never forgive myself if me being here caused Hunter to get hurt and jeopardized his position with the team. I hardly watch the rest of the game. I'm too focused on the Storm's bench and hallway, hoping Hunter will come out of the locker room at some point.

But he doesn't.

I barely register that the game is over. That the Storm won.

It's not until the people sitting in front of me file out of their seats that I realize it's time to go. I grab my phone to see if Hunter texted me, holding my breath when I see his message.

Hunter: Meet you at my apartment?

I want to walk away. Run away. I'm terrified that I was the cause of Hunter's injury. That my being in the arena meant he wasn't one-hundred-percent focused on the game. I take a breath, trying to calm my nerves, and respond.

Me: Heading that way now.

I'm equal parts nervous and excited. I can't wait to put my arms around him and make sure he's really okay, but I'm nervous that he'll blame me for his injury.

That he'll say I'm a distraction and he's changed his mind about us.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Hunter

I set my phone down and slump back against the couch. Madison is on her way.

There was a moment after I got hurt where I thought she would run. She seems to spook easily. I'm not sure why.

I thought she'd change her mind about dating a hockey player, about dating me, after watching me get hurt, but her text said she was on her way.

My stomach has been in knots since the trainer looked at my shoulder and told me I was out for the rest of the game. My palms start to sweat at the mere reminder of the conversation about how he'd reassess me after tomorrow's game.

Which I won't be playing in.

I rub my chest, trying to relieve the tightness that's settled there. A knock at the door interrupts my thoughts, and I hop up to answer it.

Madison's eyes widen when I open the door, and she steps inside.

“What?” I ask, rubbing my sweaty palms on my sweatpants.

“For fuck’s sake, Hunter. Even exhausted after a hockey game, where you played hard and got injured, you are hot as hell standing there shirtless in your gray sweatpants and bare feet.”

I shove a hand through my hair and wince at the pain in my shoulder.

“Are you alright?” she asks, concern evident on her face as she steps closer to me.

“I am, now that you’re here.” I pull her against my chest and wrap my arms around her.

Burying my face in her hair, I take what feels like my first deep breath in hours. Inhaling her sweet scent. Even after sitting in a crowded arena surrounded by booze, sweat, and stadium food, she still smells like cakes and baked goods.

Happiness.

She relaxes into me. I like knowing I have the same effect on her. We stand that way for a few minutes before she carefully extracts herself from my arms.

“I was really worried about you, hot shot,” she whispers, taking my hand and leading me into my living room. “But you scored another goal! Fuck yeah.” She pumps her fist in the air, and I can’t help but laugh.

“Thank you.” I take a seat on the sofa and pull her down next to me. “I’m fine. I’ll probably be out for a couple of games but nothing serious.”

“I was afraid you’d blame me for you getting hurt.” Her voice is shaky and I swear I see tears in her eyes.

What the fuck? Blame her? Why the hell would I do that?

“Sweets.” I reach over to wrap my arm around her, trying to hide the grimace when I move my left shoulder.

“See that. Right there.” She rears back and gestures to my face.

“If we’re going to be together, you’re going to have to get used to me getting hurt. Coming home with bruises, cuts, and who knows what else. It’s going to happen, probably every season, at least once or twice. More if we make it to the finals.”

“I know.” She blows out a breath.

I tilt my head, furrowing my eyebrows. “Why would you think I’d blame you for my injury?”

“Because I was there. You were distracted. I don’t know. It’s complicated.”

“Can you try to explain it to me? Please. I want to know what’s going on in your head.”

She drops her head to her hands and stays silent for so long that I think she’s fallen asleep.

Finally, she looks up at me and says, “Promise you won’t laugh or judge me.”

“Never, Madison.” I study her face, trying to figure out what she’s going to tell me, but she’s so hard to read tonight. Like

she's holding a part of herself back from me. I hate it.

“I told you part of the story about what happened between my best friend and me, but not all of it.” She pauses and I nod.

She takes a deep breath. “We grew up together. He's the reason I moved to Nashville after I finished school. It's where he was. I wanted to be close to my best friend. We spent the next five years being friends. I guess I thought it was never the right time for us to be together. He worked a lot.

“There were months where we didn't see each other much, but we always texted. When we did spend time together, it was perfect, or it felt like it was. We both dated people but the guys I dated were never good enough for me, he made that abundantly clear. I thought that was his way of saying he was the only one good enough. Finally, earlier this year I confronted him about it. Told him how I felt. And he ...”

She trails off, and as much as I want to punch this EJ jerk in the face for the way he treated her, I need to know the rest of the story.

I shift closer to her and reach for her hand, entwining our fingers. She stares down at our joined hands for a couple of seconds before continuing.

“He told me I had misread the signs. We got into a big fight about it. He stormed out of his apartment. That wouldn't have been that bad in the long run. I guess.

“But the next day he got hurt on the job. Blamed me. Told me I'd distracted him with everything I'd said the night before.

Said it was probably best we didn't talk for a while because he needed to focus on himself, on his career." Her voice trails off.

"Madison, I—" She interrupts me with a small shake of head.

"I was devastated. After the dust settled, I realized it was for the best. He was right, we are better off as friends. He's a partier, always had been, even with a grueling job. He needs to be around people to thrive. I'd rather be at home." She shrugs.

"His career will always come first to him. I get it. He's living his dream. Not long after, the cake shop I'd worked at closed. I didn't know what to do next so I made the decision to move here, start over, and be closer to my aunt. I sold most of my belongings. Packed up. Came here."

Fuck, that breaks my heart. Bastard.

I pull her into my arms, her back to my front. Wrapping my arms around her, I lean against the armrest of the sofa, Madison between my legs. I close my eyes, even though she can't see me, and take a deep breath.

"I have a half brother."

"You do?" she whispers, her fingers tracing the muscles on my forearm.

"Yeah. He's older. We haven't seen each other since we were kids. That is until he contacted me recently. We've talked a few times since. Maybe one day we'll have one."

I take a deep breath, letting the warmth of her skin sink into me before I speak again. "His dad and my mom worked

together and apparently on one of their work trips conceived me. She never wanted to have kids. Something I got to hear a lot growing up.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say to a child.”

“We stayed in Colorado until I was ten. She and my father had an agreement in the beginning. I spent summers with him and his family so Mom could focus on her career. God only knows why his wife—Beth—was okay with it. Funny thing is, Beth was always super nice to me whereas my father barely tolerated me. She tried to include me in things. I think she felt bad that I was stuck in that situation.”

I take a deep breath. I don’t know why I’m telling her this, but it feels good to get it off my chest. I feel like I can tell her anything.

“I play hockey because my brother did. I wanted to be like him. I guess I thought if I did what he did, I’d get a little more affection from my father. Turns out that wasn’t the case. I was the second son he never wanted.”

“Your brother plays hockey too?”

“Yeah, he got drafted out of high school. Spent a couple of years in the AHL. He’s been playing in the NHL since he was twenty.”

After Elias and I talked I looked him up. He knew all about my hockey career so I wanted to know about his.

“Hockey must be in your genes.”

“I guess. Except he’s better, he’s been playing longer.”

“I don’t think that’s true, you just took different paths. Do you want to have a relationship with your brother?”

“I don’t know,” I answer. It’s something I’ve been thinking about since we talked in Nashville. “I always thought he hated me. Didn’t want me around. Once we moved back to Minnesota, I never heard from either of them.”

“Oh?”

“He started texting me recently. I actually saw him when we were on the road last week. We played against his team, and he came into the locker room after the game to talk.”

“It’s a big decision that you’re not going to know the answer to right away. He reached out so that must mean something.” She yawns.

“Yeah, I know. I keep hoping I’ll wake up one day with the answer about what to do.” I sigh, running a hand through my hair and down my face.

She nods and yawns again.

I stifle a yawn too. The day is suddenly catching up with me. “How about we head to bed? It’s getting pretty late.”

She falls asleep quickly, her head on my chest. I, on the other hand, lie awake for a long time thinking about all the memories that I stirred up talking about my childhood.

I think about calling Elias and taking him up on his offer to get to know each other again as adults. What it would be like to have a brother to talk to, especially a brother who also plays professional hockey.

But then I think about how long it took him to reach out, and I'm torn about what to do.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Madison

“Morning. You got a minute?” Rachel steps into the kitchen carrying two cups of iced coffee.

I turn away from the cake I’m working on, wiping my hands on my apron before taking the cup from her. “Thanks. What’s up?”

“How about we sit?” She points to her office. Alarm bells start ringing in my head as I follow her.

She sits down at her desk and takes a sip of her coffee before saying, “What happened to you starting your own business? When we were in school that was your dream. When you moved here that was still your dream. You and I both knew this was temporary.”

She waves her hand around. “A place to get your bearings. Test out some recipes. See if there was even a demand for cakes. Which there clearly is. Didn’t you even meet with a lawyer a few months back? What happened to that?”

I sigh. I should have known she'd cut right to the chase. Rachel and I have been friends for years, and if there's one thing I know about her it's that she doesn't beat around the bush.

"I did. Maybe eventually I'll do it. I'm just not ready yet."

She raises an eyebrow. "What's holding you back?"

Why is she trying to get rid of me?

"Why are you pushing this? I'd have thought you'd want me to stay. You profit off this too."

When I started making custom cakes, Rachel and I came to an agreement that I would take a cut of the profits from each cake on top of my regular wage. She felt it was only fair because I was helping her business by offering a service she couldn't otherwise offer. That it went above and beyond what she'd hired me to do. I was grateful for the extra income so I agreed.

"Because"—she folds her hands on the desk—"you're my friend first and foremost. I want to see you succeed. I think you're selling yourself short, not going out on your own. Yes, I enjoy the bump in revenue we get from your customers, but I'd rather refer them to my friend's business."

"That's ridiculous, Rachel. You can't run a business like that. You'd be losing money."

She laughs, sitting back in her chair. "I can run my business however I choose. Plus, you were doing me a favor working for me all these months so I didn't have to scramble to hire

someone and train them when Alexa left. We'll do fine without the revenue from your cakes. I'm in talks with a couple of local restaurants to carry our pastries."

"I-I don't know." I take a sip of my coffee to try to gather my thoughts.

Starting my own business is scary. I appreciate that Rachel wants to see me follow my dreams, but I enjoy working here and the stability of the paycheck. Going out on my own means I'd give that up. Again.

My track record for decision-making isn't the greatest. What if I can't handle a business?

"I have faith in you, Madison. I think you should think about doing it. I love having you here. I truly do. But you could be doing so much more. Finally fulfilling that dream you had in school. Maybe even keep better hours so you're not so tired when you spend time with your boyfriend." She winks at me.

I sigh. "I'll think about it."

"That's all I ask. That you think about it. Really think about it. I'm here if you want to talk through things."

"Okay."

The conversation shifts to the most recent cake orders that have come in, but I can't stop thinking about what Rachel said.

A few hours later, I'm cleaning up the kitchen when Brandon pokes his head through the door. "Your boyfriend is here."

“Thanks. I’ll be right out.” I untie my apron, trying to remember if Hunter and I made plans for today. I rack my brain but can’t remember any.

Grabbing my purse, I head out to the front to find him casually leaning against the display counter, his arms crossed, deep in conversation with Brandon.

Like he can sense me, he looks up and directs a grin my way. Tapping on the counter, he pushes off the display.

“Hey, hot shot.”

“Hi, sweets,” he says, giving me one of his dazzling smiles. “These are for you.” That’s when I see that he’s holding a bouquet of tulips. He remembered?

“I remember everything you tell me,” Hunter says.

“Shit, I said that out loud. Didn’t I?”

“Yeah, you did.” The side of Hunter’s mouth quirks upward.

“Thank you.” I take the flowers and raise them to my nose to inhale their fragrant scent.

I step closer to him and go up on tiptoes to kiss him. I only mean it to be a quick, chaste kiss, but Hunter snakes his arm around me and holds me close as his tongue seeks entrance into my mouth.

We get lost in each other until a throat clearing behind us has him pulling back. He gives me a wink before dropping his arm and stepping away. My face heats up at letting things go too far.

Clearing my throat, I ask, “What are you doing here? Did we have plans?”

“I came to see if you wanted to have lunch with me.” He glances at his watch. “Well, late lunch that is. Unless you ate already.”

“Lunch sounds good. Where were you thinking?”

“Tacos?” Hunter suggests, and I chuckle. A man after my own heart.

“Sounds good.”

“Want to follow me in your car? Or drive with me, and I’ll bring you back later for your car?”

“I’ll drive with you.”

We say goodbye to Brandon and head out the door.

Thirty minutes later, we’re sitting in Hunter’s kitchen eating tacos.

“How was your day?” Hunter asks between bites. “Anything exciting happen?”

I hesitate. Do I tell him about the conversation Rachel and I had, or do I keep that to myself?

I opt to tell him about the two cakes that I made this morning and the run on cranberry scones we had with the breakfast crowd.

“Cranberry scones?” Hunter chuckles with a shake of his head. “Seems random.”

“I know, but everyone who came in for like an hour wanted one. No idea why. I had to make two extra trays. That never happens.”

We eat in silence for a couple of minutes before Hunter says, “Do you ever think about starting your own cake shop, cake decorating place? You know what I mean.”

“A custom cake shop?”

“Yeah, that. Do you ever think about starting your own business? I’ve seen what you can do. Your cakes are amazing.” He tilts his head, studying me.

I put the last bit of my taco in my mouth, chewing and swallowing before answering.

“That’s what I was doing the day we met, actually. I had just come from a meeting with a lawyer when my car wouldn’t start. It never went anywhere, though. Rachel asked me the same thing today.”

“And?”

“I told her I’d think about it.”

“What are you afraid of, sweets?”

What am I afraid of? That’s a good question. I don’t know if I’m afraid of the uncertainty or the risk or something else.

“It’s a big risk to start a business. Do you know how many small businesses fail in their first couple of years?” I ask.

“A lot, I’m sure. But your cakes are amazing. I have no doubt you’d do well.”

“Yeah, but ...”

“What are you *really* afraid of?” He asks again.

“I don’t know if I trust my instincts anymore,” I mumble, breaking eye contact and staring down at the table, absentmindedly playing with my napkin.

“What do you mean?”

“My instincts were wrong with EJ.” Hunter starts to open his mouth, but I hold up my hand and continue.

“I thought he wanted to date me, had wanted to for a while, but for whatever reason, had never said anything. You know how that turned out. Six months before that the shop I worked at closed down. I took a job with a new place that was just starting. They planned to franchise and have locations all over the United States. I helped them get the business started, developed recipes. I work ten-to-twelve-hour days for a couple of months. Before they could pay me, they lost their funding, declared bankruptcy, and closed up.”

“What the hell?”

“Tell me about it. I thought it was going to be a lucrative deal. I was going to get my own franchise for free. My instincts were way off with that one too.”

I spent a lot of my savings keeping myself afloat during the time I went without a paycheck.

That’s why I’m thankful now for the cheap rent, the paycheck from Rachel, and the extra money from the cakes.

“I’m sorry you had to go through all of that, sweets. I think it’s a great business venture. Caleb was telling us that Jenna’s sister, Savannah, has a wedding planning business. She’s looking for another cake shop to partner with since the one she used to refer clients to closed.”

“I don’t make wedding cakes.”

“Don’t they also need cakes for bridal showers and other events? You could hire someone to make the wedding cakes.”

He’s got a good point. *Shit, why didn’t I think about that.* “I’ll think about it.”

Hunter nods and we eat in silence for a few minutes.

“What are you doing for Thanksgiving?” I ball up my empty taco wrappers.

“Caleb invited anyone who doesn’t have any place to go to his house. I was thinking I’d do that. We only have Thursday and Friday off, so I’m not going home.”

“You could come to Aunt Judy’s with me. If you want.” The words come tumbling out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Do I want to spend Thanksgiving with Hunter? Of course I do.

Am I nervous about asking him? Yes. It feels like a big step asking my boyfriend over for a holiday. I don’t know why since he’s already met my family.

“Thank you, sweets. I’d like that. What can I bring?”

“Nothing. Judy and I have it covered.”

“Will your dad be there?”

“No. It’ll be you, me, Judy, and her boyfriend, Curtis.”

Judy asked me if I wanted to invite Jake, but I’m not ready for that. We’re still figuring out our relationship and although that’s going well, I’m not ready for him to be at a family event. Even if half of the guests aren’t family.

“Okay. Tell me when and I’ll be there.”

“Lunch is at one. Come over anytime in the morning.”

“Perfect,” Hunter says as he stands and starts picking up the trash from our lunch.

I get to my feet to help him. I’ve never been one for Thanksgiving, but maybe this year will be different since I’ll be with my family.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Madison

“Hey, you,” I greet Hunter when he knocks on my door Thanksgiving morning. We haven’t seen each other in over a week because the team was traveling.

“Hi, sweets,” he says with a smile that could melt the panties off even the coldest of women.

“Come in.”

“I come bearing gifts.” He hands me a cup of iced coffee before setting his overnight bag on the floor.

“So sweet of you.” I take a sip and follow him into the kitchen where he sets down the grocery bag that was in his hand.

“Wine. And flowers. For your aunt.” He gestures to the items he set on the counter.

“You didn’t have to do that. And coffee for me? How can I thank you for your thoughtfulness?”

“A kiss would be nice.”

“Oh, really.”

“Yes.” He turns to face me and takes the cup from my hands. I laugh as he sets it down on the counter. “Come here. I missed you, sweets.”

I step into his arms and wrap mine around his neck. “Only one kiss, hot shot?”

His eyes darken and his answer comes out in a growl. “I’ll take however many you want to give.”

Before I can answer, his mouth is on mine. I sigh into the kiss as his arms tighten around me. His tongue licks at the seam of my lips, seeking entrance. I run my nails against his scalp, and he groans, nipping my bottom lip and kissing along my jawline, his hands roaming under my shirt.

“How long until your aunt is expecting us?” He pulls his mouth from my skin momentarily before dropping back down to pepper kisses along my neck.

“Mmmmm.” How am I supposed to form coherent thoughts right now?

Hunter kisses me right below my ear eliciting a shiver from me. “How long?” he repeats.

I blink, trying to figure out what he’s asking, my head still in a daze. “An hour or so. You got here early.”

