



THE ICE
LEAGUE SERIES

Dury Bender

S.C. KATE

Our Bender

The Ice League series

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As always, to my mom. This series would never exist without your encouragement and our morning talks.

And to every girl who watched the 2005 MTV Best Kiss award and dreamed of having that kind of kiss one day.

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1. Tyler - Nine years ago

Detention sucks.

The only thing worse than sitting in school for an extra hour— my least favorite place in the world— is when Casey, my older brother, finds out about it.

Casey's been my legal guardian ever since my mom passed about five years ago, and up until this year, things were going pretty smoothly. Casey found his soulmate, Addie, at the rink, and with her and my help, he broke into the AHL and then NHL.

But here's the thing... I knew things were going too well. I sat there breathing in the stadium air while watching my brother rack up points and fame from center ice seats, and I thought, *wow, things are perfect... Too perfect.* And I was right to be suspicious, to be waiting for the other shoe to drop, because it always does drop, no matter what.

Things came crashing down at the start of the winter when Addie left him... when she left *us*. Because she was like my older sister. And now she was just... *gone*. Just like my mom. And I couldn't even be a wreck about it because Casey was hanging on by a thread, and I had no clue how to fix it. So, I tried to lay low and make the whole legal guardianship thing easy for him. But me getting detentions? Not something he'd take too lightly. It'd send him into another tailspin of feeling not good enough— a feeling I knew all too well. So, I had to get my shit together somehow.

I pulled up my hood and laid down on my desk, preparing to nap away the next hour. My friends, Duke Callahan and Reggie Williams, were both in detention as well, but we were directed to sit far apart from each other so we wouldn't cause trouble. It was probably for the

best to be honest.

I kept my eyes trained on the snowy-rain mix pelting at the window to my left, and that's when *she* walked directly into my line of sight.

Fiona Haley.

We went to elementary and middle school together, but seeing her now, it was clear she'd changed a lot over the years. She dyed her natural blonde hair pitch black, added a diamond stud to her cute, upturned nose, pierced about six or seven more earrings up her ears, and she went extra heavy on the eyeliner. She used to dress in tight clothes a lot, but now she just wore oversized sweatshirts over leggings. Today's sweatshirt, definitely a guy's from the size of it, had cigarette burns on the sleeves.

I rarely saw her anymore, but I'd never forget her acts of kindness when we were kids. One time, when I was called to read aloud in class in the fourth grade, Bradley Welters, a stuck-up prick who now captained the football team here at the high school, groaned and shouted out that I took too long, making me feel lower than low. She didn't hesitate to put him in his place. She punched him right in the eye, shouted that he was a bully, then patiently held her finger under each word for me as I read, and she even whispered the correct words to me when I got stuck.

We were on different tracks here at the high school— she took all AP and honors courses, where I was in the remedial ones, just trying to make it through. We only ever crossed paths here in detention. I spotted her in the art hallway occasionally though, displaying her drawings in the showcases. Sometimes I took longer routes to classes so I could pass by her art stuff. I didn't know her well at all anymore, but I was proud of her.

She slumped in her chair and plugged headphones in her ears. She had bags under those

heavily make-up covered eyes of hers. I couldn't help but notice that she looked how I felt inside... Sad.

Seconds later, her bright blue eyes slid to mine. She pulled her headphones out and shot me an intimidating look that said, *what?*

I snapped my neck forward and chastised myself for staring like a creep.

But after a couple minutes of silence, my brain kept wanting to study her further. I peeked down at her backpack on the ground leaning up against her desk. Her name was doodled on the top of it in pretty, loopy handwriting.

When I figured enough time had passed, and when I had enough courage, I slowly looked back at her.

Big mistake.

Her neck whipped around to mine. "What's with you? Why are you staring?" she demanded in a harsh whisper.

I swallowed hard. "N-Nothing," I stammered.

"Well, stop," she huffed under her breath. "It's freaking me out."

Self-loathing caved in on me. I hated that I scared her. "Sorry... it's just..."

"What?" she snapped impatiently.

I'm not sure why I felt so compelled to speak to her, but looking back on it years later, I'm so fucking glad I opened my mouth that day, because reaching out to her when she needed someone... It was one of the most important things I ever did. Because she saved me too.

I cleared my throat and bit the bullet. "Are you okay?"

The annoyance left her face. Her mouth dropped slightly open, like she was at a loss for words. She

squared her shoulders to the front of the room and stared straight ahead for a beat, and I immediately felt bad for asking. *Figures*, I thought, *I couldn't do anything right these days*. I laid back down on my desk, trying to drown out the interaction with sleep.

I'm not sure how much time had passed when I was poked awake. I tried to slap the hand poking me away, thinking it was one of my buddies, but then a female voice whispered, "Tyler, c'mon, get up."

Feeling all sorts of confused, I lifted my head and rubbed the sleep from my eyes, hoping I wasn't about to get chewed out by the teacher on duty.

But then I realized it was *her*, and she whispered close to my ear, "Wanna get out of here?"

Those words woke me up like a bucket of water drenched down my back. Looking around us, almost everyone was either sleeping, including the teacher, or working on homework.

Giving her a quick nod, I grabbed my backpack and tiptoed after her. It was then that I noticed she only came up to my mid-chest. She was a tiny thing. She quietly turned the doorknob, looking back at the teacher the whole time, then cracked open the door and slipped out.

There's no way I could slip through the tiny crack she made. I licked my lips and reached to push the door open wider, and it released a loud creek.

Her bright blue eyes widened in panic.

I stood stock still and spied the teacher's desk over my shoulder. I lucked out. The old teacher was still peacefully snoozing away, only my buddy, Reggie, caught my eye. He shot me a questioning look. I put a finger to my lips in a shush motion, then turned back to Fiona. She made a twirling motion with her finger, as if saying, *wrap it up, let's go*.

Barely breathing, I slipped through the door and followed after her.

As soon as we were in the empty hallway, a laugh bubbled out of her, and I let out a relieved chuckle. Honestly, I felt kind of proud I could help her feel better.

“Let’s go rookie.” She grabbed the sleeve of my hoodie and tugged me to the exit, and I’m not sure why, but I wordlessly followed.

We jogged across the freezing, cracked parking lot, and she led me to her beat up, old, white Camry.

As soon as she unlocked my side, I dumped myself on her lumpy passenger seat and rubbed my hands together for warmth.

“That was fun, wasn’t it?” she asked. Her teeth chattered as she cranked up her car’s heat.

It was fun... But then it kinda dawned on me... What if we were caught? I pulled at the front of my hair. Casey would freak. He’d probably yell so hard that the vein in his forehead would pop out.

“Tyler, buddy, you look way too serious,” she said, giving me a playful shove. I felt oddly comforted that she remembered my name, but that didn’t ease much of my tension. She rolled her eyes. “Ya gotta chill out, you’re making me feel tense.”

I swallowed hard. “What if we get caught?”

“Nah, we won’t,” she said confidently. “We’ll only get caught if we try to leave the parking lot. Joy, the old hall monitor, is sitting at the top of the lot waiting to catch people. Don’t ask me how I know,” she said with a snort. She looked at her vintage watch. “We’ve got about a half hour ‘til we can leave.” She pulled out a pack of cigarettes from her center console and held them my way. “Want?”

I shook my head. “I’m good.” Smoking did a

number on your lungs, and I needed to be in top physical shape for hockey. Plus, Casey would have my head if he ever found out.

She leaned forward and turned up the volume of the music playing in her car before lighting her cigarette.

“Those are bad for you, ya know,” I told her.

She just shrugged. “You’re probably bad for me too.”

My forehead creased. “Why would-”

“I love this song,” she breathed out, cutting me off. She closed her eyes as she listened.

Admittedly, it did have a nice rhythm. I blew out a sigh and tried to relax back against her passenger seat. “What’s it called?”

Her eyes flashed open, and she craned her neck to look at me. “You don’t know this song?”

“Uh... no? Should I?”

She studied me for a beat. “What does it sound like to you?”

I listened to it for a second and chewed on my bottom lip. “It’s kind of... dreamy, I guess. I see purple clouds in my mind.”

Her face broke into a bright smile, instantly making me feel better, like I answered correctly for once. “Right! It’s called ‘Dreams’ by Fleetwood Mac. They’re the best. They completely changed the way I listen to music. Before, I only ever listened for the vibe, which *is* important, but that’s the base level. That’s like listening in 2D, but with them, I started listening to her words too. And the way she feels them. It’s so... it’s so... important. You can really feel her emotions, ya know? She tells a whole story, and it makes me feel like she’s talking right to me, giving me advice, and I suddenly don’t feel so alone.” She shook her head and rolled her eyes. “Sorry

for rambling.”

“No, no, don’t apologize.” She was clearly passionate about this, and I liked hearing her thoughts.

“Hmm.” She squinted. “Maybe you’re right, it’s kinda *your* fault. You’re really easy to talk to.” Her lip quirked up, telling me she was joking, and then I was smiling too.

“Thanks, no one’s ever said that to me before.” I was rarely on the receiving end of compliments because I rarely did anything right— except for when I was on the ice. That’s why I needed hockey. It saved me from being a lost cause. It gave me something to work for.

She nodded, then reached to turn up the next song. “Okay, so this is the *most* hype song to ever exist.”

“This?” I laughed, pointing to her car’s old CD player. “No way.” It was a slow ballad.

“Yes, it is! Just wait for it, trust me,” she implored with her bright blue eyes.

I tried to listen for what she meant but I still wasn’t getting it. I reached to turn the volume down, but she swatted my hand away.

I thought she was crazy, until the last forty seconds of the song.

Fiona started pounding on the wheel of her car, singing along with so much passion, and damn, the girl could really sing. She even had a growl to her voice. She was amazing.

We sat in silence after the song finished.

“Okay, wow. That was hype,” I said, feeling kinda shocked. “Glad I didn’t change it.”

“Right! It’s called ‘Silver Springs’, it’s my favorite of all time,” she said excitedly. “I knew I liked you, Tyler,” she said confidently.

I swallowed. Wow. Those words made me feel seen. Special. It was rare, and it was nice. Because I was never viewed that way. It was hard to grow up watching everyone around me have someone special to love the shit out of them, but no one for me. Like Duke and his girl, Claire— the two of them battled it out every fucking day, vying for each other’s attention. Claire didn’t even see anyone else in a room when Duke walked in, and the same was true vice versa. On top of that, I had a front row seat to Casey and Addie’s epic love story... But no one ever loved me like that.

“I like you too,” I said quickly back, wondering if maybe she was my person.

“No.” She looked demure now as she shook her head. “Don’t look at me like that,” she said, patting my thigh.

My eyebrows drew down in confusion. Had I said something wrong? “What do you mean? Like what?”

She held my gaze for a beat, and it’s like she could see straight down to my soul. “Like you’re gonna fall for me.”

The car was suddenly way too quiet. I needed the next song to start. “Why? Is... Is that a bad thing?”

“Yes,” she said simply. “Because I’ve already fallen.”

“What?” Now I was even more confused. I knew she was way smarter than me, but what did that mean?

“I was perfect until he said he loved me,” she muttered more to herself than me.

“Don’t say that. You’re perfect now,” I pushed.

She gave me a half smile. “No. My heart isn’t whole anymore. I don’t know if I’ll ever be the same. A guy can really wreck a girl, ya know?” Her lips twisted and her eyes started to get a bit glassy.

Shit. I shouldn't have stepped into that territory with her. "Hey, it's okay." I said, awkwardly reaching my hand out but not quite sure if I was allowed to touch her.

A tear dripped down her pretty face and she quickly swiped it away. "Ohmygod. Ugh," she grunted, then flipped down her cracked car mirror and looked at herself crying.

"Why... Why are you doing that?"

She sighed and pushed her dyed hair behind her ears, a gesture that made her look younger and reminded me of her elementary school self. "Because it's comforting. I can share my tears and feelings with myself. That way I don't need anyone else."

I swallowed hard. "But you can share with me." Building up some courage, I gently reached out and smoothed a tear away, and my finger came away with a layer of makeup. My eyes darted back to see that I'd revealed dark yellowish skin— a color I knew well from hockey; a color that came after a bad bruise started to heal. My entire body froze.

"Fi, what the fuck?" My heart pounded. I touched her gently as I inspected the bruise at the side of her eye. "How did that happen?"

She swatted my hands away. "Don't look so freaked. I obviously left the situation," she said, rolling her teary eyes. "That's why I'm so heartbroken right now, duh."

My heart pounded with adrenaline I had no clue what to even do with. "You're sure you're okay? You can tell me. Me and my brother, we'll fix it for you, I promise." I said it with as much conviction as I could, because I really did mean that. I'd throw someone's ass down for her. I didn't know much about her these days, but I knew she was a good person, and anyone willing to hurt her deserved a beat down.

“Fix it?” she asked dubiously.

“Yes. I’m serious.”

“I was right about you,” she said, patting my thigh again.

“Huh?”

“You’re good people, Tyler Jetterson,” she said, giving me a small smile. “You called me Fi. I like that. Is that a hockey thing? Giving nicknames?” Her light laughter had a musical lilt to it.

My jaw clenched. I knew she was changing the subject on purpose, and I wasn’t sure if I should let her.

“I am fine now.” She sighed. “I’m just disappointed with myself, ya know? Whenever anyone said, ‘girls fall for guys just like their dad’ or ‘you’ll marry your father,’ I always scoffed because, Me? Him? No way in hell. But... I guess it does happen.” She turned to me with a shrug.

“Fuck. Your dad did stuff like that? Mine...” My throat painfully closed up. “Mine did too.” But I barely knew about it. I never even met the man. He was only around before I was born. That part of it was mostly Casey’s story. Casey’s hurt. He shielded me from it as best he could. I only saw the ending of the situation... Knowing that he got out of jail, my mother wanted to invite him back into our house, but Casey took a stand, saying he’d run away with me if she did. My mother left in the middle of the night to be with him again. Shortly after that, we were at her funeral. He was back in prison.

Now I was just terrified of ever being perceived as violent. I didn’t want anything linking me to *him*. I wanted to be the total opposite.

She reached over and intertwined her fingers with mine to hold my hand, then she turned the music up and we listened to more Fleetwood Mac.

“You said a guy wrecked you,” I said with my eyebrow furrowed, “But... I’m a guy, can I help un-wreck things?”

She gave me a sad smile. “You are so sweet for offering. But I’m not sure it works that way.”

“Well, it might. Let’s try. Tell me how. How to be a better man.”

She sighed. “Well, I’ll say it in hypothetical terms. When I lash out at you, it’s because I’m feeling insecure. I’m afraid you’re cheating, or you don’t love me anymore. And honestly, I really wish a boy would say, I know you feel insecure right now, so how can I reassure you? Or even just hug me. That’d be much nicer than screaming at me that I’m a crazy bitch.” She rolled her eyes.

“You’re not a crazy bitch,” I said instantly.

She lifted her shoulders and sniffled. “I think I kinda wanna become one now.”

“Okay, *that* sounded crazy,” I joked.

She snorted, despite her glassy eyes. “You’re funny, Tyler.”

And that loosened something in my chest. I felt proud that I could make her laugh.

“So, what’s your story?” she asked, nodding her chin at me.

I looked down at my backpack between my feet. My legs were starting to feel cramped in her small car. “I live with my brother. Things were goin’ great for us ‘til his girl broke up with him. I don’t want to make life harder on him, ya know? Because he’s going through a lot. So, I’m trying to be perfect, but sometimes...” I cringed. Sometimes I had issues with authority. “I just wish they didn’t break up. She used to help me a lot with school. She made our house fun. I could talk to her about stuff

too, ya know? He bought her a ring and everything, and she just... left.”

“Guess that’s show biz, baby,” she told me with a pat on the shoulder.

I was at a loss for words, because seriously? That’s it? That’s all she was gonna say?

“Fi-”

“I’m kidding.” Her lips twisted in thought. “Maybe she just needs some time. Maybe she needs something he can’t give her.” She shrugged like it wasn’t a big deal.

I ran a hand through my hair and tugged at the ends. “I don’t understand girls. What can’t he give her? He’s an NHL player, he’s loaded.”

She chewed on her bottom lip. “Independence.”

“But she doesn’t need to be independent,” I countered.

“Oh, Tyler,” she said sympathetically. She was my age, but when she talked like that, she felt years beyond me.

“What?”

“Yes, she does need independence. If she’s anything like me, there will always be a ‘what if’ in her mind. *What if he leaves? What if it doesn’t work out?* You need to be able to stand on your own two feet. Plus, she can’t rely on him for her happiness, that’s too much to put on a person. And besides,” she sighed and leaned back in her chair, “sometimes it’s more peaceful living without y’all.”

“Y’all?” I asked confusedly.

“Men.”

Silence settled in the car around us. I didn’t have the details of how she lived, but I had a feeling she knew what she was talking about, and that she had a right to

hold a grudge against men.

“So, why are you in detention, Tyler Jetterson?”

She was pretty candid with me, so I wanted to be honest with her too. “I have a problem, and let’s just say, I distract pretty well from said problem, but then it lands me here.” A more obvious answer would’ve been, whenever a teacher wanted me to read aloud in class, I basically acted like an obnoxious asshole so I’d get sent in the hall to avoid reading.

“Hmm,” she tapped her jaw. “I could use a good distraction.”

My ears perked up. “Yeah?”

“Yeah,” she said. In a second, she was climbing over the car council, and then she was sitting in my lap, straddling me.

“Oh shit,” I breathed out, struggling to keep my eyes on her arctic blue ones. I’d never held a girl like this before.

“What, you don’t like this?” she asked innocently, running her long nails through my hair.

“No, I like it,” I breathlessly mumbled.

She slid a thumb over my lips. “What’s this from?” she asked. I knew she was talking about the tiny scar stemming out of the right side of my upper lip.

“Uh... hockey puck,” I said weakly.

Her face cracked into a playful grin. “Are you lying, Tyler Jetterson?”

“Uh... no,” I tried to keep my voice even, but it came out a little too high.

She laughed. “Hmm... Maybe I’ll find out one day.” A wicked smile slid across her lips, then she pushed against me into a kiss. Her tongue swept across my lips, then was in my mouth as she ran her nails

everywhere. My hands moved up to her ribs, holding her close.