He must like that answer because he kisses me deeply again, and we get lost in each other. His hands roam up my back under my shirt. Eventually, he grips my hips and lifts me up.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

His answer is to grind into me so I can feel how hard he is, which turns me on even more. I wrap my legs around him like a koala clinging to a eucalyptus tree and hold on as he walks us to my bedroom. Hunter kicks the door shut behind him and lays me down on the bed. He bends down to remove his socks and sneakers before climbing up to meet me.

“Hi,” he says as he leans over me, his eyes hooded with desire.

“Hi.” I smile up at him.

“I wanted a better look at you.”

“Oh yeah. What did you want a better look at?” I whisper.

“You. All of you.” Hunter shifts so he’s balanced on one arm above me and uses his other hand to stroke my face.

I turn into his touch. He leans down, and when he’s a hair’s breadth away from me, I reach up and circle my arms around his neck, pulling him down on top of me. Okay, so more like I tug and Hunter lets me pull him down, because this man is all muscle, and I couldn’t move him if he didn’t want to be moved.

His warmth encompasses me, and I moan against his lips. If my panties weren’t ruined before, they sure are when I feel his hard length against my leg.

I groan and shift, trying to get some friction where I need it.

Hunter tears his lips away from mine. “What do you need, sweets?”

“You. I need you.”

He rolls, taking me with him, and I start to protest, but he stops me with a kiss. “I felt like I was crushing you.”

He snakes his hand up under the edge of my shirt and toward my breasts. My nipples harden, waiting for his hand, for his mouth, for whatever he’ll give them. He stops at the edge of my bra, slipping one finger under the edge of the cup to dance along the skin under my breast, and I about lose my mind.

“Stop. Fucking. Around. And. Touch. Me. Already,” I grit out, grinding against him, seeking friction to quell the buildup between my legs.

He chuckles. *The man fucking laughs.* “I will. I’m taking my time. I want to savor this moment with you. I’ve been fantasizing about this since we started dating. I’m not rushing it.”

I’m done waiting. I’m so keyed up, I can’t wait any longer. My underwear is soaked and my breasts are aching. If he’s going to play his game, I’m going to play my own. Shoving his hand away, I sit up, stripping off my shirt and bra and chucking them over the side of the bed. He inhales a shaky breath and I smile in triumph, but before I can take the rest of my clothes off, he pounces, and I’m flat on my back with him hovering over me.

Again.

This must be what playing hockey does for him.

“Fuck, your tits are perfect,” he growls.

I push them together and shift so my chest is closer to his face. Hoping to entice him to suck one of them into his mouth or touch me.

I’m so wound up that if he doesn’t do something soon, I’m going to take care of it myself.

He stares at me for a beat before rolling off me and sitting on the edge of the bed, his back to me.

“Hunter?” My voice is shaky. *Shit. What happened?*

“I need a second. Okay, sweets?” He takes a deep breath, and I steel myself for what he’s going to say.

That he made a mistake. That we’re better off as friends. That once again my instincts were wrong. I wrap my arms around myself and start to sit up.

He turns back to me and gestures to where I’m sitting. “None of that.”

“What?”

“I’m sorry. I needed a moment so I didn’t do something crazy like tear my clothes off and have my way with you. You’re beautiful. You take my breath away. I don’t want to rush things.”

I drop my arms as he stares at me, and my body heats up at the way his eyes rake over me.

“Hunter, I want you. I need you. If you won’t help me, I’ll take care of myself, and you can watch or leave.” I stare at him, my chest heaving, hoping he chooses to come back over here and continue what we started.

“Fuck,” he growls. “I’m not leaving. While I’d love to watch you get yourself off, I’d much prefer to be the one to do it.”

“Please,” I beg, running a hand over my chest, hoping to encourage him to touch me as I lie back down on the bed.

“You’re perfect,” he mumbles before crawling over to me.

He stares down at me and cups one of my breasts. I let out a moan, which seems to spur him on because he dips his head and takes my other breast into his mouth.

I’ve never come from someone playing with my breasts, never thought it was possible, but the way he’s sucking, licking, and pulling at my nipples I might.

I wrap one hand in his hair, tugging gently at the strands, and he growls.

I trail my other hand down my stomach, making quick work of the button and zipper on my jeans. As I’m slipping a hand down the front of my underwear, he lets go of my nipple with a pop and grabs my wrist.

“Nope,” he says, popping the *p*.

“Please,” I’m begging but I don’t care. I’m so turned on right now. So close to coming.

Hunter smirks and sits back on his heels, then pulls his shirt off with one hand like the guys in the movies do.

Fuck me if he isn't perfectly muscled. I know this. I've seen him without his shirt on.

But something about seeing him like this, with the sunlight streaming in, a little bit of sweat dripping down his chest, is a whole other thing.

"Like what you see?" He winks, flexing his muscles.

"Like you have to ask." I reach up and pull him down, fusing our lips together. All too quickly he tears his lips away from mine and rolls onto his side, propping himself up on one hand.

"Take your pants off, Madison," he growls.

I shiver with anticipation and shimmy out of the rest of my clothes, ending up naked on the bed.

Normally, I'd feel vulnerable with my body on display like this. I have stretch marks, my stomach isn't flat, but the way he's looking at me, licking his lips like he wants to ravish me, like I'm the best thing he's ever seen, gives me a sense of pride. Makes me feel beautiful. Perfect. Wanted.

Something I haven't felt from a guy in a very long time.

"Fuck me." His voice is rough.

"Your turn." I point at his jeans where I can make out his dick straining against the zipper.

"We don't have time for that. Your aunt's expecting us soon. If I take my jeans off, we won't get out of this bed today. I'm

going to make you come on my fingers and then we're going to go eat Thanksgiving lunch. Mark my words, though, after that I plan to keep you in this bed naked all night long."

"What if we're too full?" I ask, reaching over and tracing a finger down his chest and along the top of his jeans.

He scrubs a hand over his face. "Tomorrow then."

Before I can say anything else, his hands are all over me. Tweaking my nipples and running down my stomach. He caresses my pubic bone, my thighs, everywhere except where I need him the most.

"Hunter," I grit out, trying to shift so his fingers touch me.

"Patience, sweets."

Fuck this. My patience is gone. I hold his gaze as I lower my hand down my body.

"Nope," he says, pushing my hand aside and finally swiping his finger across my clit.

I moan, my back arching off the bed. I'm wound so tightly I'm not going to last long but fuck if I care. Before I can think of anything else, he's circling my clit with his finger as he watches me.

Normally, I'd be squeezing my eyes closed from embarrassment. I know I shouldn't feel embarrassed about feeling good, but I always have. But not with Hunter. He makes me feel cherished. Taken care of. I watch him as he stares down at me.

“Mmmmm. Yes, right there,” I mumble as he circles my clit.

Without warning he slides one finger inside me. “So tight,” he bites out, his voice rough. “Can you take another?”

He doesn’t give me time to answer, simply pushes another finger inside me. He strokes in and out and my body feels like it’s on fire. My orgasm building.

“My cock is bigger than that. Think you can take a third, sweets?”

“I-I don’t know. It’s been a while since I’ve had anything besides my own hand,” I mumble.

“You can.” He slides another finger inside me.

My eyes rolling in the back of my head as he fucks me with his fingers.

“So beautiful. So full. Not as full as my cock will make you, but good enough for now. Stretching that pretty pussy out for my cock later.”

I move my hips against him, needing more friction. He shifts his hand so his thumb strums against my clit, and he uses his other hand to pinch my nipple.

“Come for me, sweets,” he growls and pinches my nipple again, and that’s all it takes for me to fall over the edge into a blissful orgasm.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Hunter

I look down at Madison lying naked on the bed, blissed out from the orgasm I gave her. She's beautiful.

My dick is straining so hard against my zipper I'm afraid I'll have marks, but I don't care. That was the hottest thing I've witnessed in probably forever.

I could spend the rest of my life watching her come. That realization hits me hard. But there's no time to unpack it right now because her aunt is expecting us any minute.

"Sweets." I lean down, kissing her forehead. "We need to get ready to go to your aunt's."

"Mmmm."

"Come on, sweets." I nudge her gently and she finally opens her eyes, blinking up at me.

"Hi," she whispers, a blush coloring her cheeks and moving down her chest. She wraps her arms around herself as she sits up.

Why is she embarrassed? I tilt my head, studying her, but she won't meet my gaze.

“None of that now.” I move closer, capturing her lips with mine. What starts off as a sweet, chaste kiss turns heated quickly.

Pulling back, I reach a hand up, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear. “No embarrassment. Not with me.”

“Okay,” she says, but I don't believe it, not based on the way she scurries off the bed, grabs her robe, and makes her way to the bathroom, shutting the door behind her.

But I let it go.

I won't push her.

Instead, I stand and snag my shirt from the ground. Madison comes out of the bathroom after a few minutes with her hair in some sort of fancy braid, her face still glowing from her orgasm.

I sit on the edge of the bed as she goes over to her closet.

“Are you wearing those jeans?” she asks, her back to me.

“Yeah. Is this not alright?” Shit, maybe this is a formal dinner. I didn't even think about asking. I hope not because I sure as hell didn't pack anything fancy.

She snags a dress from a hanger and pulls it over her head. “No, it's fine. I want us to be comfortable. Hence the stretchy dress.” She tugs at the material to show how much it stretches.

“Sweets. I think you’re forgetting something,” I all but growl.

Fuck me, is she not going to wear a bra or underwear?

She shrugs. “It’s got a built-in bra. I go without a bra in this dress all the time.”

Scrubbing a hand over my face, I groan. She chuckles. I snag her around the waist when she tries to walk by me. “Are you really wearing that dress because it’s comfortable, or is it for some other reason? Are you teasing me?”

“Maybe.” She leans over to kiss me. It starts out gentle and sweet but quickly turns to fire. I growl, pull her closer, and run my hands up under her dress, then give her ass a squeeze before swiping a finger through her wet center.

“You’re going to make us late.” I tear my lips away from her and remove my hands from under her dress.

“I’m sure Judy and Curtis won’t mind. Actually, they might be busy themselves.” Madison chuckles.

“Nope. Don’t put that thought in my mind. I have to look both of them in the eyes in a few minutes. I don’t need to picture them being ... busy.” I grimace.

Yes, they’re old, not dead, and I’m sure they both have sex lives, but I don’t want to think or know about it or have the image of it in my head all day.

“You’re sticking with jeans?” Madison asks again, stepping out of my hold.

“My only other option is my gray sweatpants. So yeah, sticking to the jeans.”

There’s no way in hell I am going to sit at lunch in gray sweatpants sporting half a hard-on, which I know without a doubt I’ll be dealing with all afternoon, thinking about Madison naked under her dress.

Naked and waiting for me.

She nods and puts out her hand. I stand and let her lead us out of her apartment and to her aunt’s kitchen door.



“Shit, I’m so full,” I mumble a few hours later as we make our way across the lawn to Madison’s apartment.

“Why did I eat that much?” she groans, rubbing her hand over her stomach as we stumble through the door.

“I’m sorry, sweets. I think I need to lie down for a little while and digest first. I’m dying,” I say.

“Me too. Me too.”

She leads the way to her bedroom. I practically throw myself on her bed, unbuttoning and unzipping my jeans as I do. I should have worn sweatpants because this is painful.

Removing my pants, I let out a sigh of relief. Madison giggles and crawls into bed next to me.

“A short nap and I’ll be good to go,” I mumble, my eyes already closed.

That's the last thing I remember until I feel Madison shaking my shoulder, whispering in my ear.

"Hunter. Hunter."

"Hmmm," I mumble, half-awake, sleep threatening to pull me back under.

"Hunter, we slept for four hours."

"And?" Opening one eye, I see Madison sitting up next to me, her dress ruffled from sleep.

"I didn't want you waking up at like three in the morning and not being able to fall back to sleep."

"Get back in here." I roll over and reach for her, determined to tug her back into my side.

"Okay, hot shot." She laughs and lets me pull her back into my arms. She tucks her head into my chest, and I wrap my arms around her.

"But really, what time is it?" I whisper after a few minutes.

"Like, seven."

"I had all these elaborate plans for tonight."

"Like what?"

"I wanted to see how many times I could make you come in one night."

"I mean, you still could. I wouldn't be opposed to that."

My response is to roll us so I'm lying on my back and she's lying on top of me.

“How about a shower first? I feel like Thanksgiving dinner is coming out of my pores,” I say.

“That’s because you ate like four plates,” she teases.

“It was good. Your aunt’s a good cook. What are you doing, sweets?” I all but come in my pants as her bare pussy grinds on my growing cock, just the thin layer of my boxers between us.

“What does it feel like I’m doing?” Her voice is breathy.

“If you keep doing that,” I say, gripping her hips to still her. “We’re really going to have a mess.”

“Come on, let’s go shower. I’m sure there’s plenty of leftovers at the house if you’re still hungry, hot shot.” Madison pats my stomach as she climbs off me.

My dick immediately begs for her pussy to come back but I ignore him. He’s waited this long; he can wait a little longer.

“Hey, I’m a hockey player. My metabolism is fast,” I joke as I follow her into the bathroom.

She shakes her head at me as she reaches into the shower and turns on the water. Before I can say anything else, she’s pulled the dress over her head and stepped under the spray.

I make quick work of my clothes and follow her into the shower. I stand back as she washes her hair. I watch the suds slide down her wet body, all the blood rushing to my dick. Scrubbing a hand over my face, I groan quietly.

“You okay?” Madison cocks an eyebrow at me.

“Maybe this was a bad idea.”

“Why’s that?” She steps out of the stream of water and gestures for me to take a turn.

“I don’t know if I can keep my hands off you.” I reach out and snag her, pulling her to me and letting her feel what being in the shower with her does to me. She kisses me back but ends the kiss too soon.

“None of that in here, hot shot. Shower sex is a recipe for disaster.” I huff out a laugh but make quick work of shampooing my hair. I keep my hands to myself, mostly, during the shower, but I do sneak a few squeezes of her tits when I help her wash her back. From the way she moans and grinds into me, I’d say she enjoys it as much as I do.

“Done?” I ask after we’re both sufficiently clean.

My restraint is hanging on by a thread. If she wants to stay in the shower longer, I’m going to have to get out before I do something like push her against the wall and give her an orgasm.

“Yep.” Madison steps out of the shower and grabs a towel.

I turn the water off, take the towel she hands me, and start drying myself. I try to ignore the way the water drips down her back and over the slope of her ass as she dries off.

Fuck this.

With a growl, I drop my towel on the floor and stalk toward her. Picking her up, I toss her over my shoulder. She lets out a

small yelp as I stalk back to her bedroom. Dropping her on the end of the bed, I step back, taking a deep breath.

“Are you sufficiently dry?” I nod to the towel that’s still clutched in her hands.

“I don’t know. I think I missed a few spots. Maybe you should check,” she rasps out as she leans back on her elbows, spreading her legs wide.

I run a hand down my still damp face and stare at the sight in front of me. Madison is gorgeous, but now, here in front of me spread out for my perusal, a slight blush coloring her face and neck, she’s a damn goddess. I stare at her for a few seconds, drinking her in. *How did I get so lucky?*

Her face flushing even more as she swipes a finger through her center and my cock gets even harder.

“Still wet here. Do you think you can help me with that?” She holds up her finger so I can see it glistening, damp from her arousal.

I bend down, sucking her finger into my mouth with a groan. She tastes as sweet as I thought she would.

She moans and the sound goes straight to my dick, making it even harder. I silently tell him to calm down. My girl comes first, at least once, always.

I push gently on her upper body so she lies down, then drop to my knees at the end of the bed. I pull her closer and lean down to lick her pussy.

She whines as I pay attention to her clit, sucking it into my mouth. I lick and suck her like a man starved, paying special attention to the spots that make her moan the most.

“Hunter. Please. I’m so close,” she whispers, her voice breathy.

“What do you need?” I ask, blowing on her clit.

Her answer is to reach down and push my head back between her legs. I chuckle against her, which elicits a shiver from her. I slip one finger and then a second into her hot, tight pussy as I feast on her clit. Her pussy squeezes my fingers and I know she’s close.

“Hunter. I’m going to come.”

I double down on my efforts. Lifting my eyes, I watch her come apart around my fingers and tongue, one hand gripping the sheets so hard her knuckles are white and the other tweaking and playing with one of her nipples. I continue to lick her until she’s spent.

Sitting back on my heels, I use the back of my hand to wipe my mouth, which is still damp from her come. I grab a condom from my bag and toss it onto the bed.

“That was hot,” Madison mumbles.

“Yes, it was.” I stare down at her lying naked on the bed, something I could easily get used to, stroking myself from root to tip a couple of times. Her pupils dilate as she watches me.

“Move up the bed.” I tip my chin toward the pillows, continuing to stroke myself as she moves up the bed.

“Are you coming over here, hot shot? Or are you going to stand there and jerk yourself off?” Madison teases.

I grab the condom and rip the packaging open with my teeth before rolling it down my hard length. I climb onto the bed and hover over her, my cock nudging at her entrance.

“Is this what you want?”

“Yes, Hunter. Please. I need you inside of me. Now.”

Her demand makes my dick harder. I slowly push myself into her, inch by inch. She sucks in a breath, and I pause, remembering her telling me earlier it had been a while.

“More. Give me all of you.”

I do as she asks, filling her to the hilt. She hisses out a breath. “Are you okay, sweets?”

“More than okay.” She flashes a smile at me. “I’ve never been this full, and it feels so good.” The last word comes out with a moan.

“You feel so good too.” I want to move but I also want to give her time to get used to me.

“I need you to move. Please. Hunter.”

Her wish is my command. I pull all the way out, before slamming back in. Her hands grip my shoulders.

It’s been a while for me, and I won’t last long, especially not with the way her pussy is gripping my dick. Glancing down to where our bodies are connected, I almost lose it.

“Look at how well we fit, sweets,” I rasp. I glance up to see her staring down at where my dick is buried in her pussy.

“That’s so hot, Hunter. I’m so close. But I need more.”

I piston my hips and circle her clit with my finger.

“Fuck, I’m coming,” Madison yells.

I hope that no one’s outside because I know they’d hear her. Her pussy clenches around my dick and pulls me closer to the edge of my orgasm. A few more thrusts and I’m spilling into the condom on a roar.

Guess the neighbors heard me too. With a groan, I collapse on top of her, our sweaty bodies sticking together.