She released a breathy little moan, and that did something to me. Suddenly I was taking charge, wanting her to feel that again, wanting her to make that noise again. It was like chasing a high. I slid my hands up her shirt, and her body trembled against mine.

I froze and mumbled, “No?” against her lips.

She grinded her hips against mine. “Yes.” She grabbed hold of my wrists and placed my hands where she wanted them.

I’m not sure how long we made out, but when she pulled back, her face was flushed. “Make ya feel better?”

I couldn’t stop a grin from taking over my face. “Yeah, I liked that. You?”

She laughed. “Yeah. How ‘bout I teach ya some more things you might like, Tyler Jetterson?” she asked, wagging her eyebrows.

Winter bled into spring, and she equipped me with a shitload of knowledge on the female experience, while I distracted her.

We weren’t boyfriend or girlfriend or anything like that. We were just two best friends who loved the shit out of each other.

Both of us ended up in detention at least once a week, and when I found out she got one, I’d get one on purpose, and I suspected she did the same for me. Because of her kindness through the years, Fi had some great contacts throughout the school, including a Student Government girl named Olivia. Olivia had access to the main office, and she changed my emergency contact from Casey’s number to mine so that Casey wouldn’t be

notified of my detentions or skipped classes, which allowed me to relax about it.

Sometimes Fi and I just listened to music, and she'd explain the lyrics to me. I think she just liked that someone listened to her and all her big ideas and theories. Other times, we got into more trouble than that. We snuck into the art room so she could teach me to paint or sculpt— she was amazing at everything, but me? Not so much. We also drank cheap alcohol that she somehow smuggled— which tasted disgusting— and we glitter bombed the fuck out of the football team's locker room after Bradley Welters called her a "crazy bitch" in AP Lit. I was just content to follow her, no matter where she went or what trouble she wanted to get into.

During one of our adventures, we struck up a deal: She'd quit smoking if she could pierce my ear. I had no clue how or why she came up with that idea, but after a month of no cigs, I reluctantly let her.

"C'mon, lay down across the table," she instructed me with a giddy smile on her face. We were in the dark art room all alone. She was sitting cross-legged at the head of the table wearing one of my old tournament hockey hoodies with her hair piled on top of her head in a messy bun. My heart warmed just like usual seeing her in my hoodie. It felt like I was giving her some kind of protection. "Let's go." She tapped the table with her knuckle.

"Patience, jeez, Fi," I told her, feeling a bit shaky all of a sudden.

"Ha! I *have* been patient. A month, Tyler! A full month! This is my reward, let's go," she urged.

I did a few air squats, then punched myself in the jaw to hype myself up, Fi just laughed at me.

I reluctantly laid down, and when she pulled out the needle, I almost passed out. She cackled

obnoxiously.

“It’s not funny,” I complained. “You promise you’ll never smoke again?” I eyed her seriously.

Her mouth dropped open. “I thought this was for a month!”

“No fuckin’ way, Fi,” I said with a humorless chuckle. “You underestimated how scared I am of needles. This is for forever.” I held my hand out to shake hers.

Her shoulders slumped. “But the hole will close up in like a month. Before it was an even deal, a month for a month,” she complained, pouting her lip out.

“Nah, that puppy dog face doesn’t work on me. That needle’s only coming near me if you say never again. Deal?”

She rolled her eyes and reluctantly shook my hand. “Fine. I’ll never smoke again, promise.”

A shit-eating grin slid onto my face.

“Well, you don’t have to look all gloaty about it,” she grumbled.

A laugh popped out of me. “Yes, I do, I’ve been harping on you about this for months, girl.” I closed my eyes and sighed. “Do your worst.”

Seconds later, my ear was in searing pain.

“Ow! Fuck, Fiona,” I shouted as my eyes flew open. “That fucking hurt!”

“Wait! Don’t move! I’m putting an earring in.”

“What?! That wasn’t the deal!” I tried to squirm away, but she grabbed my hand and placed it on her boob, and well, I’m just a man.

As soon as she let go, I grabbed my ear. “That fucking hurt,” I repeated.

Now that she was done, she howled with laughter, shaking a hand in front of her face to dry her tears.

“Jesus. How did you do that so many times?” I stared up at her with wide eyes. “I change my mind, you might actually be crazy. Frickin’ masochist.” I shook my head.

She fought my hand away and held an ice cube to my injured earlobe. “Calm down,” she said, and then she sputtered into another giggle fit. “I’m sorry! Your reaction was priceless. ‘Ow, Fuck, Fiona!’” she mimicked me.

“*Seriously?!*” I yelled, but now that I was more relaxed, I was fighting off laughing too.

“Good...Good thing,” she wheezed between laughs, “good thing women have to have the babies. We’d go extinct if men had to do it. Damn, that was funny.”

“Yeah, yeah, get all your laughing in, little brat.”

When she finally settled down, she smoothed her free hand over my chest. “Poor Ty-ty. Here I thought hockey players were supposed to be tough about pain. I thought you were gonna cry!”

“Wow, mean,” I complained. “I thought women liked men who can cry. In touch with my emotions and all that,” I countered.

“Nah, we don’t want *emotional* men per se, we just want y’all to be yourselves and have the ability to understand and *handle* emotions. Big difference.”

I tucked her words away to contemplate later.

She leaned over my head and planted a sloppy kiss on my lips, her body fucking shuddering from laughing. “Besides, you should be happy!” she said when she pulled back, patting my cheek. “You’re more

my type now.”

That made me pause. “I-I am?” I stuttered.

“Hmm...” her nose crinkled, “not really. But it was worth a try.”

She cackled at my pissed face. I reached up and tickled her sides, her weakness, making her squeal and fall over top of me.

The hole in my ear was tough to explain away to Casey, and I got absolutely roasted for it in the locker room, but I didn’t care. It felt well worth it to me. I’d do anything to help her, to keep a smile on her pretty face.

The only problem was that during the last few days of that school year, she wouldn’t give me her number or address. I begged her for a way to contact her through the summer, but she wouldn’t budge, she just kept saying she didn’t want to ruin anything, and I had no clue what that meant.

Going into the next school year, I turned down the opportunity to play for a junior hockey team in Pennsylvania. Casey and I got into a rare blowout—screaming at each other, slamming doors. He completely flipped out, yelling at me that he didn’t understand me, that he didn’t even know me anymore, saying that I was throwing away a good thing. I yelled back that I learned how to do that from the best. When he asked what that meant, I screamed at him about not getting Addie back, which just got him even more riled up.

But the real reason I passed it up?

So Fi wouldn’t be alone.

But the first day of senior year, she was nowhere to be found.

I looked for her everywhere, in all her frequent places, the art wing, the theater room, but I couldn't find her. I finally tracked down some of the AP art kids and asked one of her friends, a girl named Adrienne, what happened to her, but she wouldn't answer me.

"Fuck this!" I burst at Adrienne in the busy hallway, making a bunch of teachers eye us warily.

"It's okay," Adrienne said through clenched teeth. "She went to a better place."

"What?!" My stomach lurched. I held my mouth. I was going to be sick. My mind immediately jumped to her going back to her abusive ex and ending up hurt, or worse, dead— an ending that I knew all too well. But this time, it was worse because it felt like it was all my fucking fault for not trying harder to contact her through the summer.

Adrienne grabbed my hoodie and roughly shoved me into the nearest empty classroom.

"Calm the fuck down, Tyler!" she ordered, shoving a trash can in front of me. "She's fine."

I wasn't sure what was happening to me, but I couldn't breathe and my vision was slightly blurring.

"Fucking breath!" she yelled at me, pounding me on the back.

"You made it sound like... like..." I held my chest as I wheezed for air.

She rolled her eyes. "Oh my God. You're so dramatic, no wonder you two got along so well."

I shot her an annoyed glare.

She sighed and reached up to pat me awkwardly on the shoulder. "I just don't think she wants anyone to know where she went. It's pretty important that she stay hidden from..." her eyes shifted nervously, "people around here."

“Her parents.” I knew what she was saying.

She nodded. “I’m surprised she told you about them. She never tells anyone. Abusive assholes.” She scoffed and shook her head. “Let me get in contact with her and I’ll see what she wants to say to you, okay?”

I nodded furiously. “Tell her I miss her. Tell her I love her. You’ll do that?”

Pity slid into her dark eyes, and I immediately regretted saying that aloud, because I felt way too vulnerable.

A week later, Adrienne passed me a note in biology class.

My heart pounded as I opened it and took in the sight of Fiona’s loopy handwriting. I concentrated hard on each word, trying to hear her voice as if she were speaking to me.

Ty,

You’re a good one, please never forget that. I’m happy to have known you. Your friendship will always be one of my favorites of all time, and it really meant the entire world to me. What you gave me... it’s more than you can ever know. Like legit- you won’t know, because I want it that way. I know you’ve got big dreams, and I really have this feeling that you’re gonna achieve them, so I want you to Go Your Own Way (like Fleetwood Mac, get it? ha-ha).

So please don’t look for me. Get out of this place and get after those dreams of yours. For me too, okay? Then maybe one day, I can say I know an NHL guy. And ya never know, maybe we’ll meet again when we’re both in better head spaces. I like to think we’ll

be even greater friends then.

But remember what I said about living without y'all men and it being super peaceful? Well, I finally found a really peaceful place, and I need that right now. Just know that I'm really, really happy here. Like, I can't even believe that I found this level of happiness. My heart— it isn't broken anymore. It's actually so full right now it's not even funny.