On an inhale, I roll over, pulling her into my arms. That was by far the best sex of my life.

I spend the next thirty-six hours thoroughly worshiping her body, and when I leave on Saturday morning, I’m exhausted. But it was worth it.

We barely left the bed, except to eat and help Judy and Curtis decorate for Christmas on Friday afternoon.

This has been the best Thanksgiving break I’ve ever had, and it’s all thanks to Madison, who’s invited me into her life and her family.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Madison

“Do I really have to wear a blindfold?”

“Yes, sweets. It’s a surprise.” Hunter holds the blindfold in front of me. “I promise it won’t be for long.”

“Fine, but I’m picking the music.” I allow him to lean over the seat and tie the blindfold over my eyes.

When Hunter told me that he had a day date planned for us, I didn’t think it would be this much of a surprise, but here I am on a Friday morning sitting blindfolded in his truck as he drives us who knows where.

I know we’re not going far because he’s got a game tomorrow afternoon but also there are quite a few places that aren’t that far of a drive. So I have no idea where we’re going.

“Whatever you want, sweets. Hand me your phone and tell me which playlist.”

Once the music, my favorite playlist of Morgan Wallen songs, is on, I settle into the seat as Hunter puts his truck into gear and starts driving.

“I hope I’m dressed okay since you wouldn’t tell me where we’re going.”

He laughs. “As long as you wore comfortable clothes and shoes, you’re good.”

“I did.” I grabbed my favorite pair of jeans since it’s actually cool and breezy today, normal early December weather in Orlando apparently, a pair of sneakers, and a Storm shirt, of which I have an abundance.

I swear my whole closet is going to be Storm shirts, and I’m kind of okay with that. And from the way his face lights up every time he sees me wearing his team’s shirts, I know Hunter’s okay with it too.

“Good. Sit back and relax. We’ll be there soon.”

I hum in response and close my eyes. I must drift off because the next thing I know Hunter is gently shaking my shoulder.

“We’re here, sweets. Are you ready for your surprise?”

“Can I take off the blindfold?” I ask, my fingers reaching for the edge of the bandana that’s covering my eyes.

“Yeah.”

I take it off and blink a few times, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the light. All I can see is a parking lot. A big one.

“Here,” Hunter says. He’s grinning and holding my sunglasses out to me. “Turn around.”

“Oh!” I gasp. “We’re at Disney World?”

“We’re starting at the Magic Kingdom, but I figured we’d end the night at EPCOT. I’ve been told their fireworks show is the best. The Christmas decorations are up already and you told me you always wanted to see them.”

“I told you that months ago.” My eyes fill with unshed tears. *This man.*

“I told you I remember everything you tell me. Now come on, let’s go.” He grabs a hat from the truck door and pulls it on before opening the door and getting out.

I grab my purse and make my way around the back of the truck.

“Are you excited?” he asks as we stroll to the entrance.

“Excited? You have no idea.” I grin.

“Good.” He takes my hand, and we make our way through the gates.

“Wow!” I mumble, staring down Main Street.

Everywhere I look there are Christmas decorations. Wreaths and garlands are strung around each of the streetlamps and across the street. The shops have garlands and lights decorating the outsides. All the window displays are decorated for Christmas too. Disney sure does go all out.

I can’t wait to see the park at night when it’s all lit up. The air smells like fried dough and magic.

Okay yes, I know that sounds ridiculous but I don’t know any other way to describe it.

“What ride do you want to go on first?” He studies the map in his hand.

“Well ...” I fidget with the strap of my purse.

“What’s wrong?” Hunter lowers the map. He takes my hand and leads me out of the middle of the walkway to one of the shop walls.

I watch all the people coming and going down Main Street for a few seconds.

“I’m not a fan of heights and I definitely don’t do roller coasters,” I admit, finally making eye contact with him.

I expect to see humor or frustration, the usual responses when I tell someone I don’t like heights, but instead he wraps his arm around me, pulling me to him.

“Good, because I hate roller coasters.” He chuckles. “I was afraid you were going to tell me you wanted to ride Big Thunder Mountain or Space Mountain first.”

“Yeah, that’s a nope from me. I can do some heights, but only if the ride is tame.”

“There’s still plenty to do. Come on, let’s go get our picture taken in front of the castle,” he says taking my hand.

We make our way down Main Street. My eyes dart around trying to take everything in.

“Are we going to take a selfie?” I ask, trying to figure out how we’re going to get any kind of good picture with all the hustle and bustle.

“Nah. Caleb told me to look for a ... What did he call it?” He fiddles with the bill of his cap, glancing around. “Over there.” He points to a young woman dressed in a Disney uniform and holding a camera.

“Hi,” he greets her.

“Hello. Welcome to Magic Kingdom. Would you like your picture taken?” She smiles at us.

“Yes, please.”

She leads us over to a spot in front of the castle. After getting into position she takes a few photos.

“Do you have a PhotoPass card already?” she asks.

Hunter shakes his head, and she pulls one out of her pocket. She scans the barcode on it and passes it to him.

“At any other PhotoPass spots during your visit give the photographer this, and they’ll scan it to add the pictures. At the end of your trip, you can either go to the website and order the pictures you want or visit the Emporium at the entrance,” she says.

“Thank you,” I say. Today’s already shaping up to be a great day.

We wander past the castle and turn right toward a section of the park called Tomorrowland, which is very spacey and futuristic-looking. Or I suppose what the designers thought the architecture of the future would be like. All the buildings are metallic, there are neon signs everywhere.

We pass Space Mountain and Buzz Lightyear's ride, which looks like fun. We come to a stop in front of a ride called the People Mover.

"What do you think about trying this one?" Hunter nods to the entrance of the ride. "The sign says it's slow moving, but it's up high."

I gaze up at the ride in front of us. It's a slow-moving open-air trolley that winds its way above Tomorrowland, even going through some of the other rides. Probably pretty tame. I think I can handle it.

"Sounds good to me."

Hunter takes my hand and leads me up the escalator. Thankfully, there isn't much of a line, apparently no one opts for the slow rides in the morning, and soon we're getting into a car.

A few hours later, we're wandering around Adventureland, where everything looks like a tropical jungle. I don't feel like I'm in Florida anymore with the way the buildings and rides are designed, plus there's a lot of lush tropical vegetation.

I spot a sign for the Enchanted Tiki Room that boasts of a show filled with singing birds, and I make a mental note to check out the show times on our way back.

Right now I'm on a mission to find something magical called Pineapple Dole Whip. Earlier, while we were waiting in line for a ride, I researched must-try foods at Magic Kingdom and stumbled upon it. Everyone was raving about the ice-

cream-type dessert made out of pineapple, so I knew we needed to try it.

We stand in a long line at Aloha Isle Refreshments. Apparently it's a very popular treat.

Eventually it's our turn and we put in our order. We both opt for cones. With our treats in hand, we make our way to a bench in the shade.

Hunter takes off his hat, setting it next to him, pushes his sunglasses to the top of his head, and turns to me. "Having fun?"

"I'm having so much fun," I gush. "I can't believe you brought me here. This was the best surprise ever."

I take a bite of my Dole Whip and can't help but moan at the sweet and creamy pineapple taste. Yep, everyone was right—definitely a treat you need to try if you're at Magic Kingdom.

Hunter's eyes darken and he leans closer so he can whisper. "Don't do that, sweets. We're out in public."

I huff out a laugh. "Try it and you'll see."

He takes a bite and gasps. "Now I get it. This is delicious. We might need to make a second stop on our way out."

"I thought you didn't eat sweets during the season?" I tease.

He shrugs. "It's got fruit in it. It's not dessert."

I chuckle and continue to eat. I make a mental note to play around with recipes to see if I can recreate it for him. I've made ice cream before so this is probably similar, except with

pineapples and, if I had to guess, coconut milk instead of regular milk. Can't be that hard.

As we're getting ready to throw our garbage away, I notice a little boy, about eight, sitting catty-corner from us on a bench. His eyebrows rise as he stares at Hunter.

I lean over to Hunter. "I think you have an admirer." I incline my head toward the little boy.

"Seriously?" He glances over at the boy, who drops his gaze.

"I mean, maybe it was a coincidence."

"Come on." He stands and holds out his hand for me. "Can you hold this? I'll take the garbage."

He hands me his hat and that's when I realize he wants to be noticed by the kid.

As we stop at a trash can, I hear from behind us, "Hey, are you Rhodes?"

Hunter spins around, pulling me with him, and we come face to face with the little kid from the bench. "I am."

"Grady. What are you doing?" A man my age, who I assume is the boy's father, comes walking up behind us. "You can't go wandering off in the park. There are a lot of people. You could get lost."

"Dad. It's Rhodes from the Storm," the little boy says, bouncing on his feet, pointing at Hunter.

"Grady, I don't think ..." The man trails off as he looks at Hunter. "Crap, son. You're right."

Hunter laughs and puts out his hand to the guy before bending down to shake the little boy, Grady's, hand.

I step back, letting Hunter talk to his fans.

A woman, the boy's mother I assume, produces a Sharpie from her bag and hands it to Hunter, who signs the little boy's Orlando Storm shirt and the father's hat. They pose for a picture before Hunter crouches down to chat with the little boy. After waving goodbye to them, he heads over to where I'm sitting.

"Holy shit, Madison. That's the first time I've ever been noticed. It was kind of surreal." He runs a hand through his hair, a huge smile on his face as he sits down.

"Guess that means you've finally made it." I bump his shoulder with mine.

"I guess so. I've had people before or after games ask for my signature but never randomly out in public like this." He chuckles, shaking his head.

He stares at the spot where he was just talking to his fans, and I swear I see his eyes are shining with tears.

"You okay?" I ask, leaning closer to him.

He clears his throat before turning to me. "I—" He blinks a few times, scrubbing a hand over his face. "Shit. That felt surreal. I didn't. I can't." He shakes his head.

"Hey. It's alright. I get it." I place my hand on his arm.

He takes my hand in his, entwining our fingers together, and we sit in silence for a few minutes.

“After everything this season. That,” he says gesturing to where he was talking to the little boy, “is what finally made it real to me.”

He looks up at me, and I see the emotion written on his face. He clears his throat again and drops his gaze to our hands.

“What’d you say to the little boy at the end?” I ask after a few minutes.

“He said he plays hockey but he isn’t that good at it. I told him if he keeps practicing, he’ll get better. I also invited them to the game tomorrow. Turns out they’re from Minnesota. The father, Jack, went to Minnesota State and says he still goes to watch the games. Said he’s seen me play there too. Small world.”

“It is.”

The rest of the day passes in a blur with no one else recognizing Hunter.

“I’m so tired.” I lean against Hunter as we stroll back to the castle and the front of the park.

“Come on. It’s only seven. We’ve still got EPCOT to hit.”

“I don’t think I can do it. I’ll fall asleep standing, and you have a game tomorrow.”

“Fair enough.” He stops walking to lean over and kiss me on the forehead. “Let’s go home.”

Let's go home.

The words echo in my head as we head back to his truck,
and I find myself liking how they sound.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Hunter

“You okay?” Wes asks as we skate warm-up laps around the rink.

“A little sore,” I say, rolling my neck and shoulders.

“Too much sex with that girlfriend of yours?” Holt interrupts, coming up behind us.

“Actually, we spent the day at Magic Kingdom.”

While it probably wasn't the best idea to do all that walking the day before a game, it was worth it to see the way Madison's face lit up when she saw where we were.

“You what?” Wes asks.

“And you didn't invite us. Not cool. Not cool,” Holt says.

“Funny. Haha.” I roll my eyes.

They don't have time to retort as Coach blows his whistle and calls us over for a huddle.

Morning skate flies by and before I know it, we're heading back to the locker room.

We play the Miami Mockingbirds tonight. Yes, their mascot is the Mockingbird, which sounds ridiculous, but it's the official bird of Florida so I guess it makes sense. It's going to be a brutal game. We played them earlier in the season and there were no fewer than six fights, one player on their team got a misconduct, and we ended up losing in overtime.

Tonight, though, we have home-ice advantage, which I hope means a better outcome for us.

"You want to go to lunch?" Wes asks as we head off the ice.

"Sounds good to me," Holt says.

"Yeah, okay," I agree.

When we get back to the locker room, I check my phone and see I have a message from Madison saying she has to work late because she had a last-minute cake order come in. I make a mental note to ask her again about starting her own business. We talked about it a couple of weeks ago, but she hasn't mentioned it since.

I also have a message from Elias wishing me a belated Happy Thanksgiving and asking what I'm doing for Christmas.

We text occasionally, but I wouldn't say that we've established a friendship because I'm still not sure what relationship I want to have with him.

"Rhodes?" I glance up to see Coach Weaver standing in front of me.

"Yeah, Coach."

“Can I have a word? In my office.”

“Be right there,” I answer, although he’s already disappeared. I head in the direction he went, my throat suddenly feeling dry. Taking a deep breath, I knock on Coach’s door, pushing it open when he tells me to enter.

“You wanted to see me, sir.” I stand in front of his desk, not sure whether to sit or stand.

He’s not going to tell me he’s benching me, is he? Or tell me they’re sending me down to the Mustangs?

“Have a seat.” He gestures to the empty chairs. “It’s nothing bad, Rhodes.”

Once I’m seated he folds his hands on the desk and leans forward. “You’re doing great, Hunter.” His expression softens. “I’m proud of how far you’ve come so far this season.”

“Thanks, Coach.”

“Everything going okay? Seems you’re fitting in well with the team. But what about outside of hockey? How are things going?”

“Things are good.” I lean back in the chair, relaxing.

“Good, good. Front office likes it that you’ve kept your name out of the gossip columns. Some of the rookies”—he wrinkles his nose—“come in and they’re great players, but they go a little crazy their first season. I usually have to yell at them to rein it in, threaten to bench them. Glad you’re not one of them.”

“No, sir. That’s not my style. I’m here to play hockey.” I run a hand through my hair.

“That’s what I like to hear. Keep your focus on the game. You’ll have plenty of time for fun once you’ve established yourself on the team.”

I raise my eyebrows at him when he pauses to take a breath. *Where is he going with this?*

“Okay, well, that’s all. Keep doing what you’re doing,” Coach says, and I realize I’m being dismissed.

I get up from the chair with a quick goodbye and leave his office before he can say anything else. I can’t decide if that was an odd conversation or if I’m imagining things.



A few hours later, I’m sitting on my couch trying to decide what to watch when my phone rings. “Hey, Uncle Mark. How are things?”

“Hey, son. Good. Cold. How are things with you? Ready for tonight’s game?” he asks.

My uncle always makes an effort to call me before every game to check in and see how I am. I’m grateful to him and my aunt for all they’ve done for me and continue to do for me even being fifteen hundred miles away.

“Yeah. Well, ready as I’ll ever be. You never know how the other team is going to play, though.”

“The last time you guys played them, it was so close. I know you’ll get them this time, your team’s been playing way better lately. They haven’t been doing so hot.”

I appreciate his vote of confidence and hope he’s right. “What’s up?” I sink back into the couch.

“Wanted to see if you were planning to come home for Christmas.”

“Yeah, that’s the plan. It’ll be a short visit. I’m only off the twenty-third to the twenty-sixth.”

“We’ll take any time we can get with you. You heard from your mom?”

“I got a postcard from her last week,” I say flippantly. She can’t even bother to call or text me anymore, she sends postcards. “She’s in Milan with her new husband, Georgio.”

“I’m sorry, son.” Mark’s voice softens. I know he feels bad bringing up such a sore subject.

“How’s Maggie?” Maggie is my younger cousin, well, second cousin since Mark is technically my cousin. I only call him and Amanda my aunt and uncle because they’re close to my mother’s age.

“Good. Good. The baby should be here any day now, so you’ll get to meet your new cousin over Christmas.”

I grin. Maggie and I grew up together since she’s only a year younger than I am. She and her husband, Oliver, live in Minneapolis. “I can’t wait to meet her.”

“Greg will be here for Christmas too. He’s bringing his girlfriend. He was asking about you the other day. Whether you were bringing someone with you. We were all wondering.”

I huff out a laugh. I was waiting for that question to come up.

“Madison is staying in Florida to spend Christmas with her family. But hopefully you can meet her soon.”

“Amanda and I were talking about coming down there in the new year for a visit. She’s been dying to get out of the snow. I can’t say that I blame her,” Uncle Mark says.

“It was seventy degrees today.”

“I’m so jealous.”

“You won’t be when it’s in the high nineties in the summer,” I say with a laugh.

“Yeah, you can have that weather.” Mark chuckles.

I laugh again.

Mark’s tone sobers as he asks, “Any word on a contract?”

“No,” I answer with a sigh.

“I’m sure it’ll come. You’ve scored three goals and gotten how many assists now?”

“Five.”

“It’ll come, Hunter. Don’t you worry.”

“If it doesn’t? If they decide I’m not good enough for another year or two on the team, then what?”

“I don’t think it’ll come to that. But if it does, you’ll find another team. You’ve more than proven that you’re cut out for the NHL. Someone will want your talent if the Storm don’t.”

I scrub a hand over my face. Somehow Mark knows exactly what to say to make me feel better.

Even though it’s exactly what I’ve been telling myself for the past few weeks, hearing him say it makes it sink in.

We spend a few more minutes catching up, and I promise to call in a few days when my aunt is home so I can talk to her too.

I hang up the phone and decide that it’s about time to take a nap, my usual pregame tradition. As I’m climbing into bed my phone goes off.

Elias: I thought we’d mended this gulf between us but I feel like you’re still ignoring me. Can we talk?

I sigh. I don’t know what to say to him. I need more time to decide what to do so I don’t respond. Instead, I pull up my text thread with Madison and send her a quick text.

Me: Hi sweets. Just wanted to tell you I’m missing you. Wish you were here taking a nap with me. I’ll call you on my way to the rink.

Madison: Miss you too, hot shot. I wish I was napping with you too. I'm so tired. It's been a long day.

As I drift off I think about the dark-haired hazel-eyed beauty that I get to call mine.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Madison

“Ready to go?” Hunter asks as he comes out of his bedroom. It’s New Year’s Eve and we’re getting ready to go to the team’s masquerade party at Caleb and Jenna’s house.

My breath hitches when I see what he’s wearing, and I’m suddenly thankful for this fancy party because it means I get to see Hunter in a suit. I’ve seen him in a suit before games before, but there’s something different about this one.

Maybe it’s because he’s wearing a turquoise tie that matches my dress or maybe it’s because it hugs his muscles in all the right places. Whatever it is, it makes him look even more delicious than usual. All I want to do is peel it off him.

“Yeah, I think so,” I answer.

“You look beautiful, sweets,” he says as he helps me to my feet.

“Yeah?” I twirl around, showing off my sleeveless knee-length turquoise dress that I purchased specifically for tonight and my silver kitten heels.

“Gorgeous.” Hunter nods, his eyes raking over me.

“Looking good yourself, hot shot. Are you sure we have to go tonight? There are other things I can think of to occupy our evening.” I waggle my eyebrows at him as I give him a once-over.

Hunter chuckles as he grabs our masks from the coffee table. “While I’d love to take you up on that offer, yes, we have to go.”

“Are you sure? I don’t think anyone would miss us.”

He takes my hand and leads me out of his apartment. “Once the clock strikes midnight, we can leave.”

I sigh but allow him to lead me to his truck and help me inside.

The drive to the gated community where Caleb and Jenna live is short.

“Wow,” I exclaim, glancing around at all the houses that dot the streets.

I wasn’t paying attention the last time I came here, too focused on getting the cakes delivered on time and in one piece.

“Yeah, it’s something else back here. Quite a few of the guys live here.”

“The houses are huge.” House is probably the wrong term, more like mansions.

“Would you ever want to live in a place like this?”

His question shocks me. I look over at him and our eyes meet for a second before he turns his attention back to the road.

“I don’t know. I’ve always imagined that I’d have a house with some land. Somewhere away from the buzz of the city. What about you?”

“It’s nice with the security and the gates, but yeah, I don’t know if I want to live in a place like this. I’d have to agree with you—I’d rather live somewhere a little bit away from the busy city.”

I’m quiet the rest of the way, trying to figure out if there was something deeper to his question. I don’t have much time to contemplate as Hunter’s soon parking his truck on the street, along with all the rest of the vehicles.

“If we lived here we could drive a golf cart over or even walk.” He nods toward the group of golf carts in front of Caleb’s house.

I don’t say anything, too focused on the fact that he said *if we lived here*. Did he mean that, or was it a slip of the tongue?

Before I can ask, the front door is opening, and Jenna is greeting us with hugs.

“You made it.” She looks gorgeous as always, her long blonde hair curled and loose across her back. She’s wearing a black-and-gold dress that hugs her curves. Is that a bump I spy?

Before either of us can speak, Caleb comes up behind her, pulling her into his arms and resting his hands on her stomach. He's wearing a black suit that fits him perfectly, a gold mask that matches his wife's on his face.

“Surprise. We're pregnant.” Jenna throws her arms out wide before dropping her hands on top of her husband's, which are still cradling her bump.

“Congratulations.” I'm happy for them. They seem like a great couple. I know Hunter really looks up to Caleb, and from the interactions I've had with the both of them, they seem like genuine, loving people.

Jenna grins and untangles herself from her husband's arms.

“Come on.” She links her arm through mine. “Let's let the guys do whatever it is they do when they're not playing hockey. A little bird told me that you're thinking about starting a cake decorating business.”

“I am.” I glance over at Hunter, who winks at me before turning to Caleb.

“We should talk because my sister happens to own a wedding planning business.”

“I've heard that,” I say as Jenna leads me deeper into her home. “Your home is beautiful.”

The walls are painted a light bluish-gray and are lined with pictures of Caleb and Jenna and other people, I assume their families. Jenna comes to a halt in front of a photo, and I take a

moment to study it. Whoever took the picture was in the right place at the right time.

Caleb is holding the Stanley Cup above his head, an expression of pure joy on his face, but standing off-center is Jenna, staring at him with a look of equal joy.

“This is my favorite photo. Five minutes later he proposed to me. I was kind of pissed.”

I tilt my head. “Why?”

“He’d just won the Stanley Cup, and now I had to share my engagement with a million people. He claims he did it that way so he’d never forget the date that we got engaged. Now, I can admit that it was romantic. We’d only been dating for three months when he proposed. That was five years ago.”

“Oh.” I’m shocked at her revelation and also not sure why she’s telling me this.

“To be fair, I’d known him my entire life.” She pauses and turns to face me. “As my older brother’s best friend.”

I smile at her, unsure of what to say.

As if reading my mind, she continues, “Sometimes when you know, you know.”

“That’s a sweet story.” I take a deep breath and swallow back the emotions that threaten to spill out. It’s like the universe keeps giving me signs about Hunter and I and where we’re heading.

“Anyway, come on, let’s sit.” She gestures to the open doorway of what I assume is her office.

The walls are painted a light pink, and an L-shaped desk takes up a lot of the room. One wall is all shelves that are filled with books of all sizes. Jenna heads to two pink wingback chairs that take up a corner.

Her words echo in my head—*sometimes when you know, you know* as I sit down.

Chapter Thirty

Hunter

I glance toward the hallway where Jenna and Madison disappeared a few minutes ago.

“Stop worrying, man.” Caleb claps me on the back.

I try to focus on the conversation in front of me and not the woman in the other room whom I’m in love with, but it’s hard. I’ve been wanting to say those three words to her for a little while now, but I haven’t.

There’s still a big what-if staring me in the face—what if at the end of the season the Storm don’t offer me another contract? It doesn’t feel fair to tell her how I feel knowing I might have to leave Orlando at the end of the season.

Her family’s here. So is her job. It’s not like I could ask her to come with me. We barely know each other. We’ve only been dating for a few months.

It feels too soon to be saying those three little words or asking her to give up her life to move with me.

How can I already know she’s it for me?

As if reading my mind, Caleb says, “You’ll be here next year. Don’t worry about it.”

“What?”

“I can see the wheels spinning in your head. If you keep analyzing and worrying, you’re going to stress yourself out and fuck up your rookie season. Ride it out. Your ice time keeps increasing, and you got two assists in the last game. Don’t worry so much about it.”

“I know. I—“ I shrug.

Before Caleb can reply, Brody walks in with a woman on his arm. I blink rapidly a couple of times. Am I seeing things? I’ve never heard Brody talk about a woman or about dating. I half expected him not to show up at all tonight.

Interesting.

“Hi guys. This is Aubrey. Aubrey, you know Caleb. This is Hunter, my linemate,” Brody says when they come to a stop in front of us.

“Hey, Aubs,” Caleb says, pulling her into a hug.

I remain silent, watching the interaction, still unsure of who she is to Brody. Clearly they know each other well since she knows Caleb too, but I don’t see a resemblance so I rule out them being siblings. Is she his girlfriend?

She laughs, hugging Caleb back. “It’s good to see you again.”

“Hi. Nice to meet you. Brod’s told me about you,” Aubrey says to me, shaking my hand.

I smirk at the nickname. “Nice to meet you too.” I turn to Brody. “Where’s your mask, dude?”

“Right here.” He raises his hand to reveal his mask.

We chat for a while until even more guests arrive. Caleb excuses himself to make the rounds, reminding us to put our masks on as he leaves.

Jenna and Madison wander back into the room a few minutes later and make their way over to us. I wrap my arm around her waist and pull her into my side.

“I missed you,” I whisper into her ear.

“I was barely gone for fifteen minutes.”

“Too long,” I mumble into her hair, holding her close.

Madison shakes her head at me and puts her hand out to Aubrey. “I’m Madison, Hunter’s girlfriend. Nice to meet you.”

“Aubrey. Well, Aubs to everyone except this guy.” She pokes Brody playfully in the side. He swats her hand away and shakes his head, all without breaking eye contact with Cole, who he’s deep in conversation with.

I raise an eyebrow at that interesting display of affection or flirting. I’m still not sure what’s going on between the two of them.

“Nice to meet you, Aubrey. You look like you can use a drink. I know I sure could. Want to go get one?” Madison

says, pulling out of my arms. I let her go even though I don't want to.

Aubrey nods in agreement and whispers something to Brody. Madison kisses me on the cheek, and they walk away to find drinks.

Cole excuses himself to go find his wife. I notice that Brody watches Aubrey as she follows Madison. Before I can ask him about Aubrey, Wes and Holt arrive.

"Who's that?" Wes tips his chin toward the two women.

"Aubrey, my best friend," Brody says.

"She's hot. Best friend, not date or girlfriend? I think I'll go say hi," Wes says, turning to go the way the ladies went.

"Keep your hands to yourself," Brody growls, glaring at Wes. Wes laughs and turns back. *Shit stirrer.*

"Interesting," I mutter. "Care to tell us what that's about?"

"Nothing," Brody says with a shake of his head.

"Then why do you care if Wes talks to her?" Holt asks the question that I'm thinking.

"She's off-limits."

Holt chuckles. "That's what I thought."

Brody rolls his eyes and stalks away.

"How long do you think it'll take him?" Wes asks, watching Brody.

I shake my head. "A while."



“Two minutes to midnight,” Caleb yells as he comes into the den. “Countdown is happening outside.”

“I need to go find Aubrey.” Brody sets his empty beer bottle on the coffee table, grabs his mask from the spot where we tossed them when we decided to move back inside and take a break from wearing them, and with a wave, slips out of the room.

“I should find Madison,” I say as I reach for my mask, but it’s not here. I glance up at Wes and Holt to see if they have my mask but neither of them do. But Brody’s is sitting on the ground next to the coffee table. Shit, he must have grabbed mine.

With a shake of my head, I grab his, slip it on, and make my way outside, where I spot Madison chatting with Jenna and a couple of the other women in the corner.

“Hi, sweets.” I slip my arm around her waist.

She leans into me, tipping her head up. “That’s not your mask.”

“Yeah. I know. I think Brody grabbed mine. I didn’t have time to find him.”

Someone starts counting down from ten. The countdown hits one and everyone yells Happy New Year.

“Happy New Year, sweets.” I spin her around and kiss her. She wraps her arms around my neck and swipes her tongue

across my lips, deepening the kiss. I groan quietly. With only a kiss, she's ignited the fire in me. I want to do more to her, but we're in public and I can't. I pull back.

"Happy New Year, hot shot. Let's go home," she whispers, grabbing my hand. Yes, please.

We make our way around the backyard stopping to say a few Happy New Years and goodbyes as we head to the door.

"Are you okay to drive?" Madison asks as we walk toward my truck.

"Yeah, I only had two beers. You okay?" I ask, helping her in.

"I didn't drink much either," she answers.

I make my way around to the driver's side. "Anything in particular you want to do when we get back to my place?" I ask as I pull away from the curb.

"Hmmm," Madison hums, laying her hand on my thigh. "I can think of a few things I'd like to do."

She traces her fingers up my thigh until they're hovering over my hardening cock. Taking one hand off the steering wheel, I place it over hers and bring both of our hands down on top of my bulging cock. She moans and it makes me instantly harder.

"Fuck, sweets," I husk out.

"Yes. That. Fuck me when we get home. Please."

I glance over at her, but the darkness makes it hard to see anything. “Are you all wet for me?”

“Yes,” Madison says shifting in her seat. “So wet.”

“Prove it,” I growl.

This might be a bad idea, but I can’t help myself. Thankfully, the drive from Caleb’s is short and there’s no traffic, so I won’t have to wait long to get my hands all over her.

“What?”

“Prove how wet you are for me, sweets. Touch yourself.”

“Right now? In the truck?” Madison’s voice is breathy.

“Yes. It’s dark. No one will see. Slip your fingers under that dress of yours, push your panties aside, and touch that pretty pussy of yours.”

She doesn’t respond but I hear the rustle of fabric.

“Hunter,” she whimpers, her hand running up and down my cock, which is straining to get out and feel her soft hands, her lips, her wet pussy.

“Are you touching yourself?” I shift in my seat and push my foot down a little bit farther on the gas pedal. “How wet are you?”

“Wet, so wet,” Madison pants.

“Don’t come yet. Your first orgasm of the new year will be from my fingers, cock, or tongue, not your hands. You can touch yourself, but you better not come.”

“I’m so close.”

“Madison,” I growl.

She moans, and I curse myself for this idea because it’s taking far too long to get back to my place. Finally, I make the turn into the garage.

“Why are you so wet for me?” I ask, pulling the truck into a parking spot in the garage and turn it off.

“You in that suit. All I’ve been thinking about all night is peeling it off you.”

“Your wish is my command. Let’s go.” I hop out of the truck.

The elevator ride is the slowest ride of my life, and I try hard not to think about the fact that her fingers are wet from touching herself.

Finally, we reach my floor. I fumble with the key, but eventually get the door open. She’s barely inside before I’m slamming the door closed and caging her in against it.

“I need to taste you.” I sink to my knees in front of her, staring up at her.

Fuck, she looks like a queen, a goddess, smiling down at me like that. Her pupils dilated, her chest heaving, her hair falling out of the fancy updo she had it in for the party.

A thrill runs through me that I’m the lucky guy who gets to worship her. She sinks her hands in my hair, tugging gently on the ends, and I moan, my eyes rolling in the back of my head.

“Hunter.” Madison whimpers as I run my hands up her legs, pushing her dress up.

“Are you attached to this?” I tug on her thong, staring up at her.

She shakes her head and I tear it, tossing it to the side. I circle her clit with my index finger, feeling how wet she already is.

“Please.”

“Whatever you want, sweets.” I push her legs apart and kiss and lick up her thighs until my mouth is hovering over her pussy. She pushes my head closer, and I chuckle, blowing air on her clit. I lean forward and suck her clit into my mouth.

She lets out a half moan, half groan that goes straight to my cock. I lick and suck on her until I feel her legs trembling and I know she’s close.

Repositioning myself, I slip a finger inside of her and suck her clit back into my mouth. With a yell, she detonates around my tongue, and I feast on her, my cock getting harder and straining even more. With one final lick, I pull away and wipe my face. She sinks down against the door, and I pull her into my arms.

“You taste so good, sweets, but now I need to be inside you.”

“Yes. Yes, please.”

Standing, I pick her up and walk us to my bedroom. She gets a second wind, and we’re a mess of arms and legs on my bed, discarding our clothes in a hurry.

Finally, she's lying naked on the bed under me, her hair fanned out on my pillow free from its updo, and I'm hovering over her.

"Feel what you do to me?" I grind my hard aching cock against her leg.

Her eyes flutter closed, and she whimpers as I rub my cock against her clit.

"Do you need another orgasm first?" I grind myself against her.

She starts moving her hips, and I growl as her wet pussy rubs against my cock.

"Fuck me," I whisper, dropping my head to see her arching her hips and grinding against me. "Look at us, sweets." I glance up to see her looking down at where my cock is pressed against her clit.

"So good." Madison wraps her legs around me and pulls me closer. "But I need you in me. Now."

"Let me get a condom." I pull away, reaching for my nightstand drawer.

"I got tested after I broke up with my last boyfriend and the tests came back negative. I haven't been with anyone since," Madison says. "I'm on the pill."

Hearing her say that she wants me to fuck her, no, make love to her, bare almost makes me blow my load right then.

“I get tested regularly. Everything was negative after my last tests. I haven’t been with anyone except you. Are you sure?” I ask as I position my cock at her entrance.

In answer, she thrusts her hips up and pulls me into her.

“Fuck,” I grit out and I swear I see stars.

She feels so good around me. I know this is going to end far too quickly. I take a deep breath, trying to gain control of myself.

“Yes, fuck me,” Madison groans.

“I want to watch you ride me,” I growl, flipping us so I’m lying on my back and she’s sitting on top of me.

“Take what you need, Madison. Use me,” I rasp out, staring up at the woman who has captured my heart, made me feel safe and like I finally belong somewhere.

With her.

I have to take a deep breath to stop myself from saying out loud all the things in my head. They aren’t the kind of things you talk about in the middle of sex.

Instead, I force myself to be in the moment. To feel Madison pulsing around me. Watch her ride me. Her perfect tits bouncing up and down. She throws her head back in ecstasy.

Reaching up, I take one of her tits in my hand and play with her nipple the way I know she likes. She hisses out a breath when I pinch it and rides my dick faster.

I reach my hand between our bodies and rub her clit, knowing it's what she needs to send her over the edge.

“Come with me,” Madison demands, her voice breathy. “Hunter. I need you.” Her voice trails off and she gives out a small moan.

I break out of the cage I've been keeping myself in and thrust up into her a few times before my orgasm barrels out of me at the same time she falls apart.

It's never ending as her pussy clenches around me, dragging out all my come. I swear I black out for a few seconds.

It's never felt this good with anyone else.

Only her.

She crumples on top of me, and I stroke her hair, loving the feel of her lying on top of me.

Chapter Thirty-One

Madison

“Come on, sweets. Let’s get cleaned up,” Hunter whispers, stroking my hair.

“But I don’t want to.” At least that’s what I think I say. I can’t really be sure because I’m half-asleep after the most mind-blowing sex ever.

Every time it gets better, but tonight it was out of this world. Hunter’s ruined me for any other guy. Not that I want to have sex with any other guy, *ever*.

That thought has me blinking open my eyes and sitting up. Where did that come from?

It’s too soon. I can’t possibly be thinking about forever with Hunter already.

Can I?

I remember asking Mom when I was a teenager how I’d know when I was in love, and she’d told me that I would know when it was right.

But is that even possible?

I'd thought I was in love with EJ for all those years and look where that got me—heartbroken and without my best friend. How can I trust my instincts when they've been so wrong in the past?

“You okay?” Hunter asks.

Blinking, I realize that I've gotten out of bed and walked halfway across the room in a daze.

“Fine. I'm going to—” I point toward the bathroom and Hunter nods.

I make my way to the en suite and close the door behind me. It's got to be postsex haze or endorphins that are making me feel this way.

But a tiny voice in my head tells me that I need to stop lying to myself. I tell her to shut up as I finish in the bathroom.

I climb into bed, not bothering with pajamas, while Hunter takes his turn in the bathroom. He joins me a few minutes later and pulls me in close.

A groan of appreciation tumbles from him as he runs his hands down my naked body.

“Teasing me, are you?” He playfully swats my ass.

I gasp, rolling over to face him as I feel wetness forming between my legs. *Huh*. Who would have thought I like to be spanked?

Hunter laughs again and shifts, poking me in the leg with his already hard cock.

“Already ready for round two, hot shot?” I reach down to stroke him a few times.