Lastly, please don't be all sad when you think of me. Be happy. We had so much fun together. Please remember the fun times. Like glitter bombing the fuck out of stupid Bradley Welters' football locker. I'm cackling just thinking about it now. He'll rue the fucking day he ever messed with us when you're in the NHL.

'Til we meet again, keep the dreamy vibe, Ty.

PS, sorry we listened to 'Silver Springs' together, you'll never forget the sound of my voice now, muahaha!

Love ya forever buddy,

Fi

I swallowed down the hurt in my throat. I would not cry. I would not. Because she was happy. She found her peaceful place, just like she wanted. And I'd rather it be me who was left lonely than her sitting here without me. So why did my stomach feel so heavy? Why did my eyes burn so fucking bad?

I stared down at her handwriting and my vision blurred. *Fuck*. I put my head down on my desk, willing myself to get my shit together, but the loneliness felt suffocating. I couldn't shake the sadness, the bitterness. It was all encompassing, closing in on me, making it so I

could barely breathe or else I'd cry. I didn't even get to say goodbye. God. How many times was this going to happen to me?

"Jettensen!"

Shit. I quickly tried to wipe away my face. There's no way in hell I wanted these assholes in class to see me cry.

But I guess I didn't pull myself up in time.

A second later, water was aggressively sprayed at the side of my head like I was a misbehaving puppy being punished. Kids around me burst into laughter.

No, no, no...

My fingers trembled as I looked down at the note on my desk. Fat water droplets from the teacher's damn squirt bottle dripped on it, blurring her loopy letters together, erasing the 'Love ya forever buddy.'

"I warned you," Mr. B barked on his way back to his desk. "Head up, Jettensen. Pay attention!" His voice sounded like it was coming from underwater and my whole body shook with rage. It took all I had not to jump up and attack the bastard, not to punch his face in... Because he just took this one *last* piece of her from me, and I felt like combusting inside.

I quickly rubbed my arm over my eyes. *Fuck. Not here. Not right now,* I ordered myself, because everyone's eyes were on me. But despite my best effort, my chin quivered, and I couldn't fucking take it. I was gonna lose it.

Keeping my head down, I quickly grabbed up my backpack and stalked out of the room.

"Mr. Jettensen! Where do you think you're going, young man?" Mr. B yelled at me. "Back to your seat. Stop walking *right now.*"

The anger and grief building inside me twisted

together, making me tremble. And I knew if I stopped, I'd wreck my entire life by slugging him in the face. Instead, I pulled the door open and slammed it shut behind me.

I stood there in the locker lined hallway feeling the reverberation from the door... and from her. Echoes of Fi were everywhere. The colorful memory of her tugging me along to find trouble clashed with the silent, dark, loneliness I was left in.

I could practically still see her throwing her head back with laughter, her misty eyes when she was fighting tears, the mischievous grin she'd get when she came up with what she deemed was a *tremendous* idea, the way she'd shove her hair behind her ears when she was nervous.

I'd seen Fi in all states, and I loved her through them all. We were there for each other. It was an unspoken promise, but it was there.

She was the kind of girl who changed your life forever. The kind of girl you loved forever.

So how could she just be *gone*? How could she leave me behind like this?

My throat burned as I walked through the school, and I tried to keep my shit together. I really, really tried... but with every step forward, I was breaking down. Choking on sobs. Wheezing for air. Crying over losing her. Crying over that fucking asshole destroying her note. And I really should've just left the school...

Instead, I found myself wandering down the art hallway, and my heart seized when the display case came into sight. The paintings that hung there hadn't been switched out since June.

There, in the center of the case, was her painting: A beautiful sunset streaking the sky and the outline of a car with two teenagers sitting on top of it. The little piece of tape underneath it read: Dreamy by

Fiona Haley.

Seeing it snapped me back to the spring when she first showed it to me...

"Is that us?" I asked in awe.

Her lips twisted and she blushed, looking almost shy—an emotion that rarely ever crossed her face.

"It is us!" I picked her up and swung her around, making her giggle. "It's amazing, Fi," I told her when I placed her back on her feet. I rested my chin on her head, and she stayed content in my arms. "My favorite thing you've ever made."

"What? Better than the vagina pot?!" she chortled.

In ceramics class, she accidentally made a clay creation that resembled female anatomy and only realized it after I pointed it out.

"Yes," I laughed, squeezing her waist. "Damn, you're so talented."

"Not as talented as you," she said, playfully elbowing me in the stomach. "My future NHL All-star boy."

I snorted, still studying every detail of her painting, trying to memorize it.

Her eyebrows pinched together as she looked up at me with her bright blue eyes. "You actually mean it though? You're not just saying that because I'm me and you're you?"

"I promise. I'd pay a million bucks for that," I told her seriously, still gazing at it.

She just laughed and told me I was crazy, to which I tickled her sides, making her squirm into me. But then she promised me I could have it after it was graded.

"You don't want it?" I asked.

"Nah, I can make myself another one," she said, reaching up to pat my cheek. "I think this one's yours."

...I decided right there in the hallway that the school wasn't worthy of having her painting. A school so gray and sad didn't deserve to have this little piece of *my* happiness.

And honestly, I might have momentarily lost my ever-loving mind.

I punched the glass, one, two, three times, but it wouldn't break. I threw my backpack at it, but it just shook. I took a full fucking trash can and chucked it at it as hard as I could, trying to shatter the fucking thing, but it didn't even scratch. I furiously stalked over to the trash can to throw it again, and that's when I was interrupted.

"Mr. Jetterson! What are you doing?!"

My neck whipped over to see Mrs. P, Fiona's favorite art teacher, a tiny woman with a pixie haircut. She stared at me with wide eyes, holding a hand to her chest. She looked... scared. Scared of *me*, and that just added to my misery.

My shoulders dropped, and I felt all the anger inside me dissipating, leaving me just sad and hurt and empty.

"She's... gone." My voice cracked as I struggled to find the right words to explain myself. "She's gone, and I have nothing. I have nothing to..." Mrs. P blurred in front of me. My shoulders shook and I covered my face.

In one of the most shocking moments of my life, instead of screaming at me, the little art teacher wrapped her arms around me in a hug.

I'm not sure how long I stayed there, crying like that on her small shoulder. It didn't fix the pain, but I

appreciated her trying. She rubbed my back like a mother would, and that made me unravel for different reasons.

When I finally settled the fuck down. She pulled away, sniffing a bit, and wiping at her own face.

“Okay, Tyler.” She pulled a lanyard off from around her neck and fumbled with a couple keys before unlocking the display case. She carefully untacked Fi’s painting and rolled it up before handing it to me. “I think this is yours.”

“Thank you,” I rasped out, trying to look above her head now because it felt too vulnerable to meet her eyes. “I should-” I looked at the trash surrounding the hall and felt like an absolute piece of shit.

“No, don’t worry. I’ll fix it. Just... take care of yourself, honey. You’re a good one, I can tell.” She patted my shoulder.

I didn’t feel like a good one. If I was that good, people wouldn’t leave me.

I turned and left, knowing that it’d be the last time I ever walked out of school...

Later that night, I found Casey sitting at the kitchen table, his shoulder wrapped up with a huge ice pack and an open beer can by his side.

I cleared my throat. I had to get this over with and make things right between us. We’d been walking on eggshells around each other for weeks and I hated it. “I’m sorry,” I forced out.

His face cracked with confusion as he spotted me standing at the edge of the kitchen. “What?”

“I’m sorry,” I repeated firmly. “Think you can call in a favor and get me another shot with that Pittsburgh team?”

He rubbed a hand over his eyes, looking like the picture definition of frustration. “Was all this a cry for help or something? Am I failing you?” His voice cracked and it just about killed me.

“No.” I hung my head. “It’s nothing to do with you. I had a...” I squinted, trying to come up with the best wording, “situation. I had to see it through.” I stalked across the room, pulled out a kitchen chair, and plopped down next to him. “It’s over now.”

He eyed me warily. “What does that mean? You have to spell it out for me. I’m sorry, but I’m bad at this, okay? Adds—” he winced and cut himself off, like it was too painful for him to even say her name. “She used to help me when it came to...” he wagged a finger between us, “this guardian shit.”

“I know.” I sighed. He wasn’t a bad guardian. He was just reeling from the shittiness of this past year and losing his partner... And now I unfortunately knew a little more about what that felt like. The Jetersen brothers needed to get our shit together. “I’ll put this in terms you’ll understand real quick.”

He waited patiently.

I rapped my knuckles against the wooden table. “I had an Addie... kinda.”

That sobered him up real quick. “Kinda? What does that mean?”

“It wasn’t exactly romantic love like you guys had, but... I loved her,” I choked out,

“Oh.” He nodded. “Well, what happened?”

I covered my eyes, willing them to stop burning. “I don’t really want to talk about it.” I reached for his beer, but he quickly swatted my hand away, then paused.

“What the fuck, Tyler.” His voice sounded exhausted.

“What? Oh...” I looked down at my right fist. I forgot I punched the display glass.

He pushed himself up and went to the fridge. He rustled in the freezer for a minute before pulling out a bag of frozen peas. He shook his head at me before practically chucking the bag at my head. “Do I even want to know?”