“Always, sweets. Are you ready?” He doesn’t wait for me to answer, just slips a finger inside me, and I moan, rocking against his hand.

“So wet for me. Again. Insatiable. What am I going to do with you?”

“Make love to me.” The words tumble from my mouth before I can stop them. Hunter stills, and I realize what I said.

“I-I—” I try to come up with something else to say, something to make what I said less awkward.

But I don’t get the chance as Hunter leans over, sealing his lips to mine. He grinds his erect cock against me and slowly slides his finger in and out of me.

Pulling his mouth away from me, he whispers, “Is this what you want me to do? Drive you wild before driving my cock into you?”

“I. Want. You.” I roll my hips toward him, trying to get the friction I need. Already feeling another orgasm building.

He stills my hips with his hand. “I’ll give you what you need, but you need to stay still.”

“Hunter,” I whine as he pulls his finger out of me and lazily strokes my clit.

“Yes, sweets?” He lifts his head, his blue eyes sparkling.

“Please,” I beg, rolling onto my back.

“Please, what?” He runs his hands up and down my thighs and legs, skimming his fingers over my aching center.

“Stop fucking teasing me, or I’m going to take matters into my own hands,” I hiss, running my hand over my chest and down to where I need it.

“No, you don’t.” Hunter pins my hands above my head with one of his and uses the other to tease my clit.

“Please,” I beg again.

“Is this what you want?” He asks as he climbs on top of me dragging his cock through my wet center.

I gasp as he slams into me. “Fuck,” I whimper, loving the delicious ache between my legs.

He leans down to pepper my neck with kisses. “Like the way my cock fills you up?”

“Yes.” I clench around him.

“Madison,” he grits out.

“More,” I moan, tugging at his shoulder.

His response is to pull all the way out before slamming back into me. He does it a couple more times, and as if sensing what I need, reaches down and rubs my clit with his finger.

“Hunter,” I yell, my orgasm slamming into me.

He pistons into me a few more times before yelling out his own release. Panting, he collapses on top of me.

I love the way it feels to be surrounded by him. I should feel like I'm being suffocated, he's so much larger than I am, but I don't.

He shifts and rolls over, pulling me with him so I'm lying on his chest and I relax into him enjoying the way this feels.

Like I'm safe.

Loved.

Treasured.

Like this is where I belong.

Like things are finally working out how they're meant to. That it's time to take the chance. Leap.

"What are you thinking?" Hunter whispers, startling me.

I take a deep breath before saying, "I'm thinking about everything that happened last year, and how it feels like with the new year it's finally time to trust myself again, but I'm scared."

"What do you mean?" Hunter asks, running his hands through my hair.

"I want to start my own business, but I've trusted my intuition before, and it was wrong. I got burned a couple of different ways. What happens if I start the business and it fails? If it's been a fluke that there have been so many orders

for cakes? Or if it's because of Sugar and Crumbs?" I squeeze my eyes shut, feeling the sting of tears.

"Hey," Hunter whispers. "Look at me."

I comply. The room is bathed in moonlight so I can't make out all his features, but I can see enough to tell that he's got a determined expression on his face.

"I believe in you. If it doesn't work out, I'll be here to help you pick up the pieces. You don't have to do this alone, you know."

"Thank you, Hunter." I take a deep breath. "I want to do it," I whisper as my heart starts racing. I'm not sure what's making me brave, but whatever it is, I can't take the words back now.

"Okay. Let's do it then. What do you need from me?"

"What do you mean?" I ask, sitting up.

"I'm all in, sweets. Anything you need, you tell me. Need me to get the guys to post about it? Done. Send me what you want them to post, and I'll text them in the morning."

"Seriously?" I stare down at the man who has captured my heart and who, I realize, I'm in love with.

"Anything for you, sweets." He stifles a yawn.

A quick check at the clock shows that it's after two.

"Maybe we should talk about this tomorrow."

"Whatever you want, sweets," Hunter says, tugging me back down so I'm lying on his chest again.



“Morning,” Hunter says brightly when I step into the kitchen, wearing one of his Storm shirts and nothing else. “I like you in that.” His eyes rake over me and I blush.

“Thanks.” I accept the cup of iced coffee that he hands me.

“Sleep well?”

Before I can answer, I hear my phone ding with a text message, and assuming it’s my aunt since I haven’t been home much lately, I go back into the bedroom and grab it off Hunter’s dresser. I sigh when I see it’s EJ.

EJ: Hey Mads. We’re playing the Storm in a few weeks. Can we have dinner?

I don’t have any illusions that we’ll be able to go back to the way things were after what went down, but maybe it’s time to have a conversation with him and get closure, if only so he stops texting me.

Me: Okay. When and where?

EJ: Wednesday night at 6:30? There’s this steakhouse, Marks, that I’ve heard is good.

Me: Sounds good.

EJ: Thanks, Mads.

“Everything alright?” Hunter asks from behind me.

“Fine.” I set my phone on the nightstand, turning to face Hunter before saying, “That was EJ. He wants to have dinner in a few weeks. He’ll be in town.” I pause, waiting for a response, and when none comes, I add. “I agreed.”

Hunter studies me for a minute. “Want me to come with you?”

“I—No.” That’s the last thing I want.

“You don’t have to do this alone, you know, Madison. You don’t have to face him by yourself.” Hunter sits on the edge of the bed watching me.

I rear back. “What do you think he’s going to do? It’s only dinner.”

“He was an asshole to you.”

“I’m well aware,” I bite out.

Hunter pulls on the back of his neck studying me. Is he jealous? With a sigh he finally says, “okay, but if you change your mind I’ll be there.”

Before I can say anything else, my phone dings again. I grab it and see both my aunt and my dad have texted me.

Judy: Happy New Year, Dearie.

Jake: Happy New Year. I’m sorry we haven’t gotten to see each other.

“Someone’s popular today,” he says, nodding toward my phone.

“Yeah. Judy and my dad.” I lock my phone and set it back on the dresser.

“When am I going to meet him?”

“I-I—” Shit, are we really doing this today?

“Are you hiding me from him? Do you not want me to meet him?”

“I’m not hiding you. You’ve met my aunt, haven’t you?” Shit. Fuck. Hell. I knew this day would come. I just hoped it wouldn’t come this quickly.

“Then what is it?” Hunter asks staring at me.

I sigh, wringing my hands and staring down at the floor. How do I tell him that his coach is my father? It’s probably as simple as that, but it doesn’t feel simple. It feels messy and complicated.

But if you two are going to be serious, doesn’t he deserve to know? The voice in the back of my head asks, but I tell her to shut the hell up.

“Hey. What is it?” Hunter reaches out and tugs me to him, wrapping his arms around me. I sink into his embrace.

“I’m sorry.” I take a couple of deep breaths and on an exhale say, “I want you to meet him. Our relationship is new and complicated.” I pick up my head from Hunter’s chest. “I promise I’ll introduce you soon.”

Hunter studies me for a few beats before nodding his head. “Do you want to come home with me over the All-Star break? In February? My family is dying to meet you.”

I chuckle. “Yeah, okay. I’ll talk to Rachel, but it shouldn’t be a big deal.”

Hunter grins at me, his eyes lighting up. I hope he’s still happy when I tell him the truth about my father.

I send up a silent prayer that I can figure out how to break the news to the both of them without too much fallout.

Chapter Thirty-Two

Madison

“You okay?” Rachel’s voice startles me.

“Fine. Fine,” I mumble, getting off my stool and walking over to the oven to check on the cake.

This is the first cake I’m making under the Madison Mae Cakes brand—original I know, but it was the best I could come up with—and I want it to be perfect.

Last week I told Rachel that I was ready to take the leap and start my own business, but it would take me some time to get everything squared away.

She shocked me by telling me I could use the bakery’s kitchen for as long as needed. She also gave me the information of her web designer, who built me a website in a day so I could start taking orders.

Hunter got his teammates to post about the business on their socials, and it didn’t take long for my first order to come in.

The cake I’m working on is for a wedding shower, for a client of Savannah’s who happened to see the social media

posts by the team.

“You don’t look fine. Want to talk about it?”

“Maybe I’m making the wrong decisions.”

“About having dinner with EJ? Something else?” Rachel leans against the counter, watching me.

I told her all about EJ and our relationship the other day. I needed an unbiased opinion about what to do, and I didn’t know who else to talk to.

My aunt told me I shouldn’t give him another second of my energy, not that I was surprised by that reaction because she saw me when I first got here and what a mess I was. She was the one who helped me pick up the pieces. I didn’t expect her to be anything but anti-EJ.

Hunter offered to go with me again, and I turned him down. I don’t need the two of them meeting before they meet on the ice.

He also suggested that I cancel dinner. But I need closure and this dinner with EJ feels like the way to get that. That’s why I talked to Rachel.

“Both,” I finally say.

“Okay. What else are you worried about?”

“I feel like this is a dream”—I wave my hands around—“that I’m going to wake up from any minute.”

“Why?” She asks.

“I don’t know.” I rub a hand down my face. “Everything’s gone so smoothly. I keep waiting for the other shoe to drop. For something to go wrong.”

Rachel laughs. I stare at her, my mouth gaping.

She shakes her head, taking a deep breath. “Do you hear yourself, Mads? Why are you expecting something bad to happen? Just enjoy the good that’s happening. You deserve it.”

“Yeah, but ...”

“But what? Stop finding reasons to doubt yourself. I know how scary it is. Trust me.” She motions to the front of the shop. “It’ll all work out in the end. And if it doesn’t, you always have a job here. But it’ll work out. I know it. Now tell me why you’re second-guessing having dinner with EJ. I thought you wanted closure.”

“What happens if I’m not over him?”

Rachel studies me for a couple of beats. “It’s possible, but you’re in love with Hunter so I wouldn’t worry about it.”

“I’m not in love with Hunter,” I protest.

Rachel laughs once again. Since when did I become so funny?

“Seriously? You are so in love with him. He’s equally in love with you.”

“It’s too soon,” I whisper, staring down at the counter.

The idea that I’m in love with him has been rolling around in my head for a little while now, but I’ve been too chicken to

think too much about it.

“Who says there’s a timeline for falling in love?”

“But—I, we, can’t.”

“I’ve seen the way he looks at you, and you look at him the same way.”

I tilt my head curious as to what she means. “How’s that?”

“You look at him like he hung the stars and the moon. He looks at you like you’re the sun that he orbits around. Like you’re the center of his galaxy.”

I tilt my head, studying my friend. “Since when did you become such a romantic, Rach?”

She shrugs and mumbles something that sounds like, “You learn a thing or two about love when you’ve had your heart broken.”

“Anyway.” She clears her throat. “I think you should go to dinner with EJ. Clear things up. Tell him you’re dating someone better than him—a hockey player.”

“EJ plays hockey too.”

“No shit,” Rachel says, her eyes wide. “You do have a type.”

I laugh as the timer for the oven goes off. I grab oven mitts and pull the cake out.

“What else is going on?”

Setting the cake on the counter to cool, I take a deep breath.

“My father.”

“Oh?” Rachel tilts her head. “I thought that was going well.”

“It is. But I haven’t told Hunter who he is.”

“That’s a problem because?”

I glance over to the kitchen door checking to make sure that it’s still shut and Brandon hasn’t suddenly appeared. The last thing I need is him hearing. He’s become quite the lover of Storm gossip. Always asking me the latest on any drama about the team. I had to warn Hunter to watch what he says around him.

Not that it’s a secret who my father is, not really, but until I tell Hunter and tell my father that I’m dating one of his players, I’d rather keep the information to a select few people.

“Because he’s his head coach,” I say.

Rachel gasps. “Wait, come again?”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “Jake Weaver, head coach of the Storm, is my father.”

“Well, shit. That makes things interesting.”

“Tell me about it.”

“Why haven’t you told Hunter?”

I stare down at the counter, tracing the pattern in the tiles with my finger for a moment before heaving out a breath.

“Because I was afraid he would freak out. He’s already so worried about whether or not he’s going to get another contract. I didn’t need to add anything else to his plate. When

we first met, I didn't know who he was and then we were supposed to only be friends. You know how that turned out."

"Does your dad know you're dating one of his players?" Rachel asks, crossing her arms and leveling me with a stare that tells me she already knows the answer to her question but wants me to say it out loud.

I hang my head. I know I should tell him. Except I can't figure out how. "No."

"Mads." Rachel places a hand on my arm. "You need to tell them. Especially if you and Hunter are serious. He deserves to know. Your father does too. Before either of them finds out from someone or somewhere else."

I nod. I know she's right.

"I should get back out there. Brandon is about to leave for the day, but if you need to talk about this some more, you know where to find me."

The afternoon passes in a blur of activity. Before I know it, it's time to head back to my apartment and get ready for dinner.

I take a quick shower and then spend five minutes debating what to wear. I finally settle on a pair of black slacks, my favorite purple sweater, and black flats. I leave my face makeup free except for a swipe of mascara and some ChapStick.

With only a few minutes to spare, I braid my hair since it's still damp and I don't have time to dry it. After one last glance

in the mirror, I grab my purse and head out to my car.

I get lucky and hit almost every green light on the way, pulling into the lot a couple of minutes early.

“Hey,” a familiar voice says from behind me as I’m heading toward the restaurant.

I spin around and see EJ leaning against an SUV, his hands in the pockets of his black slacks. The sleeves of his blue sweater are rolled up, showing off the ink on his arms. Ink that I used to find hot but now don’t. He stands to his full six foot four and strolls up to me.

His brown hair is longer than the last time I saw him and is unruly like he’s been shoving his hands through it. His blue eyes look dull and if the bags under them are any indication of how his season is going, I’d say it’s not going well. He shifts back and forth on his feet, glancing around the parking lot.

Guess I’m not the only one who’s nervous about tonight.

Good. I’m glad he’s nervous and uneasy around me. He should be after the way he treated me.

“Hi.” I take a deep breath, tugging at the sleeves of my sweater.

He gives me a small smile. “Shall we go in?”

“Yeah.” I follow him inside and to our table situated in the back corner of the restaurant.

I’m not sure if EJ specifically asked for a secluded table or if it was a coincidence but I’m grateful that we’re not right in the

main walkway where there's more of a chance someone will recognize him and stop to chat. Or where someone else can easily overhear our conversation.

“What’s going on?” I blurt out once the waitress has taken our drink order and left us to look over the menu.

He’s my oldest friend, but after everything that went down with us, I feel like I don’t know him anymore. I want to get to the point of this dinner quickly.

“I’m sorry for everything. For how I reacted. It was never my intention to lead you on. I genuinely didn’t think those guys you dated were good enough for you. I knew you could do better. I wish I’d known how you felt so we could have talked about it. But I made a mistake. I’ve been miserable without you in my life. I miss hanging out with you.” EJ takes a deep breath. “I was wrong to friend zone you. I miss you, Mads.”

The air rushes from my lungs.

Did he really say that?

My heart pounds. A year ago I would have been thrilled, but now, I’m not. Even if I wasn’t dating Hunter, the time I’ve spent away from EJ has made me realize that we wouldn’t have worked out.

We’re interrupted by the waitress bringing our drinks and taking our dinner order.

“I’m dating someone,” I blurt out once the waitress leaves. I grab my drink and take a big sip of it, needing the liquid

courage for whatever is going to come next.

“Oh.” He releases a breath.

The waitress comes with our food, and we eat in silence for a few minutes. EJ, finally breaks the silence asking, “Is it serious?”

“Yeah. It is.”

“Are you sure, Mads?” EJ finally looks up at me, holding my gaze. “That’s what you thought about the last guy you dated and that didn’t work out.”

Did he really go there?

“Elliot,” I grit out. “Seriously?”

He shrugs. “Calling it like it is.”

I set my fork down on my plate, inhaling a deep breath.

Don’t make a scene, Madison. Don’t make a scene.

“What the fuck, Elliot?”

He studies me for a beat before surprising me by changing the subject and asking, “How are things with your father?”

The air in my lungs whooshes out at his words. I reach for my glass, draining the last of my wine.

I finally say through gritted teeth, “It’s going well. We’ve seen each other a few times. Had dinner. I think we’re building a great relationship.”

“No need to be hostile about it, Madison. I’m simply curious to know what it’s like having a father who is the head coach

for the Storm.”

“Really, Elliot?” I cross my arms, my food forgotten. What the hell is he getting at? Agreeing to see him was a mistake.

I study him for a minute trying to figure out where my best friend went. Where the guy who held me when I lost my job twice went. Where the guy who was always there when I needed him went. Because this guy, this guy in front of me, is none of those people.

He quirks a brow at me, feigning surprise. “That’s still under wraps?”

“Yes,” I hiss. Hoping he’ll drop it and move on.

“Why?”

“Because we’re still navigating our relationship.” I take a deep breath, closing my eyes for a second to try to tamp down my anger, before asking, “How’s your season going?”

Do I really care about his season? No, not really. I just want to change the subject, finish dinner, and get out of here.

“It’s going.”

He proceeds to tell me about the new head coach of the Fury and how he’s made some changes to the lineup. I nod at the right times, only half listening to him complain about his teammates and the coaching staff. Apparently he’s not getting as much ice time as he thinks he deserves.

A past version of me would have wholeheartedly agreed with him, but now after being away from him for so long, all I

see is a grown man whining about not getting what he wants.

The conversation trails off and we eat in silence, which I'm grateful for.

Tonight gave me the closure I was seeking on our friendship, and it's time for him to move on, without me.

"EJ." I push my empty plate away from me. "I think—"

"Madison. I'm glad we had dinner tonight. I hope this can be the restart our friendship needs." He shoves a hand through his hair, holding my gaze.

For a second, I catch a glimpse of my old friend, the kid who protected me from bullies in elementary school, comforted me when my first boyfriend broke up with me in high school, but then he's gone.

"EJ, Elliot. I don't know if our friendship can be repaired. Not after tonight."

"It's been almost a year, Madison," he says like I need reminding.

I shake my head. "It's not only about what happened before. It's how you acted tonight."

"I apologized." He gestures between us. "What more do you want?"

"Yeah, you apologized but then proceeded to tell me you were wrong about what you wanted. When I told you I was dating someone, you asked if it was serious. And you then

proceeded to not like my answer. Or did you forget? So no EJ. We can't go on from here like everything is fine."

"Fine, Madison. If that's the way you want it. When he breaks your heart, I'll still be here. Waiting. But I won't wait forever."

My mouth drops open.

Did he really say that?

The nerve of this man. The person who was supposed to be my best friend.

For fuck's sake.

He should be asking to meet the guy I'm dating or at the very least telling me he's happy for me. Not insinuating that the relationship will end.

Before I can form words to reply, the waitress returns with our bill, and he pays it.

When he asks if I want to talk more, I just shake my head. I don't know what else to say to him.

He gets to his feet, and I follow him to the door. He holds it open for me and I walk through, right into a brick wall that's not a brick wall at all.

Chapter Thirty-Three

Hunter

Glancing at the clock in my truck, I see that I'm on time for dinner with Elias. Not sure how I did that, but I'll take it.

I get out of my truck and wipe my sweaty palms on my black slacks and adjust the rolled-up cuffs of my button-down. I wasn't this nervous playing in my first NHL game, but something about having dinner with my half brother brings on the nerves.

I hear my name as I cross the parking lot and turn to see Elias striding toward me.

He's dressed similarly to me in slacks and a button-down shirt. His brown hair is perfectly styled, unlike mine, which is a mess from how many times I've shoved my hand through it.

"Hey, Hunter," he says, tipping his chin up at me in greeting.

I let out a breath, glad he didn't try to give me an awkward bro hug or shake my hand. "Hey, Elias. Want to go in?"

"Sounds good to me." We make our way silently to the door, and I yank it open, ready to step through the doorway when

someone collides with me. I recognize that sweet smell anywhere and know immediately who it is, but why is she here?

“Madison?”

“Hunter,” Madison says. “What are you doing here?” She untangles herself from me, wringing her hands and glancing over her shoulder.

Before I can answer, someone steps up behind her. It takes me a second to register who it is. Elias inhales sharply as he comes to a stop behind me.

Remembering that I’m standing in the doorway of the restaurant, I step farther inside, placing my hand on Madison’s lower back and guiding her with me.

“I’m having dinner with my brother,” I answer, gesturing at Elias.

“Elias Stoneheart.” He steps around me, his hand out.

“Madison Harris,” Madison says, shaking his hand.

“My girlfriend,” I add, as if he hasn’t already figured that out.

“Nice to meet you, Madison. I hope you’re keeping him in line,” Elias says, smirking at me.

I roll my eyes at his attempt to defuse the situation before turning my attention to the guy looming behind Madison shooting daggers my way.

“Oh.” She glances over her shoulder. “This is EJ. Elliot. EJ, this is Hunter, my boyfriend.”

Fuck. Did not see that coming.

Elliot Jacobs, the defender for the Nashville Fury, is Madison’s EJ?

The guy’s a beast at well over six foot and nasty to boot. The last time we played the Fury, he checked Winston into the boards so hard he couldn’t play the last period.

This guy was her best friend? The one who screwed her over?

Elliot doesn’t put out his hand to shake mine when introductions are made. He simply glares at me. *Great. Loud and clear, buddy. Loud and clear.*

“EJ.” Madison steps out of my arms and turns her attention to her friend. “Be nice,” she hisses.

He simply nods at me, his brows furrowed. I open my mouth to say something, but quickly shut it as Elias bristles next to me. I look over at him to see him raise his chin toward Elliot.

His teammate.

Fuck me, did this get complicated fast.

“We’ll let you get on with your dinner,” Madison says to us. “Nice to meet you, Elias.”

“Nice to meet you too.” Elias shoves his hands in his pockets. “I’m going to check on our table.” He nods towards the hostess stand before ambling away.

I pull Madison to me before she can leave, placing a chaste kiss on her lips. “Bye, sweets. I’ll call you later.”

“Bye, hot shot.”

I look up to see Elliot glaring at me. If looks could kill, I’d be dead.

With a wave Madison heads out the door, Elliot close behind her.

I sigh, turning to see Elias chatting with the hostess. I make my way over to him, and she grabs menus, telling us to follow her.

“That was awkward,” he says once we’re seated. “Not the part about meeting your girlfriend. She seems nice. But seeing her with Elliot. What’s that about?”

“It was weird,” I agree, studying the menu.

Before he can respond, the waiter comes over and takes our drink order—a beer for me and a gin and tonic for Elias.

“They grew up together. In Colorado. Small world, right? He seems nice,” I say sarcastically.

He raises his eyebrows at me. “He’s a jackass.”

“I got that impression,” I say with a shake of my head.

“Thanks for agreeing to have dinner with me. I know things between us haven’t been easy.”

“Yeah.” Apparently we’re diving right into things. *Fun.*

Elias takes a sip of his drink. “I’d like us to have a better relationship. I thought after our conversation a few months

back, we were on the same page, but you've barely been responding to me."

"It's complicated, Elias. I can't simply flip a switch and we're buddies. We hadn't seen each other in how many years?" I take a sip of my beer.

"I get it, but I'd like to put all that behind us."

"I'm trying. I'm here now, aren't I?" I gesture around us.

"Yeah," he concedes.

I pick up my beer and drain the rest of it as the waiter comes to the table with our meals. We order another round of drinks and dive into our food. I wouldn't normally have a second drink with dinner but between meeting EJ and dinner with Elias, I need it.

"So," Elias says, finally breaking the silence that settled as we ate. "How are you enjoying Florida? Are you fitting in well with the Storm?"

"It's good. The team is great. Not sure we'll be headed to the playoffs this year, but who knows."

"You all are in a better position than us. There's still a lot of season left. Anything can happen."

"That's true. How's your season going?"

"I'm having a terrible season. Missing easy passes. Haven't scored a goal in the last ten games. During our last game Coach benched me for the final period because of how bad

I've been playing. I don't know if I'll be playing in Nashville after the season is over. Maybe even before then."

"Oh?" My mouth falls open. He's played his whole career in Nashville, and now he thinks he might not be around much longer? Shit.

"I'm butting heads with some of our newer players. The chemistry is off. I don't know, maybe it's me." He shakes his head and takes a long pull of his drink.

"That sucks."

Elias shrugs. "Yeah, but it is what it is. How'd you meet Madison?"

I let him change the subject even though I want to ask him more about what's going on with his season.

"I met her randomly when I walked by her car that was broken down. Helped her jump it. Ran into her a few weeks later when I went into the bakery she works at." I smile thinking about how we met and then met again a few weeks later. As if fate wanted us to be together.

"She makes you happy? Wait." He puts up a hand. "Better question: do you make her happy?"

I shake my head at him and chuckle. "Yeah. I mean, I think I do."

"Good," Elias says, picking up his fork and going back to his food.

"What about you? Dating anyone?"

“Nah, man. No one wants to date this grumpy old bastard.”

I laugh because Elias doesn't give off grumpy old bastard vibes, but maybe he's different around me.

We finish our dinner chatting about surface-level topics—the weather, the All-Star events next month, trade rumors we've both heard.

“Want to go out for drinks? The night is still young,” Elias asks as we make our way toward the parking lot a little while later.

“I'm gonna head home.” I pull my keys out of my pocket.

“You can say it, Hunt.”

“Say what?”

“That you'd rather go home to your woman than hang out with your brother.”

“Eli.” I see the surprise in his eyes when I use his childhood nickname. I take a deep breath. “I'm glad we finally had dinner. Talked. I don't think we're at the 'going out for drinks' stage of our relationship yet.”

“I get it. One day, though.” He shoves his hands into his pockets. “Soon I hope.”

I nod in agreement. We stare at each other for a few seconds.

“See you tomorrow night. Don't check me too hard into the boards,” I finally say. “Thanks for dinner.”

“Any time, little brother. Any time.” Elias turns and walks to where his car is.

I set off toward my truck and pull out my phone to call Madison.

It would be so much easier if we lived together. Even when I'm gone for long stretches, I could come home to her asleep in our bed. Maybe if the Storm decides to sign me to a new contract, we can have that conversation.

I'd like nothing more than to be able to go home to Madison every night.

Chapter Thirty-Four

Madison

I glance around the packed arena, watching everyone file in as the Fury and the Storm take the ice for warm-ups. Hunter is passing a puck back and forth with Brody. As if he can feel me watching him, he looks over at me. His eyes widen when he sees I'm wearing the jersey he gifted me for Christmas. I turn around to show him the back with his name and number on. Over my shoulder I see EJ watching the interaction.

Shit.

After last night's less-than-courteous introduction between EJ and Hunter, I didn't sleep well, worried about tonight's game. I almost didn't come because I didn't want to rub it in EJ's face that I didn't pick him. That I'm not with him.

Around two in the morning I realized that that was stupid. Not that I'm not nervous that something will go down tonight or that my dad will finally catch on that I'm dating one of his players. That thought has me turning back around.

I look over at the Storm's bench, but my dad is deep in conversation with one of the other coaches. I watch him for a few moments.

I need to tell him.

If we're going to have a relationship he needs to know that I'm dating one of his players. I glance over to where Hunter is warming up with Brody. I need to tell him too. It's time. No more secrets. I only hope when it's all out in the open they both still want me in their lives.

"Thanks for the invite," Rachel says, as she takes the seat next to me, handing me one of the two beers in her hand.

We're sitting a couple of rows back from the glass, in about the same place I sat last time I was here.

"No problem." I take a sip of my drink, watching the game start.

The first few minutes go by without much incident. But EJ and Hunter aren't on the ice at the same time.

"Want to tell me what's got you chugging your beer?" Rachel leans closer to me during a television timeout.

"What?" I peel my gaze from the Storm bench to glance down at the cup in my hand. Sure enough, over half of my beer is gone, and we're only ten minutes into the game.

"If you wanted to get drunk at a hockey game, you should have told me. I wouldn't have driven," Rachel says with a laugh.

I shake my head, gesturing to the visitor's bench. "EJ and Hunter met last night."

"I take it that it didn't go well."

"Nope," I say, as I turn my attention back to the game. I don't want to get into the details right now and thankfully Rachel doesn't press the matter.

"Need me to get you something stronger?"

"No, I'm good," I say. "But thanks."

Hunter hops over the boards and onto the ice at the same time EJ does. *Shit*. Made it ten minutes into the game before they were out at the same time.

The Storm gain possession and skate toward the Fury's net. Brody passes the puck to Hunter who passes it to Caleb. The Fury close in, and the puck gets trapped along the boards.

I lean forward in my seat trying to see what's going on.

EJ slams one of the Storm into the boards as the Fury clear it out of their zone.

Both teams change on the fly, and I exhale a deep breath, thankful that no punches were thrown even if that check from EJ was uncalled for.

The last five minutes of the period pass without any incidents, and the Storm even manage to score a goal.

"Want to get something to eat?" Rachel asks, pushing to her feet when the buzzer sounds for intermission. I nod and follow her out into the concourse.

We're fifteen into the second period when it happens.

EJ and Hunter exchange words in front of the Fury's net after the whistle blows. EJ shoves Hunter, but the referee gets between them before anything escalates.

Caleb takes the face-off and gains possession of the puck but he can't shake off one of the Fury's defenders. I can't hear what Brody says but he's clearly asking for the puck, banging his stick on the ice. Caleb passes it to Brody who is waiting for it to the left of the Fury's net.

Before he can take the shot, one of the Fury's forwards comes flying at him and Brody's forced to skate toward the wall with the puck. The Fury players hot on his heels, he checks for an open teammate. Out of nowhere EJ skates up behind Brody, lowers his shoulder and plows Brody into the wall so hard the glass shakes.

The Fury take possession of the puck, moving into the neutral zone. It was a questionable hit but the referees don't call a penalty and Brody's definitely shaken up as he skates back to the bench.

Hunter yells something at Caleb and another player I don't know before skating after EJ.

Shit, this can't be good.

I can't hear what's said over the roar of the crowd, but suddenly gloves are dropped and Hunter is in EJ's face. EJ responds by grabbing Hunter's jersey with one hand and

swinging his first with the other. Hunter tries to get free but he can't.

EJ throws another punch that Hunter ducks. Hunter's response is to grab a hold of EJ's jersey and punch him. I jump to my feet and get close to the glass. Elias, who's first to the fight, grabs EJ from behind. EJ brushes him off and continues after Hunter.

By this time, the rest of the Storm have made their way over, and the referees are trying to break up the fight. Elias says something, I can see his mouth moving, and suddenly he's dropping his gloves and swinging at EJ.

Holy shit.

The crowd goes crazy. Fighting between teams is one thing, but teammates fighting each other never happens.

After what feels like forever, the referees and the linesmen finally pull everyone apart. Hunter, EJ, and Elias are given ten-minute penalties and go to their respective locker rooms because there's only five minutes left of the period.

"You okay?" Rachel asks from next to me. I jerk back, not realizing she was standing there, a hand over my racing heart.

I shake my head and follow her back to our seats. I can't focus on the game as play continues.

I wish I could go down to the locker room and make sure Hunter is alright. I pull my phone out, hoping that maybe he'll text me during intermission, but he doesn't.

This is all my fault.

Chapter Thirty-Five

Hunter

I chuck my helmet across the locker room and throw myself down on the bench. Ten-minute penalty for fighting.

Fuck me.

It probably wasn't the smartest move, but Elliot's hit on Brody was uncalled for. This isn't the first time he's done something like this. Only now that I know who he is to Madison his actions felt personal.

I saw the way he glared at me when she introduced us. She hasn't said anything, but I have a feeling he doesn't like me. So yeah, I saw red when he slammed Brody into the wall. I reacted. The only good thing to come out of the fight is that Elliot also got a ten-minute penalty.

But so did Elias.

I'm not sure why my brother felt the need to jump into the fight. I'm grateful but also feel like shit that him helping me meant fighting his teammate.

I roll my neck and shoulders, trying to shake out the tightness that's settled in since I came down the tunnel.

Groaning, I sit down on the bench, pull my jersey off, and wait for the rest of the team to come in for intermission.

“What. The. Fuck,” Brody bites out as he sits down on the bench next to me and reaches down to pull his skates off. I shrug.

“Quit being an idiot and starting fights. That's my job,” Wes says.

Great, the peanut gallery is here.

“He had it coming,” I grind out.

They know who he is. I warned them during morning skate. I figured they deserved to know what might happen so they could be prepared.

Wes says something but I ignore him, grabbing my water bottle and trying to calm the anger simmering beneath the surface.

Coach comes in and talks strategy for the third period. I only hear half of what's being said.

“Rhodes. My office. Now,” Coach barks.

Fuck me. I get to my feet and head to his office.

“What the hell is going on?” Coach asks once I'm seated.

“He had it coming.”

“This isn't like you. You're not a fighter. Yet you go get into a fight with the Fury's biggest defender.” He laughs. “And you

ended up with a Fury fighting for you.”

I run a hand through my hair as all the adrenaline leaves. Suddenly I feel every hit and punch.

My shoulders sag and I drop my head, mumbling, “Sorry, Coach.”

He nods, looking me up and down. “I don’t know what’s going on with you but get it together. You’re benched for the rest of the game.”

Shit.



“You okay?” Holt slaps me on the back as he makes his way over to his stall to get dressed.

We won last night’s game against the Fury, but Coach still rode us hard during practice this morning.

I’m ready to go home and take a nap before Madison comes over. After everything that’s gone down in the past twelve hours, I can’t wait to hold her in my arms.

“Fine.”

“What are you wearing?” Wes asks, a little too loudly, and the rest of the locker room goes silent.

“Huh?” I glance down, realizing that I’m wearing a pair of boxer briefs that Madison gave me for Christmas. They have slices of cake in different colors all over them. I stand and wiggle my hips so they can take in their full glory. “Don’t you like them?”

“What the fuck, man.” He swats at me and rolls his eyes.

“You’re just jealous I have a girlfriend who gifts me things like this, and you don’t.” I’m laughing now and dancing around the two of them.

“Whipped,” Wes stage whispers to Holt although his voice isn’t quiet. I tip my head back and laugh even harder.

“You alright?” Brody walks up to us, a towel around his waist, his hair wet.

“I think he had too much coffee this morning.” Holt points at me.

“How the hell do you have this much energy after that brutal practice?” Brody drops to the bench with a groan.

“Because I’m not in my midthirties,” I say with a smack to his shoulder. I sit back down and pull on my jeans.

Brody shakes his head, and we finish getting dressed in silence.

“Alright. I’m out.” I get to my feet and grab my bag. “See you all later.”

“Dinner tonight at my place?” Wes asks.

“Sorry. Can’t.” I feel bad saying no to my friend.

We haven’t hung out a lot lately outside of practice and games. I’ve been so wrapped up in my relationship with Madison. Wes’s face falls.

“Madison is coming over. How about the next time we’re home on a Sunday night?” I do miss our Sunday night dinners,

and Madison will understand if I want to hang out with them one night.

“I get it,” Wes says.

“Well, count me in,” Holt says from behind me.

“Mind if I invite myself?” Brody asks.

I don't stick around to hear the rest of their conversation, heading for the door so I can get home and take a nap. I'm exhausted. The season is starting to wear on me.

I can't wait for the All-Star break in a few short weeks because it means a whole week of no games or practice. I plan to spend as much time as possible with Madison.

The second half of our season has us traveling more, and I know our time together will be sparse. I smile as I unlock my truck and toss my bag in.

For the first time in a long time everything is going right, even with last night's fight. We don't play the Fury again during the regular season, so I won't have to face EJ again.

I've got the career I always dreamed about.

And I've got the girl I didn't even know I always wanted.



“Hey, sweets.” I pull Madison into my arms a few hours later, not even bothering to close the door first.

“Hey, hot shot. Are you okay?” she asks, tipping her head back to look at me.

“I’m fine now that you’re here.” I hold her for a few seconds longer before releasing her.

She steps through the doorway and drops her bags. I grab her hand and lead her down the hallway.

“Where are we going?” she asks.

“My bedroom.”

“Hunter? I think we should talk about what happened the past couple of days.”

“We will,” I say, moving over to my bed. “I want to hold you.” She nods.

Tugging off my shirt so I’m left in only athletic shorts, I climb into bed and use the pillows to prop myself against the headboard. As much as the decoration in this apartment isn’t to my taste, the bed is comfortable.

Madison climbs in and comes over so she’s sitting with her back to my chest. I band my arms around her, pulling her close, leaning over to bury my nose in her hair.

“Are you okay?” she asks again, stroking my arms.

“I’m fine,” I mumble into her hair.