I winced. “Probably not.”

We sat in silence for a minute, but I should’ve known better than to think the conversation was over.

“So, the detentions, skipping classes, this...” He reached over and yanked my ear.

“Ow!” I slapped him away with my good hand. “She said it’d close up in a month,” I grumbled.

He laughed aloud. “Not sure it works the same for everyone, little brother.”

“Whatever.” I really didn’t give a shit, so long as she kept her word and never smoked again. “Wait, how’d you know about the detentions? Thought we got them hidden.”

“Jesus,” he muttered, rubbing a hand over his jaw to hide what I detected was a slight grin. “She sounds like trouble.”

“She was.” I smiled thinking of her. “So, how’d you know?”

He arched an eyebrow at me. “I have my ways.”

“Do I even want to know?” I asked.

He snorted. “Probably not. Let’s just say, I had an inside man checking in on ya. Wasn’t sure why I stopped getting those behavior notifications because I knew there’s no way you turned into a straight A student and cleaned up your act that quickly.”

I rolled my eyes. “Wow, thanks for the vote of

confidence, bro.”

He just shrugged and drained the rest of his beer before getting up to retrieve another from the fridge.

“My... friend, she’s an artist.” I wasn’t sure why I was even telling him. “She’s really great at it.”

He popped the top of his next beer. “Sounds like a cool person. Sorry, man.”

I shrugged. “She wasn’t my girlfriend or anything,” I clarified.

“Same kinda hurt.”

His words justified my feelings, and suddenly I was glad I confided in him. He pushed up from his chair and walked to the corner of the room to cue up the ancient record player.

“What are you doing?”

“It’s sad boy hours here in the Jettensen household,” he mumbled. “We’re either going to the gym and hitting the bag ‘til we’re both dead, or we’re wallowing in our own self-pity with Miss Swift. Right now, I’m hurting too badly to hit the gym with you.” Seconds later, Taylor Swift’s voice singing, ‘All Too Well’ filled the room. “Makes me think of her,” he said, sitting back down. “Is this pathetic? Yes. Do I care?” He cocked his head to the side. “No.”

“You have any Fleetwood Mac?” I asked him.

He arched an eyebrow at me.

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “Makes me think of my her,” I said with a smirk.

He sat back in his chair and took another swig of beer. “Fleetwood Mac... Good taste.”

I just nodded.

“So, I guess I’ll tell you now. I was hoping you’d

go to Pittsburgh. Ya know my assistant Coach? Coach Petersen? He's finally getting a head coaching gig."

My eyebrows raised. "Where?"

"Detroit. I kinda wanna follow him. I wasn't gonna go if you wanted to stay here in Minnesota, because that's too far. But... Pittsburgh is only four hours from Detroit. That's nothing. It's your choice though."

He'd already tailored too much of his life to my schedule. It was time for him to be free. And it'd probably be good for both of us to get away from here. There were too many memories.

"Okay," I said, nodding. "If you can get me a shot in Pittsburgh, I'll take it."

"It won't be a problem. They really wanted you. You forget that I trained ya, kid," he said, pulling me into a headlock with scary quickness. "Besides, Coach Pete will help get you there if I ask. He already wants to draft you as soon as he can." I struggled to get out of the headlock, and finally tapped out.

"So, we doin' this?" Casey asked, raising his hand to fist bump me.

I returned his fist bump. "Yeah. We are."

Hockey would become my number one focus again. Fi wanted it that way, and I'd honor her wishes.

2. Tyler - present day

“Wooo!” I released a celebratory yell as I ran off the ice last after our crazy win over Winnipeg.

Our home crowd fans were hanging over the sides of the hallway, screaming for me. I quickly lifted my stick and handed it to a little girl holding a cute homemade sign that read, “Number 17 on the ice, Number 1 in my heart.”

The staff in the hallway all clapped for me. I just had one of my best games of my career. We won 3-0 and I had all three goals, pulling me up to the second highest goal scorer on the team, only behind my buddy, Duke Callahan.

My teammates all let out a loud roar of applause as soon as I entered the locker room.

“Jetts gets to pick the song!” my teammate TJ Vonnie yelled over everyone.

“‘Go Your Own Way’, now!” I said, pointing to our stereo system.

TJ arched a curious eyebrow, but he listened to me. He was probably hoping for some rap song and was clueless about the greatness of Fleetwood Mac.

Everyone was looking at each other questioningly when the first few chords floated through the locker room, but I immediately started singing along and drumming on any available surface.

I pulled off my helmet and shook out my sweaty hair, then stripped my jersey in time for the chorus.

As soon as the hype guitar part started, I took my stick and started air-guitaring, then screamed the rest of the lyrics into my stick like it was a microphone. My

teammates were joining in, pounding along, belting it out as well.

It would've been a great private moment... but someone always has their damn phone going these days...

“Buddy,” my brother laughed into the phone the next morning, “Turn on SportsCenter.”

I fumbled with the clicker to quickly do as he said, hoping they were reporting on my sick hattrick... But dread washed over me as soon as I turned it on.

I dropped my phone through my fingers.

Because there I was on the screen, still in my hockey equipment, sans jersey, using my stick as a microphone while singing ‘Go Your Own Way’ with my eyes closed.

“Dude!” my brother’s faint voice yelled on the other end of the line.

I smoothed a hand over my hair. The damn broadcaster was laughing and the headline under the shitty iphone video read: “Who Hurt Tyler Jetterson?”

After the initial shock wore off, I picked up my phone. “Whatever,” I muttered into it.

My brother was still laughing. “It *is* a great song. Addie loves it. She recorded your performance so she’d have it forever. She says you dance spectacularly well.” The tone of his voice assured me they were laughing *at* me, not with me.

“Great,” I ground out sarcastically.

“Well, just calling to double check that you’re coming to dinner tonight.”

“Yeah,” I muttered. We had weekly family dinners these days, and I usually looked forward to

them, but now I was dreading it. I knew his toddlers were probably going to roast the shit out of me about this as soon as I walked in their door. Casey was seemingly training his sons to skate *and* chirp, and despite their cute cherub faces, they could be little meanies.

“Dude, don’t stress,” my brother said, but I could hear the damn giddy smile in his voice.

“It’s one of the most hype songs to ever exist,” I said defensively.

“It is! I told you, it’s a great one!” he replied in a placating tone.

“Whatever. I’ll see you later,” I grumbled.

I threw my phone away from me and rewatched the video. My eyes slowly drifted to the framed picture on my wall. Dreamy.

I couldn’t help but shake my head and let out a wry chuckle over that one school year where Fiona Haley had me wrapped around her little finger. I didn’t think about her much these days, but I hoped wherever she was, she’d see the video and it’d make her smile and wanna call me up to argue that ‘Silver Springs’ would’ve been a much better song choice.

3. Josie - November

Sitting in my idling Jeep, I stared at my huge rock of an engagement ring while waiting for my fiancé to finally emerge from his apartment building.

Garrett had completely disregarded the ring I originally loved— a simple, delicate gold band with an oval diamond. Instead, he picked out this square rock sitting on a diamond encrusted silver setting. It was beautiful, but I just wasn't a flashy person... or a silver gal for that matter. And there's no way I was about to start wearing silver earrings and necklaces anytime soon, so I guess I'd just be clashing for the rest of my damn life. Which wasn't a terrible thing. I realized this was a total champagne problem, and I felt like a bitch for not appreciating the ring, especially when he was so proud of it. I was just... surprised, is all. Because we'd been together for years. Literal *years*. And this ring just wasn't *me*. At all.

I checked my phone again, wondering if I'd somehow mixed up the time I was supposed to pick him up. I'd just driven three hours from Detroit to be able to send him off on his first NHL road trip. I knew I wouldn't have much time with him, but I wanted to show support. Him being late though? That just meant we'd have even less time together.

I forced myself to take in even breaths. I couldn't snap at him and risk throwing off his game. This wasn't a big deal, and the long distance would be over as soon as he was a little more established in his career. Garrett had been bouncing around to different minor league teams over the past few years, and I was a high school teacher. I couldn't just pick up and move in the middle of a school year to follow him, so the plan was for me to live with my parents in Detroit until he had a secure spot on a

roster... and he was finally closing in on that goal.

A little part of me knew I should've been happier for him. But I was kind of dreading moving. I loved my life in Detroit. I was now teaching my fourth year at my small K-12 school, and I was excited to watch the freshmen from my first year walk across the graduation stage this May.

A little worried voice in the back of my mind wondered if maybe it wasn't a good thing that Garrett and I were so okay living apart from each other... But all couples were like that after being together for so many years... right? We were just comfortable and we had our own lives, which was a good thing.

Garrett finally bounded down the steps of his high-rise apartment wearing a plaid suit, Minnetonka slippers, and a beanie covering his blond hair. If he had any other profession, he would've looked ridiculous in his get-up, but because he was a hockey player, he could get away with it. Hell, some of the things these guys wore were ridiculous, but they always managed to look good.

He laughed at something the doorman said, then his long stride carried him to my Jeep. He threw the door open and plopped in his seat, then swiped on his phone for a second.

"Uh... Hi," I said.

"Hey babe," he said with an easy smile, still looking down at his phone.

I paused for a minute, feeling weird that he didn't immediately kiss me like usual.

"Sorry, had to take care of that text to my agent," he said, finally looking up and planting a quick kiss on my lips.

His agent. Okay, that was important, that was okay.

“How was the drive?” He pulled the brim of my hat. “Hate when you wear hats, babe,” he pouted. “Can’t see your pretty face.”

I threw my hat in the backseat and moved to gather my long hair into a messy bun.

“Hate when you do that too.” He sighed. “Why not keep it down, babe? I love it down.” He reached over to smooth my hair behind my ear, then paused as he studied the strands. “I thought you were gonna go blonder?”

I smacked his hand away, and he knew I was annoyed. He was always telling me this lately. He suddenly wanted me to have the standard look of a hockey girlfriend— long, bright blonde hair, always worn down, and that just wasn’t a priority to me. “I told you, my hair is fried right now, I need to give it a break.”

“Should ask Joe where his girlfriend gets her hair done. She looks great,” he muttered while buckling up.

I white-knuckled the steering wheel and side-eyed him. “Then why don’t you date her?”

He laughed like it was the most ridiculous thing in the world. “Calm down, babe. Just trying to help you out.”

“Well, I don’t feel helped, I feel insulted,” I said quietly. Why were we so on edge with each other? I *just* got here.

He went back to his phone. “Jeez, what’s gotten into you? You on your period again or something?”

My mouth dropped open. I was about to lay into him over how I just drove three hours to be here in Columbus to see him off, but he cut me off by raising a hand. “Sorry, I guess I’m just nervous about this weekend. Don’t take that personally, you know I love you.”

You know I love you. Never just I love you. I'm not sure when he started saying that, but I'd grown to resent it. Because no, sir. Sometimes I didn't know and I needed reassurance.

I threw my car in drive and pulled away from the curb.

"Ugh this shit makes my ears bleed, babe," he said, pulling my phone off the aux cord and cutting Taylor Swift off mid-song.

I forced myself to swallow down my rebuttal. We just had different tastes in music. It didn't matter *that* much... did it? A little voice in my head whispered, *He could've compromised and listened to my music sometimes though...* But nope. I shut that voice down. It didn't matter. It was fine. This emo music from the early 2000's that we've listened to a million and one times was *fine*.

When we got to the airport, I still got out and went around the car to give him a hug goodbye. Even if I was slightly irritated, I'd swallow down my annoyance because I cared about him and didn't want to be a distraction from his game.

He gave me a hug and a quick peck on the lips. "Bye babe. Have a nice weekend, enjoy the apartment. You going to Orange Theory with Kelly tomorrow?"

My mouth moved into a thin line. If he said one thing about working on my ass again, I was going to lose my shit. "Maybe."

"Send pics." He wagged his eyebrows and grabbed my butt, making me crack a reluctant smile. That was alright to say, I guess.

"Have a good weekend," I said, patting the lapels of his suit before turning away.

I watched him stride into the airport to meet up with his teammates, his phone totally out of sight when

greeting them...

This year should've been easy. He was finally realizing his dreams and getting his shot in the NHL, but for some reason, it was straining our relationship. Because I couldn't ignore the fact that he changed... Ever since he started getting called up this fall, he cared way more about appearances, and I was growing sick of it. With his constant comments about my appearance, he was starting to make me feel insecure, and I didn't do insecure anymore. I grew up at the rink competing in figure skating, and I'd already fought through years of body dysmorphia to finally feel happy and at peace with myself. He was with me through some of those years, so he should've known. I probably just needed to remind him and then he'd quit nagging about things.

We were just going through a rough patch. We'd be fine. We always were.

Later that night, I was snuggled up on his couch watching his game. He was on fire tonight.

I did truly hate his celebration after he scored though. For some reason, I thought he'd change it after making it to the NHL, but nope. It was the same as usual: Head down, arms up like, *Yupp, I just fuckin' did that, give me all the applause*. It honestly slightly gave me the ick. But he was the new guy. He was still finding his footing. Hopefully someone would tell him to knock it off and stop looking like an ego-maniac.

I guess I could tell him. We had a healthy flirt-to-roast relationship... Although, sometimes he became a little too cruel, and sometimes I wished he were a little more attentive. Not suffocating, just a little more caring. Like last month when I was having horrible period cramps and really wanted to just stay in bed instead of

going out to meet his friends. I really wished he would've laid down behind me and comforted me. Instead, he said, *Shouldn't you be used to that by now? Get up, let's go.* He just wasn't the comforting type. You couldn't have it all.

That night, I tossed and turned, struggling to sleep on Garrett's new, stiff mattress. When I finally felt myself drifting to sleep, a notification on my phone woke me up. With a frustrated groan, I reached over to switch off the sound before laying back down. Two seconds after my head hit the pillow, my phone buzzed loudly against the bedside table.

Then it buzzed again, and again, and again.

I reached for my phone and froze when I saw Tiktok notifications popping up like I just went viral. Panic ripped through my chest, and my mind raced, thinking I accidentally posted something inappropriate.

I scrambled to open my Tiktok and squinted hard against the brightness.

My heart finally slowed when I realized I was just being tagged in the comment section of a video of Garrett. Okay, weird, but it happened here and there, so whatever. Maybe he said something cute about me or something.

But as I watched the video, my stomach dropped.

Because there he was... My so-called fiancé, completely shitfaced, talking to a girl who looked too young to even be in a bar. And maybe it would've been more okay if they were just talking, but the way he was leaning, the way he brushed his fingers against her arm

and bare waist... He was flirting.

And then the words popped up: “If you’re dating a hockey guy named Garrett who was at Firebird on 11/3, I’m sorry, honey. He’s cheating on you.”

The next seconds of the video had him kissing the girl’s neck, feeling her up on the dance floor, dipping her dramatically and then shoving his tongue down her throat. And then they sloppily walked off together.

I watched it about five more times, and the notifications just kept coming. But the tears didn’t.

All I felt was anger lighting up in my entire body.

I’d like to say what I did next was because of the constant notifications. They egged me on. People wanted me to know he was a cheater. People wanted to see my reaction. That’s why they were constantly tagging me, right?

So, I’d give them a show. I had to. To stop the notifications. To show the world that I knew, and that I wouldn’t take his disrespect lying down.

I padded to the kitchen and broke out the expensive bottle of wine that Garrett had been saving to celebrate with after he finally signed a full-fledged NHL contract one day, not just a two-way one with the minors like he currently had.

I popped the cork and took a long, hard swig of dry-ass wine. I loved Moscato, not this red bullshit.

And then I did what any sane girl would do who wanted the notifications to stop. I grabbed the scissors and went Live.

“Hello world,” I hiccupped and took another swig of wine. “I am @Josie-Bosie, the girl you keep constantly tagging in that stupid ass video of my skeezy cheater fiancé— ope, ex-fiancé, I should say.” I rolled my eyes

and walked to his huge closet. “Seems only fair I should show you guys my reaction since you’re the ones who enlightened me on this whole situation.”

I trailed the scissors lightly over all his neatly, pressed suits. And then I cut into one. And it felt *good*.

I proceeded to cut into every single one of them. I cut the arms off a couple, cut holes into a few, cut the legs off of others. I ruined each and every stupid suit that he loved, cackling as I did it. I paid special attention to his favorite one—the one Columbus purchased for him before his first game with them.

“Am I done?” I sighed into the camera. “No. I’m just hungry now. Snack break.” I was slightly dizzy as I walked to the kitchen and almost tripped. “Ope, little tipsy here, boys and gals.” I laughed as I went to the fridge for food. “Remember though, drinking is only for those twenty-one and up.” I paused and cocked my head to the side. “Did anyone check that girl in the video’s ID?” I asked, then completely ignored the people sending live chats in.

When I looked in his fridge, I zeroed in on the two cartons of eggs and grinned.

“New idea, guys,” I told my live audience, which was growing in huge numbers, but I didn’t care. I was drunk as shit. Besides, it only seemed right. Garrett’s video was nearing a million views, and in my drunken haze, I wanted to beat his numbers. It was amazing how many people were still on their phones at 3am.

I went to his front room closet and pulled out his sheet of synthetic shooting ice and lined it up in his living room. Then I grabbed an extra hockey stick and swiped the eggs off the kitchen counter. I flipped my camera phone and set it on the couch so it could tape me in all my slapshot glory.

I placed the egg on the ice, then stood up and

pointed to the framed picture of Garrett and I in the living room. It would've been cute if he put it there. He didn't. I did.

"I'm a figure skater, but I'm playing hockey today," I said, imitating *Happy Gilmore*. "Four!" I shouted right as I used a wrist shot on the raw egg. The egg missed the photo and exploded on the wall. "Damn, missed," I muttered. "Don't worry, I'll get it." I winked at my phone.

I took wrist shots, slapshots, then switched it up and pretended I was golfing. I rotated the direction of my shots through the room so that each of my 24 available eggs exploded somewhere different.

After my very last egg, I jumped up in happy celebration, then did a little air guitar with the stick. I turned to my phone and dropped the stick like a mic drop. "Now that is how you celly, Garrett. Someone should tell you the whole head down, arms up thing-" I hiccupped, "makes you look like a total asshole, you fuggin' puck hog."

I took the very last sip from the wine bottle and then turned off my phone before falling asleep in a drunken mess on the couch.