“I’m sorry about EJ.”

“That wasn’t your fault, sweets. But why didn’t you tell me that EJ was Elliot Jacobs of the Nashville Fury?” That’s something that’s been bothering me—why she never told me who EJ really was.

Madison shifts so she can look at me. “I’m sorry. I should have told you but I wasn’t sure how our dinner was going to go. I didn’t want to say anything to you that might have you fighting him on the ice for no reason.”

“It wouldn’t have been for no reason.” I run a hand through my hair. Why does she think me fighting the asshole that hurt her would be for no reason? “How did dinner go?”

She chews on her lip for a moment before saying, “Not great.”

She takes a deep breath and tells me about their conversation and how Elliot asked her about our relationship. Yep, probably a good thing I didn’t know about this before our game because I definitely would have started a fight with him during warm-ups and not gotten any ice time.

“I wish you’d told me,” I admit. “But it’s probably better that you didn’t.”

“Did you get fined? For the fight.”

“No.”

“That’s good. How was dinner with your brother? I noticed he jumped into the fight with you. The fans around us were speculating the rest of the game as to why that was.”

“It went well. We talked about some stuff. I don’t know where or what our relationship is going to be, but we’ll get there.” I take a deep breath. “After the fight, I realized that whatever resentment I was holding against him for being our father’s chosen one was stupid. He jumped into a fight against

his own teammate because I needed his help. Not that the fight was the only reason I forgave him, but it sealed the deal.”

“I’m glad, hot shot. You deserve all the people on your side you can get.” She pats my chest gently before leaning back against me.

I’m at a loss for words so I simply pull her into my arms and breathe in her sweet scent. We sit in silence for a while until I hear her phone ringing from the other room.

“I should probably go see who that is. Aunt Judy and Curtis left for a cruise this morning so I’m house-sitting,” she says climbing out of the bed.

She’s gone for a few minutes, and I’m about to go find her to make sure everything is alright when she comes back into the room.

“I have to go,” she says, her voice shaking and her face pale.

“Everything alright?”

“I don’t know.” She pauses. “That was my dad.” She wrings her hands. “It’s kind of an emergency. He’s fine. He’s not hurt or sick or anything. It’s something else ...”

“Want me to drive you?”

“No. No. It’s okay. I’ll call you later,” she says with a shake of her head.

“Okay, if you’re sure. Let me know everything is okay.” I pull her into my arms and kiss her. She nods.

I follow her out of the bedroom and watch as she grabs her bags and, with a wave of her hand, leaves.

I sink into the couch. Something's not right. I wish she'd told me what was going on.

Why didn't she want me to come with her?

I grab the remote and turn on the television, hoping it will distract me from all these thoughts swirling around in my head.

But I can't focus.

My phone starts ringing. I pick it up, hoping it's Madison telling me what's going on, but it's Coach. *Why is Coach calling me?*

"Hey, Coach. What's up?"

"Hey, Hunter. Sorry to bother you."

"No problem," I say slowly.

He sounds off. Like something's wrong. I immediately worry that something has happened to one of our teammates, and he's calling to tell me.

"Can you come down to the arena? There's a bit of a situation."

"Okay. What kind of a situation?" I'm on my feet, walking to my bedroom to find my clothes.

"A media situation. We're in my office when you get here."

"I'll be there as soon as I can," I tell him.

“See you soon,” he says and hangs up.

There’s not a lot of traffic on the road at this time of day, and I make it to the arena in record time, my heart racing the entire way.

I wave hello to the security guard on duty and hurry in the direction of the locker room and Coach’s office. The door is mostly closed when I reach it, so I knock.

“Come in.”

I push the door open and step into the office. “What’s going on Coach?”

“Hunter, have a seat.” He gestures to the only empty chair in his office, and that’s when I see her.

I shuffle back a step, blinking a few times to make sure I’m not imagining the scene in front of me.

What’s Madison doing here?

She turns to stare up at me, confusion—or is that fear?—written in her expression. She told me she had a family emergency.

I crinkle my forehead glancing back and forth between Madison and Coach. What the hell is going on? Why would he call her? Better yet why would she tell me her father was on the phone, if... . no. There’s no way.

I glance from her to Coach again.

Then I see it.

She has his eyes.

I'd never have guessed without seeing them side by side, but now the resemblance is uncanny.

For fuck's sake. He's her father?

"Hunter, have a seat," he repeats.

I stand fixed to my spot, my mouth opening and closing but no words coming out. My brain has short-circuited.

"Hunter," Madison whispers. It's as if her voice restarts my brain. I glance one more time between her and Coach before taking a seat.

"I take it you didn't know," Coach says, crossing his arms and pinning Madison with a look.

I know his expressions well by now having played for him for half a season. He's disappointed. Is he disappointed with Madison for not telling me? Well, shit, that's not what I expected.

Chapter Thirty-Six

Madison

“Hunter,” I whisper, glancing up at him.

He’s standing just inside Dad’s office, glancing back and forth between the two of us, his mouth gaping open.

Shit. Fuck.

This was not how I wanted this to go. My voice seems to bring him out of his trance, and he finally takes a seat.

When Dad called me, all he’d said was there was an emergency. He was fine, but he needed me to come to his office. He’s never asked me to his office, so it has to be something big. I have my suspicions.

When I stepped into his office, he told me to have a seat and that we were waiting on someone. Apparently, that someone was Hunter.

This can’t be good. My heart races. Did he find out we were dating, and now he’s going to intervene and tell us we can’t?

“Did you not know that Madison is my daughter?” Dad asks.

I glance over at Hunter, who is staring at me, his hands clenched at his side.

“Madison,” Hunter bites out. The tone of his voice has me turning toward him.

“I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.” I stare at the floor, unable to look at him and see the hurt I’m sure is there.

“Why?”

I huff out a breath. “At first I didn’t know where things were going with either of you, and then I didn’t know how to bring the subject up.”

“Oh, I don’t know, how about ‘hey, Hunter. Do you know your coach? Yeah, he happens to be my father.’ That would have worked.” I wince at the sarcasm in his voice.

Dad claps his hands. “Clearly you two need to talk about Madison not telling you about me, but right now we have a bigger issue.” He looks up at the door and says, “Come on in now, Sutton.”

The door is pushed open, and a woman about my age with long blonde hair, dressed in jeans and a Storm polo, walks into the room.

“Madison. Hunter. This is Sutton,” Dad says, and Sutton nods at us. “She’s in our PR department and alerted me to what she stumbled on. Sutton, the floor is yours.”

I turn my attention to Sutton, and that’s when I notice she’s holding an iPad. My stomach rolls at the thought of what she might show us.

This can't be good.

“Hello,” she says before glancing over at my dad. “I’m sorry to drag you all in like this, but we figured it would be best to handle this quickly.”

“Show them.” He gestures to the iPad in her hand. She pushes a few buttons before setting it on the desk between Hunter and me.

Shit.

My hands shake as I lean forward and look at the pictures and article headline—“Orlando Storm’s Head Coach’s Daughter Dating A Player.”

What the fuck?

My head swivels to Hunter, who is staring at the iPad, his face a shade of gray. He mutters something under his breath. I rub a hand over my chest, trying to alleviate what feels like an elephant sitting on it.

“What? What did you say, Hunter?” I ask.

“Elliot. Elliot Jacobs,” he repeats louder this time.

“What?” I lean back in my seat, away from him. “He wouldn’t do this.”

“You said that he wasn’t happy when he found out you were seeing someone seriously and clearly he wasn’t thrilled it was me. I mean the fight pretty much proved that.”

No. No. No.

“Madison. Are you okay?” Sutton puts her hand on my arm, and I realize that I’m on my feet, my chair toppled over backward on the floor.

Dad glances back and forth between Hunter and me, his eyebrows pinched together.

“I can’t.” I pull in a deep breath through my nose. “He wouldn’t do this.”

“Does he know Coach is your father?” Hunter’s shoulders drop and he hangs his head.

“He does,” I mumble. The pain that I was feeling about keeping the secret from Hunter is ten times worse now that he knows that EJ knew but he didn’t.

Shit.

He’s right. I can count on one hand the number of people that know, and they’re all people who would take my secret to the grave.

All except EJ.

EJ leaked this story.

There’s no two ways about it. He’s jealous. Of course he wanted to ruin my relationship with Hunter. Ruining Hunter’s career is the icing on the cake. *Hunter’s career. His spot on the team.* I right my chair before crumpling back into it, tears threatening to spill.

Hunter leans closer to me. “Were you ever going to tell me? Or were you going to keep it a secret forever? Kind of

important, don't you think?" He grinds out the last word, and it makes my stomach drop.

We're getting into this now, I guess.

"I was going to tell you tonight, but we got interrupted by this." I gesture to the iPad that sits forgotten on the desk.

I'd planned to tell Hunter the truth tonight. Tomorrow, I was going to call my father and tell him about me and Hunter.

Only now, everyone and their brother will know. All our dirty laundry aired in public for everyone to see.

"Right." Hunter gets to his feet, and begins to pace.

This is all my fault. Had I not had dinner with EJ, he never would have met Hunter and found out who I was dating. I could have told Hunter about Jake being my dad. Yeah, there's a possibility he would have been mad, but at least the whole world wouldn't have known.

We could have gone to my dad together and figured out how to disclose this so his spot on the team wasn't jeopardized. Now I don't know what's going to happen. He's still waiting on a contract for next season. Will the team even want him now?

"How about we give you two a chance to talk before we sort this out? Otherwise, I have a feeling we'll be here all night." Dad pushes back from his desk.

"Come on, Sutton. Let's give them a minute." He follows her out and closes the door behind him. Great, we've run him out of his office.

I huff out a breath, lean back against the chair and close my eyes.

“At first, I didn’t know you played for the Storm. Then we got to know each other as friends. I didn’t know what kind of relationship I was going to have with my dad in the beginning. For all I knew we were never going to see each other again after the first time we met and telling you too soon would have distracted you. I didn’t want you to be accused of getting special treatment because we were dating. I didn’t want to add to your stress. But I was going to tell you tonight and him tomorrow. Figured things would either work out or they wouldn’t, but I was tired of keeping secrets.”

Hunter stops his pacing and sits back down. “You lied to me.” He turns to look at me and there’s hurt written all over his face. “I asked if you knew my coach, and you flat out said no.”

My shoulders sag and I stare down at my hands. “I didn’t know him when you asked me. We’d only had one conversation.” It’s a lame excuse, but it’s the best I’ve got.

Hunter fists his hands in his lap. “I don’t know what to say. I need some time to ... come to terms with everything, with all of this. I—It’s hard to digest. Coach is your dad. I can’t. I need some space.” He shakes his head. “But what are we going to do about this?” He sweeps his hand toward the iPad.

“Can we come back in?” Sutton peeks her head into the office. I nod and she and my dad step back into the room.

“We were talking.” She gestures between herself and my dad. “We don’t think there will be any problem with you two dating. I’m going to speak with the general manager, but I think he’ll agree. Once I’ve done that, we’ll issue a statement. You two started dating after Hunter secured his spot on the team. Hopefully in a couple of days this will all blow over.”

Hunter nods.

“Great. I’ll get right on that.” She picks up the iPad and leaves.

“Are you two okay?” Dad asks, glancing between the two of us.

Hunter reaches up to tug on his hair. “Fine, Coach. Peachy.”

I hear the sarcasm in his voice and sigh. I know Hunter. I know he’ll be worried that the Storm won’t want him next season after this news. If I could go back in time and change things I would but I can’t and now I have to live with the outcome.

How could I be so stupid? Why didn’t I tell him weeks ago? Tell both of them.

“Don’t worry about this, Hunter. Nothing’s going to change.”

He gets to his feet. “If that’s it, Coach?”

“Yeah. See you at practice. If you need anything, call me.”

Hunter stalks out the door. I want to rush to my feet. Fly after him. Ask him if we’re alright. If we can talk. I hate that

all of this came out the way it did. This is not how I wanted either of them to find out.

Now everyone who reads that article will think Hunter only has his spot on the team because of me. This is a far worse outcome than had I told him the truth. In trying to shield him from stress and worry I made it worse. I hope Sutton can do damage control or else I'll never forgive myself for ruining his reputation.

"You alright, Madison?" Dad asks.

I shrug. I don't really know how to answer that.

"How about I walk you out?"

"Okay." I follow him out of his office and through the arena. "Thanks," I mumble when we reach my car.

"If you need anything. Anything at all, Madison. You know where to find me. Hunter will come around." He shoves his hands in his pockets and turns to leave.

"Wait." I call after him and he turns back to me. "Did you know about Hunter and me?"

"I did. I saw the way he greeted you at the game earlier in the season. Couldn't take his eyes off you during warm-ups. Plus, hockey players are not the greatest at keeping their voices down, and they forget my office is in the locker room. I know far more about some of them than I probably want to know, but yes, I heard your name and Hunter's thrown around together. I suppose it could have been a different Madison, except I saw you two sneak away at the barbecue."

“You’re not mad?”

“Mad? Why would I be mad?”

“He’s one of your players and I’m your daughter.” I know I’m stating the obvious, but this reaction is not at all what I expected.

“Hunter’s a great guy. Focused. Driven. Calm. Smart. Dedicated. I couldn’t have picked a better guy for you.” He smiles and nods before turning away. “Night Madison,” he calls over his shoulder.

“Night. Dad.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

Madison

It's been ten days since the story broke that the head coach of the Orlando Storm has a daughter who is dating one of his players.

Ten days since I've seen or talked to Hunter because the team have been gone on a week-long road trip.

I've been watching the games, and there's something off with him. Someone else probably wouldn't notice but I see it. It's the little things. He's missing easy passes, hesitating before taking shots. It's all my fault. I'm the cause of his lackluster playing.

My dad has texted twice to tell me that everything worked out. The general manager wasn't concerned that we were dating.

Dad even sent me the statement the Storm released. I'm thrilled that at least the article didn't cause any negative repercussions for Hunter's career. At least not yet.

He still hasn't gotten a new contract, that I know of, and we're already deep into January.

I peek through the curtains of Judy's front window and see that they're still out there—the reporters. Their numbers have been dwindling every day since the morning the story broke. Today there are only two.

Aunt Judy and Curtis will be home from their cruise tomorrow, and I'm really hoping that they'll all be gone by then.

My phone rings and I startle. I see it's Rachel and hit ignore. I feel bad. But I'm not in the mood to talk to her. I'll text her later.

I spoke to her the morning after the story came out to give her a heads-up in case any reporters reached out to her for comment.

She came over the second night with wine and ice cream. We stayed up late talking. It was nice, but when she offered to come over the next night, I turned her down. She's got a business to run, and I don't want to do anything to jeopardize anyone else's career.

My phone rings again and I sigh. Doesn't she get the hint? But when I see that it's EJ, I decide it's now or never.

“Yeah?” I bite out, not bothering to hide my anger.

“Hi, Mads.” His voice is soft, and I cringe at the nickname.

“What do you want, Elliot? Haven't you done enough damage?”

He clears his throat. "I'm sorry, Madison."

My pulse pounds in my ears, and I want to scream. Instead, I take a deep breath and say, "If you can't have me, no one can have me. Right?"

"He's not good enough for you."

I rub my forehead, feeling a tension headache starting. Talking to a friend shouldn't make me feel this way.

With that realization, I make a decision that, if I'd made it months ago, would have prevented all of this from happening. I wasn't strong enough to make it then, but I'm strong enough now.

"We're done. Don't call me anymore. Stay away from Hunter."

There's silence on the other end of the phone for a moment before he says, "Mads, please."

"No, Elliot. You lost that right when you did what you did." Before he can reply I hang up.

He calls me back. I hit the Ignore button.

With shaking fingers, I go into my contacts and block him. I drop my phone onto the couch, and the tears start to fall.

Our relationship is over. There's no coming back from what he did to me. He betrayed my trust.

Our relationship was probably over a year ago, but I had hoped we could find our way back to friendship. Well, no more.

Sitting on the couch, I cry for my failed friendship, for the boy who protected me in school, who helped me up when I fell down. I say a silent prayer that he can figure himself out and find happiness, but it won't be with me.

I don't know how long I cry for, but eventually, I have no more tears. I take a shaky inhale, wipe my face, and go back to the guest room I've been staying in. I climb into bed, pull the heavy comforter over my body, and close my eyes.



Voices jar me awake, and for a moment, I'm confused about where I am.

When the room comes into focus and the past ten days come slamming back to me, I groan. I shove the covers back and get out of bed, trying to figure out who's downstairs.

Realistically, I know it's probably Aunt Judy and Curtis, but at this point, I wouldn't put it past Rachel to have found the spare key and let herself in. I pad down the stairs and into the living room to see Aunt Judy and Curtis on the sofa drinking tea.

"Hello," I mumble.

"Good, you're up. How about a cup of tea?" Judy gets to her feet.

"I'm good, thanks. What are you doing back already? I wasn't expecting you until Tuesday."

Judy blinks at me before glancing over at Curtis. “It is Tuesday, dearie.”

“I guess I lost track of days,” I mumble with a wave of my hand as I walk to the kitchen, suddenly starving. Unsurprising since I slept for an entire day.

“What’s going on?” she asks as she follows me into the kitchen.

“What do you mean?” I open the fridge and pull out a dish of leftovers.

“Dearie, I already spoke to your father. I know what went on while we were gone. What I don’t understand is why you’re wallowing. Everything turned out okay. Didn’t it? Your father is worried about you. He said you were ignoring his calls.”

“I’ve been busy.” Part of me is annoyed that she’s asking all these questions, but part of me is glad that someone’s stepped in to ask what’s wrong. I know I’ve been spiraling, and I haven’t been strong enough to pull myself out of it.

“Sleeping? Good grief, sweetie, when was the last time you got out of the house?”

I grab a bowl and serve myself some leftovers. “There have been reporters camped outside. I didn’t want to deal with them.”

“Well, they’re gone now. When was the last time you showered?” She wrinkles her nose, eyeing me up and down.

Instead of answering I put my bowl in the microwave. Come to think of it, I don’t remember when I showered last.

That's when I realize the Storm shirt I'm wearing has stains from the ice cream I dropped on it three nights ago.

Shit, I really am a mess.

I push down the overwhelming urge to cry and grab my food out of the microwave, then take a seat at the table. Judy silently moves to the sink and starts washing the dishes that I've let pile up.