I woke up with a startle. My head immediately pounded. As I slowly took in my surroundings, a blurred supercut of last night came slamming back into my brain.

And that's when the tears came.

The tears weren't over losing the guy he became... No. The tears were for the college version of us. The version of him that actually seemingly liked me and wanted to spend time with me and wanted me to go to all of his games in person. The version of us that enjoyed pigging out on Five Guys after a night out. The version of us that enjoyed casual intimacy of hand-

holding and lazily sleeping next to each other through the last six years of our lives. RRR—

I had to cut off those thoughts. I couldn't start romanticizing what we had. Sure, we slept next to each other, but I was never allowed to touch him at night because he'd complain of getting too hot. And while I still loved going out with him, he started questioning what I chose to eat and drink in front of him. And while he used to play with my hair while we watched TV back in our college dorm when we were young, now he just complained when he could see my darker roots coming in. Like, I'm sorry, but what kind of guy even notices that?

The only thing I should've been sad about was the amount of time I wasted with him. I should've left him in the dust a long, long time ago.

I should've listened to all of the warning signs in my brain instead of rationalizing all of his harsh words.

But that realization didn't stop my tears.

And they didn't stop as I packed up my shit and took every single reminder of us from that apartment and threw it down the trash chute. The throw pillows I bought him? Gone. The coffee machine I gifted him last Christmas? Smashed. The nice Scotch my dad gave him? Stashed in my suitcase. The few clothes I left here were also thrown down the trash chute because I didn't want anything of mine to smell like him.

The only sign of me left in his place was the framed picture of us at our college graduation. It still hung above his living room couch, but it was now coated in splattered raw egg.

I marched to his bedroom and swiped the puck in his bedroom with tape around it that read "first AHL goal" and smashed the glass.

Then I slid the stupid ring off my finger and left it

on his kitchen counter. I choked on a sob as I turned and left the apartment for the last time.

When I was back in my jeep, I turned my phone back on for driving directions home and immediately regretted it. A stream of notifications popped up with no ending in sight. Instead of stressing over it, I deleted each of my social media apps off my home screen.

I blasted Taylor Swift's Reputation album, trying to drown out my thoughts as I drove... But when I reached home, I couldn't bring myself to pull in the driveway. I just couldn't imagine walking in and rehashing everything to my parents. So, I continued driving. I aimlessly took a few laps around the city, but then my sister's workplace caught my eye, and my intrusive thoughts won. I slammed on my brakes and threw my jeep in park in front of her high-end salon.

I slid my sunglasses on to cover my blowfish eyes from crying all morning and marched in.

I completely ignored the teenage girl manning the front desk yelling at me that I didn't have an appointment, and I made my way back to my sister's station where she was sweeping up hair on the ground.

I plopped in her leather chair. "Dye it brown," I said, gesturing to my hair. "Please. Right now."

My sister faltered for a second, looking at me in confusion. "I thought... I thought you were in Ohio this weekend?"

I eyed her darkly in the mirror. "Not anymore. Brown. Dye. You have it?" I waved my hand impatiently at my head.

Her face cracked in confusion. "Uh... Okay?"

My phone started ringing and I let it go to

voicemail. It proceeded to blow up with a bunch of texts.

“You gonna get that?” my sister asked. She was now mixing goeey shampoo colors in a little plastic bowl.

I picked up my phone, turned it off, then slammed back down on the counter.

“I’m entering a new era,” I announced. “A dark one.” I sat back sullenly and tried to hang onto my anger. Anger was less painful than regret... and grief.

“Okay then,” she drawled. “What happened to Garrett’s insistence on going blonder?” She snorted.

I glared at the mention of his name. “Fuck. Garrett.”

Her mouth formed a perfect little oh.

After what felt like a full hour of painting and pulling and tugging on my hair, my sister finally led me back to the sink, which was the only relaxing part of this whole hair fiasco.

After painstakingly blow drying what seemed like each individual strand of my hair, she finally spun me around to face the mirror, and I let out a deep breath. My chest actually physically loosened.

Gone were my old, grown-out, blonde highlights, and now my hair was a rich milk-chocolate color.

Seeing myself in the mirror with this color, something clicked into place, like this. *This* was me. Not some fake, knock-off version of me that I molded myself into in an effort to win that idiot’s love.

“You like?” my sister asked hesitantly.

I nodded. The reflection staring back at me looked and felt more *me* than it had in years, and I hated Garrett a little more for making me feel like I always had to change myself. “Love it,” I confirmed.

I took a selfie— with my sunglasses on, because blowfish eyes, ya know? – and sent it to Garrett.

His phone calls and texts stopped coming.

It was that simple for him.

Fucking dick.

I didn't care what anyone thought of me, but I slightly regretted airing my reaction to the world. At the time, I thought it would make me feel better. I thought it would stop people from continuing to tag me. Because I couldn't take it. Each tag was a reminder of what Garrett had done and it was like an additional little stab to the heart. And by taping my reaction, I thought I'd show people that yes, they made me aware of his cheating, and I got my retribution.

My drunk brain thought it'd make the story of us die.

It didn't.

It blew it the fuck up.

That night, I was made aware that the footage of me drunk slap-shotting eggs all over Garrett's living room was now viral on Barstool, had been played multiple times on SportsCenter, and was now trending on Twitter.

But the worst part of it all?

Texts from girls in other cities poured in, telling me that they were also seeing him. He had a girl in almost every city he played in while in the minors.

And the most painful shock came from an anonymous number showing Garrett had written: *Baby, you know I love you. But I have to stay with her to make it in hockey. Do you know who her dad is?*

Reading that made my heart completely shatter.

It was a worse betrayal than the video evidence of him actually cheating.

Everything was a lie.

Every kiss.

Every touch.

I shivered. My skin felt dirty from his touch. I instantly wished I could shed it all off me like a snake so I never felt him.

Years.

I wasted *years* with him.

And it wasn't even real...

I curled up in a fetal position in my childhood bed and hugged myself while I sobbed over how I let love make me a stupid, *stupid* girl.

I couldn't help but think of the irony. Every time I taught *Romeo and Juliet*, kids always complained about how stupid Juliet was... and I agreed.

But I was stupider.

Later that night, my dad knocked on my door. I knew it was him from his footfalls behind my door. You didn't live with someone your whole life and not know the sound of their walk. I didn't invite him in, but he creaked the door open and leveled me with his serious eyes.

"I never liked him," he said in his gruff voice.

I let out a shuddered sigh. "Don't lie, dad. Yes, you did. He had all of us fooled."

He shuffled into my bedroom and my bed divoted down as he sat on the edge. "I'm sorry, honey," he said, patting my blanket-covered feet. "He's a piece of shit. I'm not lying though. Why do you think I never drafted him?"

I paused. My dad was the head coach of the Detroit Crewmen. I always wondered why he passed up on Garrett because that would've made my life easier. I always figured my dad didn't want him because it'd look too much like nepotism if he made the team... but deep down, I think I knew he wasn't the kind of player my dad liked, I just never admitted it to myself.

"He's a shit teammate," my dad confirmed. "He messes up plays because he's a selfish asshole. Yes, he got a goal last night, but his team probably could've had three more if he passed the fucking puck. And I know you know that because you ended your uh..." He coughed into his hand to cover a laugh, and I rolled my eyes. "Your performance with saying he's a 'fuggin' puck hog." My dad shook his head. A calm silence settled between us, until he fully cracked up at my words. "I'm sorry, that was great."

I pushed up and shoved his shoulder. My body couldn't decide if I should be laughing or crying, so I melted into a mix.

"Oh honey, c'mere," he said, pulling me into a side hug. "You'll find a better man, I promise."

My throat felt like it was closing up. "You can't make promises like that. You never lie to me, so you can't start now."

"I know," he said plainly. "But I am a little relieved. Aren't you?"

"Dad!" I lightly smacked his shoulder and sniffled up my tears.

"Honey, I gave him permission to marry you this summer because I thought that's what you wanted, but I wasn't happy about it."

That admission floored me. "Why am I hearing about this for the first time right now?" I demanded. He never said anything negative about him before.

“The lives of hockey players, they’re not... They’re not always conducive to healthy marriages. They’re in different cities all the time, which obviously is too tempting for those like Garrett, and they miss a lot of important events. I try hard to let my guys prioritize their families, but it doesn’t always happen. Last month, Coleson missed the birth of his new baby. Shit happens when we’re on the road. So, I’m relieved. I think it’d be nice if you met someone who was boring. Normal.”

I scrubbed a hand over my face. I couldn’t see the bright side of this whole situation just yet.

“I wasted 21 to 27 with him. So many years,” I groaned out miserably, covering my face.

He patted my leg again. “That’s okay. Think about it this way, you know those chick flicks you make me watch? They all start out the same way.”

I eyed him warily. “Huh?”

He snapped his fingers. “What’s that word? It starts with an A... The silly little story in the beginning about the bad ex before the main love interest is introduced, you know what I mean?”

“Anecdote,” I sighed.

“Yeah! Garrett is just another silly little anecdote. He’s not your main story, honey, I promise.”

“But that means I’m at the very beginning of a story again. I was going to marry *him*. I don’t want to start *all over!*” I practically shrieked. I’d have to date again. Meet the parents again. Pretend to be perfect again— like I didn’t toot or pig out on food or wear sweats every chance I got. I’d have to act all proper and shit. What the actual fuck?