"You don't have to do that. I was going to do them before you got home," I mumble around mouthfuls of food.

"It's fine. When you're done eating, you're going to shower, and then we're going to talk."

"Nothing to talk about."

She glances at me over her shoulder. "Madison Mae Harris. That's bullshit. You know it. I know it."

I sigh. She's right, I do need a shower. I can't argue with that. That's when I realize how much of a mess the kitchen is. There are empty bowls and discarded glasses everywhere. When did it get this bad? I blink back the tears that threaten to fall, pulling in a deep breath through my nose.

A few minutes later, I make my way upstairs to shower and change. I tried to help Aunt Judy clean up the kitchen, but she wouldn't let me. She simply pointed at the stairs and gave me a death glare that said if I didn't go upstairs and shower on my own, she'd have Curtis carry me up there.

Half an hour later, I walk down the stairs, showered, and in a fresh pair of leggings and my favorite oversized plaid button-

down shirt. I do feel better after a shower and putting on clean clothes.

My steps falter as I round the corner into the living room and see who's sitting on the couch.

"Rachel? Dad? Aunt Judy? What's going on?" I ask glancing around the room at the people staring back at me.

Aunt Judy and my dad exchange looks I can't quite decipher.

Rachel clears her throat, folding her hands in her lap. "Mads, we're all worried about you. This isn't healthy."

"I'm fine. See." I wave a hand down my body. "Showered and changed. No need to worry about me anymore."

"You're not okay, Mads. And that's okay, but you can't hole up here like this. It isn't healthy. When was the last time you went outside? Got some sun?" Rachel tilts her head, studying me.

I know she means well. I know they all mean well, but that doesn't mean I have to like it.

I cross my arms, shifting from one foot to the other. "I don't know. A few days."

"You should talk to Hunter," Dad says gently.

"I can't. I'm not ready to deal with that." My voice shakes and I stare down at the carpet, willing myself not to cry. "I'm ruining his career before it even really gets started."

This is the first time I've voiced out loud the thought that's been circling in my head since the article was released.

“No, you’re not.” He reaches out to touch my arm, but I sidestep away from him and begin to pace.

I hear whispers behind me, but I can’t make out what’s being said. They’re probably trying to figure out the best way to handle me.

I stop my pacing, resolved in my decision. “I love him, isn’t this what’s best? If I take myself out of the equation, he won’t be so distracted. I’ve seen it. I know you have too.” I look at my father. “He’s not been focused. He hasn’t been playing his best. If I wasn’t around, all of this wouldn’t have gone down, and he wouldn’t be ruining his career.”

“Madison, a few bad games aren’t going to ruin his career. If you love him, don’t you think you should tell him that? Talk to him. Let him decide if he has enough space in his life for two loves,” Dad says.

I furrow my brows. “Two loves?”

“You and hockey.”

I stare at him. I don’t know what to say to that. What he’s saying makes sense. But part of me feels like it’s unfair to drag Hunter through all this drama. “But you’re still my father. That’s not going to change.”

He drags in a deep breath, running a hand through his hair. “I thought we resolved this. The front office doesn’t have an issue with it. Nothing shady happened. They like what he’s done for the team and so do I. You’ve got nothing to worry about. Neither of you do.”

“Honey.” Aunt Judy steps closer to me, putting her arms out.

I heave out a breath, stepping into her embrace. I didn’t realize how starved I was for human touch until now.

“It’s going to be okay. No one blames you. Yes, maybe you made a bad decision not to tell Hunter sooner, but you need to reach out to him, talk to him,” Judy says gently rubbing my back.

“He said he wanted space,” I mumble into her shoulder.

“I think he’s had enough space,” Rachel says. “Call him. The worst that can happen is he sends you to voicemail.”

I pick my head up from Aunt Judy’s shoulder and step out of her arms. Taking a deep breath I say, “Okay. I’ll call him. He may not want to talk to me, though.”

“Good,” Rachel says. “I should probably go. I left Brandon all alone, and the afternoon rush is about to hit.”

“I’ll show you out,” Aunt Judy offers.

“You need anything. You call me, you hear? Everything will work out.” Rachel wraps her arms around me in a quick hug before she follows my aunt out of the living room.

“You okay?” Dad asks softly.

“Am I making the right decision? Why aren’t you telling me that I should cut Hunter loose? Wouldn’t that be better for you? For the team? He won’t have any distractions.”

He tucks his hands into his pockets. “I want my players to be happy. Not distraction-free. Even some of them that are

unattached are focused on other things. In all my years of playing and coaching, the happiest players are the ones that play the best. I can tell when a player is going through something outside of hockey because their game is off.

“So no, I don’t want you to break up with Hunter for my benefit, for the team’s benefit. If you love him, you should tell him. Let him make his own decisions about what’s going to make him happy. And with that, I’m going to go too. If you need me, you know where to find me.”

I nod, at a loss for words. What he said makes sense, I know it does, but deep down I still wonder if things between Hunter and I can work out.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

Hunter

Another shitty game. I missed an easy pass from Brody that could have been a goal. Shitty playing seems to be all I'm capable of lately.

I pull my jersey off, probably a little harder than I need to, flop down onto the bench, and yank on my skate laces. I see movement in my periphery but ignore it, hoping whoever it is won't stop to talk to me.

I'm in no mood. The same way I've been in no mood for the past week and a half.

"What's going on?" Caleb asks, taking a seat next to me.

I sigh. Why the hell is he over here? His stall is on the other side of the room. I run my hands through my hair, tugging on the ends, and shrug.

"Come on, we all know something's going on. Is it still about the article?"

I pull on the back of my neck, unsure how to answer.

He must sense my hesitation because he leans over and whispers, “Spill it, Hunter. As your captain it’s my job to make sure the team is working well together, and something is off with you.”

Tipping my head back, I lean against the divider between the stalls, close my eyes, and take a deep breath.

“How about this,” Caleb says, “go take a shower and change. We’ll talk when the locker room is cleared out. How’s that sound?”

I open my eyes and find him studying me, his eyebrows raised.

“Okay, fine.” I give in. Maybe it’ll help to talk to someone about everything that’s going on. With a nod, he walks back to his stall.

I finish undressing and head to the showers. I take my time, hoping that it’ll give most of the guys ample time to leave.

When I decide it’s been long enough, I turn off the shower, grab my towel, wrapping it around my waist as I step out. Back at my stall, I get dressed quickly. I’m sitting down pulling on my dress shoes when Caleb comes sauntering over, followed by Brody, Holt, and Wes.

“Great. You brought backup,” I grumble, slumping against the wall.

“We’re worried about you,” Wes says as they all step closer, forming a semicircle around me. “You’ve been off, and you won’t talk to us about it.”

I huff out a breath and tell them the whole story. They knew about the article, but they didn't know who leaked it.

Elias called me last week and confirmed that it came from Elliot. Apparently he was drunk at a bar the next night bragging about it. One of their teammates who knows I'm Elias's brother heard and told Elias.

We talked for a while, and I thanked him for stepping in during the fight. I know we have a long way to go in our relationship, but it seems like we're headed in the right direction.

"I don't know if I can forgive Madison for not telling me the truth about her father. Maybe I should just focus on my career."

"Madison probably should have told you sooner. But what's done is done. It wasn't her fault that it came out the way it did. You said she wanted to tell you that night but Coach called." Caleb takes a deep breath before continuing. "Do you think she said that to cover for herself? Or was she really going to tell you?"

That's something that I thought about a lot the first couple of days after everything went down. Was Madison really going to tell me that night?

Was it a coincidence that she was going to tell me the same day the article came out, or was she going to keep hiding it from me? I tug at my tie.

“I trust her. If she said she was going to tell me, I have to believe her,” I finally say.

“That’s what I figured you’d say, but I had to ask,” Caleb says.

“I know.” I glance around at the guys standing around me, who have become not only teammates but my family.

“It is a lot of work to juggle a family and this career, but if she’s worth it, you make it work,” Caleb says. “Is she worth it?”

Before I can answer, Brody pipes up and says, “Your hockey career is short-lived. You’ve got ten years, if you’re lucky, fifteen. Love is a lifetime. Don’t give it up.”

I do a double take and raise my eyebrows at him. His eyes go wide, and he inhales a choppy breath.

Is he speaking from experience? My mind drifts back to New Year’s Eve and meeting his best friend. *Maybe there’s something there.*

Before I can ask him, Wes interjects, “How would you feel if in six months or a year you were out and saw Madison with someone else? Because you know she’d move on eventually.”

I growl at the thought of some other man kissing her, seeing her naked, giving her orgasms. *Nope. No. Not happening.* I scrub a hand down my face.

“That,” Wes says, pointing at me. “That’s all the answer you need.”

“You know what you need to do, go tell your girl that you love her.” Holt pats me on the back.

“He needs a grand gesture,” Wes says.

“No, he doesn’t. That’s only if he screwed something up.”

“Nope. They’ve gone two weeks without talking,” Wes argues back.

“I’m out.” Brody throws his hands in the air and backs away from us. Slung his bag over his shoulder, he disappears out the door.

“What do I do?” I glance from Wes to Holt and finally to Caleb.

“Go over to her place. Tell her how you feel,” Caleb says. The other guys are all slowly nodding in agreement. That feels too easy, though.

“Can’t hurt,” Holt says, running a hand through his hair and grabbing his bag from the bench. “Are you good?” he asks, studying me.

“I’m good,” I say as I get to my feet, grab my bag, and follow the guys out, contemplating my next move.

Is it too late to show up at Madison’s door unannounced? Will she even answer the door for me?

I don’t know, but I need to do this tonight. I need to ease the ache in my chest that’s been there since the conversation in Coach’s office.

The road is quiet and thankfully the drive across town goes quickly because I need to make things right with my girl and tell her how I feel, if it isn't too late.

I park my truck in Judy's driveway and head to her apartment. Taking a deep breath, I knock on the door, relieved to see a light on. I hope that means she's home.

"Hunter?" Madison says when she opens the door wearing one of my Storm shirts, a pair of sweatpants with a rip in the knee and her hair loose across her shoulders.

When she steps closer to me I notice her eyes are bloodshot. Has she been crying? "What are you doing here?"

"Hi, sweets. I'm sorry. Fuck." I run a hand through my hair, yanking on the ends. "Can I come in? Can we talk?"

"Yeah." Madison steps back to let me in and closes the door.

I spin around and take a hesitant step closer to her. I want to reach out and touch her, but I don't.

We need to clear the air between us, so I settle for being close enough to breathe in her sweet, comforting scent.

"Madison." My voice comes out shaky. "I'm sorry."

She stares at me, her mouth opening and closing a few times but no sound coming out. She takes a deep breath wringing her hands. "Why are you sorry?"

"For fucking this whole thing up." I throw my hands in the air. "I don't—I'm sorry."

“Come on.” She takes my hand, and I let out a breath, feeling the weight that I was carrying around disappear when her hand slides into mine.

She leads me to her couch, where I take a seat. Taking a chance, I pull her down into my lap. Breathing another sigh of relief when she nestles into me.

“What’s going on, hot shot?” she asks, turning around to meet my gaze. She reaches up and caresses my cheek. A sigh escapes me as I lean into her touch.

“I fucked up. I’m sorry. I should have talked to you after everything happened. I handled things badly.”

“No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I should have told you sooner about my dad. It’s all my fault that the news came out the way it did.” She lets out a huff. “Actually, if I’d told you about my dad from the beginning, it wouldn’t have mattered what EJ did. I’ll understand if you don’t want to be together after all that drama went down. I know it was a distraction to your game.” She trails off and buries her face in her hands.

I pull her into my chest, wrapping my arms around her. “I want you, sweets. I’ll always want you. I should have told you this weeks ago.” I pause and Madison lifts her head from my chest. “I love you, Madison Mae Harris. You’re it for me. I think you’ve been it for me for a while. As much as I love hockey, if I had to choose, I’d choose you. Every day. All day.”

“Hunter,” Madison whispers, swiping away the tears that are falling down her cheek.

Fuck. I made her cry. I open my mouth to say something. To make her feel better, but she shakes her head at me, and I wait.

“Hunter, I love you too. I’d choose you every day, all day, no matter what.”

My eyes well with tears, and I clear my throat, hoping she doesn’t see the emotion written on my face.

I’ve spent so long wanting someone to choose me, and here it’s finally happening in a way that I never expected.

I came to Florida hoping to live out my dream of playing professional hockey, making it in the NHL, and not only have I done that, but I’ve also met my dream girl, found my forever, found my *home*.

“Say it again, sweets,” I whisper, struggling to gain my composure.

“I love you.”

“No, the other part,” I choke out, needing to hear her say it again.

Her eyes shining with unshed tears, she says, “I’d choose you every day, all day, no matter what.”

There is still one thing on my mind that I need to ask. “What happens if I get traded?”

“We’ll move somewhere new.”

“You’d go with me?” I ask, my face lighting up.

“Of course I would, hot shot. You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“What about your business? I couldn’t ask you to give that up.”

Madison sits up, takes my face in her hands, and pulls me toward her. “You’re not asking me to do anything I don’t want to do. Don’t you understand? I love you, Hunter. I’d go with you anywhere.”

“Fuck,” I mumble, my eyes stinging with emotion again. How did I get this lucky to have this woman in my life?

“I love you too, Madison,” I say, blowing out a breath and trying hard to keep my voice steady.

I close the distance between us, sealing our lips together. No matter what happens, I’ll always come home.

To her.

At the end of the night.

At the end of the season.

She’s my home.

Epilogue

4 Months Later

We're silent as we make our way to the locker room after losing game five of the first round of the Stanley Cup playoffs to the Montreal Flyers.

I look over at Brody, and it's written all over his face. He blames himself. Of course he does.

He missed a shot with seconds to go in the game. A shot he's made a hundred times. A shot that would have tied the game and taken us into overtime.

I don't know what to say to him. It's not his fault. Not really. The rest of us played poorly too. We shouldn't have been in the position to need the goal. Half of us are injured. All of us are exhausted. It's been a long season. But it's still heartbreaking.

Brody throws himself down on the bench, a tirade of curse words leaving his mouth. I trade glances with Wes and Holt,

who both shake their heads and shrug their shoulders. I get it. I'd be angry too if it was me who missed that goal.

Aside from Brody's outburst, the room remains silent. I take a shower and get dressed quickly. Madison is waiting for me. I can't wait to hug and kiss her. Lose myself in her and try to forget about this terrible game.

I'm disappointed our season is over now, but I am excited to spend more time with Madison. The second half of the season was rough because we were constantly traveling. I was grateful that she agreed to move in with me.

The first thing I did after I signed a three-year contract with the Storm was find a place to call home and ask her to move in. The second thing I did was buy a ring.

Yeah, I plan to ask Madison to marry me, I just haven't figured out when I'll do it. I don't want to rush her, things with her business are hectic, and I know she's still healing from everything with Elliot. I'll wait until she's ready.

Coach comes into the locker room while I'm getting dressed and gives a speech about the end of the season that I only half pay attention to.

It's still weird to me that he's Madison's father. I have a hard time not calling him Coach when we're all together.

He thanks us for a great season and tells us he'll see us at the end of summer and to stay out of trouble. Everyone claps. He waves and heads out to do interviews.

Caleb says a few words thanking us for the great year and mentions an end-of-the-year party at his house next week. The locker room begins to clear out.

I turn my attention to Brody, who is sitting on the bench hunched over, a towel draped over his head, and still in his uniform and skates.

“You alright?” I ask. He doesn’t answer me. I nudge him to make sure he hasn’t fallen asleep.

“Fine,” he grumbles, not bothering to look up at me.

I lock eyes with Caleb, who raises his eyebrows at me. I gesture at Brody’s unmoving form. He nods and comes over.

“Brod. You alright?” Caleb asks.

Wes and Holt join us but stay silent. I start to leave but stop when Brody lifts his head and pulls the towel off. “I fucked up,” he whispers.

“Hey, man. It wasn’t your fault.” Caleb claps him on the shoulder, sitting down next to him.

I stay silent, letting Caleb take the reins on this one. “If we weren’t in the position we were in, it wouldn’t have mattered whether you got that goal or not. It’s on all of us. We’re a team. There’s not one guy to blame.”

Brody shakes his head. “This might be the end for me.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“My contract is up. The Storm haven’t called offering a new one. After tonight’s performance this might be it for me here.”

“Don’t say that. We all have shitty games,” Holt says.

Brody shakes his head. “My play has been off since January. you all know that. I’m not a young guy anymore. I wouldn’t blame them if they want the space in the salary cap that’ll be freed up if they don’t re-sign me. The team needs younger guys.” He glances over at Caleb. “It’s how it works. You know it. I know it.”

“Don’t say that,” Caleb says. “You’re one of the best damn forwards in the league.”

Brody shakes his head again and starts taking his skates off. “Was. I was one of the best forwards in the league. If I was still a great forward, I would have scored that goal and we wouldn’t be sitting here depressed that our run for the Cup is over.” He stands and pulls his jersey off. “I’m gonna go take a shower.”

Caleb stands too. “You know where to find me if you want to talk. You’re coming to the party next week, right?” He pins Brody with a look.

Brody shrugs and continues getting undressed.

I take that as my sign to leave. Madison is probably wondering where I am. “If you want to talk or get a beer. You know where to find me,” I tell Brody. He nods.

Grabbing my bag, I wave to the guys that are left and make my way out to where Madison is waiting for me.

“Hi, sweets.”

“Hey, hot shot,” she says, wrapping her arms around me. I relax into her touch, feeling better already. I give her a quick kiss before taking her hand and turning toward the parking lot.

“Ready to go home?” I ask.

“Always.”



Thank you SO much for reading Hunter and Madison’s story. If you enjoyed it, please consider leaving a rating/review on [Amazon](#) and/or [Goodreads](#). Want more of Hunter and Madison? Click [here](#) to get an exclusive BONUS EPILOGUE. Or scan the QR code below for a link to the Bonus Epilogue. The Orlando Storm will be back in 2024.



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About the Author

Marissa James grew up reading books and dreaming of being an author. She finally decided to pursue her dream of being a published author in 2022. She loves to write happily ever afters with a perfect blend of emotion and steamy romance. When she's not writing, she can be found working her day job, reading romance novels, watching hockey, or hanging out with her husband.