My mind raced then. I was getting ahead of myself. I’d have to act perfect *if* I got asked out on a date. I was screwed. I didn’t have friends like I did back in college, and even those friendships hadn’t really

lasted because Garrett always made a stink about me going out with girlfriends, so they moved on without me.

And I was a teacher. I worked with kids all day, not in an office with other grown adults.

And my idea of a fun Friday night was not going to the bar to flirt with new people anymore. I enjoyed going to the movies with my parents or going to one of my dad's games with my mom and swapping notes with him later... *How the hell would I meet someone new?*

I think my dad could track my dread, because he said, "It'll happen when you least expect it."

I cut my eyes to his. "Do not fucking say that."

He rubbed his forehead. "I'm sorry."

"I don't have friends to go out with, I don't have coworkers to date, I live here and don't even see anyone my own age, I-"

"Focus on one thing at a time. Focus on what you *do* have," he urged.

"What *do* I have?!" I shouted in a panic. "The whole world is going to think I'm a crazy girl! That video went everywhere."

"No one thinks you're crazy. They think you stood up for yourself. *And* that you have impressive hockey skills," he said, struggling to keep a straight face.

His laughing was not helping. I dropped my head in my hands and let out a strangled groan.

"Hey, don't look so sad. You have me, too." He pulled me into a side hug, and my despair melted a teensy bit at that. I did have him. And my mom. And my three older sisters, but they all had their own married lives with kids already.

"Never would've thought I'd be the failure child," I mumbled.

He let out a bark of laughter. “You are not the failure child. I am quite proud of that slapshot of yours. Way better than any of your sisters could do.”

I rolled my teary eyes, but I did appreciate the compliment. “I am basically living out the *Failure to Launch* movie right now, dad.”

“No,” he shook his head, “You’re the creative, bossy one. You always have been. I think you’re stronger and smarter than most men, and that’s harder to pair off.”

“Pair off?” I asked warily.

“Yeah, weak men are threatened by you, and there’s a lot of weak men these days. There are still good ones, I know because I work with some. You just have to find one that fits with you and your life here. I always suspected you were gonna have a harder time than you sisters because they were in a totally different generation of dating. I don’t think the...” He paused and snapped his fingers, searching for the words, “what do you call it? The Timber and the Tikitytok and the Instasnap stuff? I don’t think that existed when they were going through the dating world, and I think it was easier without all of it. But I know you’ll end up happy. I’d bet on it.”

“You’d probably bet a single dollar,” I said in a condescending tone.

“Nah, a million bucks on my favorite daughter,” he said with a wink.

I rolled my eyes because he always told each of us that we were his favorite.

“I’m serious. You’re top dog now. How many other guys can say their daughter’s slapshot made it on SportsCenter?” he added with a snicker.

4. Tyler - December

“Left, left, left!” I shouted into my Xbox headset. “Yes!”

“Woo!” Erick Hassik, one of my roommates and teammates, shouted out next to me. He reached out and slapped me a high-five.

The TV screen read “#1” and shot off some cool fireworks.

“Numero uno spot. Nice work, boys,” I said into my headset. My older brother, Casey, and my best friend, Duke, were playing on our xbox team as well from the comfort of their own living rooms. Actually, Duke lived in my apartment complex as well, he was only a short elevator ride away, but Casey lived in the suburbs with his wife and twin toddler boys.

I could hear a woman’s voice yelling in the background of one of their headsets. “Ah, I gotta go guys, duty calls,” my brother said.

“Waa-chow!” Duke called out, making fun of him for being “whipped.”

“Shut it, rookie,” my brother replied. “I wouldn’t talk if I were you,” he warned in a gruff tone.

Duke started to argue, “I’m not a rook-” but my brother disconnected his headset before he could even finish his sentence. “Jetts, bro, why does your brother insist on calling us rookies? And what did that mean? ‘If I were you’?” he asked, mimicking Casey’s deep ominous tone.

I snorted. “No clue, but he thinks everyone is a rookie compared to him.” I guess that kind of made sense. Casey retired from the NHL a few years ago as one of the longest and winningest defensemen in the

league. His number was retired and hung in the rafters in Boston's stadium.

A fist pounded on our door then, distracting me. "Gotta go, Dukes. Garcia just got back with our food." Tommy Garcia was the third roommate here in our lovely, industrial loft that overlooked the snowy city of Detroit.

"Nice. I should probably figure out dinner for me and Claire. See ya at game time tomorrow, boys."

We said our goodbyes and I got a running start, then slid across our hardwood floor in my socks to answer the door for Garcia, who was holding a huge takeout bag from our favorite Chinese restaurant.

"You assholes are getting your own food next time," Garcia grumbled, pulling a snow-covered beanie off his jet-black hair.

"Yeah, yeah, you're the one who lost, bud," I said, slapping him on the back. "Get to the gym." A loft rule of ours was that we competed in a pushup contest to see who would have to venture out into the cold to pick up our food.

I took the bag, and he trailed me into the kitchen where Hassik was already seated. I purposely slowed down as I fished our stuff out of the bag, hoping they would forget about the-

"Fuck, no!" I shouted as the bag was ripped from my grasp. Garcia snatched it and ran to the living room, cackling as he went.

Hassik's lanky ass body was flanking his side in a second.

I ran after him and jumped up on the couch, trying to pull the bag from his grip. But that's when we toppled over completely, slamming to the ground. It was smart of us to for-go a coffee table, because we wrestled in here way too often. The three of us ended up in a

tangled mess on the rug, writhing around, trying to win the bag.

A pounding on the door made us all pause for a split second. Hassik stole the opportunity to pull a prized fortune cookie from the bag.

Garcia then did some weird wrestling move and rolled his body over so he was on top of me, and then he retrieved his own fortune cookie out as well.

I let my head fall back against our rug. Fuck. I was stuck with “the last fortune”, which in our book, was always the worst one. I hadn’t been stuck with the last cookie in months. Garcia was a worthy competitor, but losing to Hassik—our goalie— that was pretty pathetic of me.

“Fine,” I breathed out. “I lose. One of you assholes get the door.”

Hassik threw open the door a second later.

“What the fuck was that huge bang?” Duke asked with wide eyes. He lived directly below us.

“Fortune cookie war,” Garcia responded with a shit-eating grin. “Jetts lost.”

I sighed and stayed where I was, sprawled out on the rug.

“You guys are so fucking weird,” Duke muttered. “Got any extra food? Claire’s going to her sister’s for dinner. She’s pissed at me,” he said with a sigh. “Casey could have warned me directly on the phone that she was goin’ there instead of being so damn mysterious.” Claire’s sister, Addie, was married to Casey. Duke stalked into our kitchen without being invited and grabbed up one of our Chinese food containers, then started opening and closing our drawers, searching for silverware.

“What’d you do?” I asked, slowly getting up. I

needed to get some food for myself before they ate everything.

He tore off his hat and ran a hand through his hair. “I said something dumb but it wasn’t even *that* bad. I’ve said a lot of dumber shit,” he admitted.

I snorted at that. He really wasn’t the best with his words, but neither was she. Their competitive streaks were not their friends sometimes.

“She won’t even answer her phone now,” he continued. “She texted that she doesn’t want to eat in my presence. That’s so unlike her. I think she’s stressed with skating stuff again. I fucking hate figure skating, dude. She’s retired one day, she’s not the next. She won the fucking Olympics. What more does she want with the sport?”

I cocked my head to the side, weighing the resentment in his words. He was there for her through the last few years of her skating journey, even opting to miss games last season to be at her important events, including the Olympics— which she did win.

I cleared my throat, trying to choose my words carefully and not make his relationship mess any stickier. “Have you asked her? Have you thought maybe she wants to fully retire but she’s scared of what comes next? Hell, I’m scared as shit about change. How would you feel about retiring right now?”

“Yeah, dude,” Garcia scoffed. “I’d be scared. The rink is all we know.”

“Yeah,” Hassik agreed. We all waited for him to add something else, but he shoved a forkful in his mouth. He was truly a man of few words. He was so quiet I forgot he was even around sometimes.

Duke swallowed hard, but stayed silent, telling me he really hadn’t communicated any of this with her.

“Well, I wouldn’t let that go too far,” I advised

him.

He looked up at me with tired eyes. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you should go to Casey’s. Go eat with her right now. Go apologize. Be very calm.” I heard my old friend’s voice in my head as I said, “Don’t get mad at her, reassure her.”

He pushed the food away from him and dropped his fork. “You think?”

“Yeah, and ask Casey for advice. He went through most of Addie’s skating career with her. I remember them talking about it when I was a kid. I mean, he fucked shit up with her for a bit, but they figured it all out. He might have some advice.” I shrugged. “Worth a try.”

His face went blank. “You really think I should go there now?”

I nodded.

His jaw set with a look of determination. He pushed his chair back and power-walked to the door, looking like a man on a mission. Hassik and Garcia stupidly started clapping for him.

“Let us know how it goes!” I yelled right as he threw our door shut behind him.

“Well boys,” Hassik said, looking at me and Garcia seriously. “Fortune time!”

Hockey players were known to be superstitious, but the public only knows half of it. We’re freaks about it. We can’t mention any team doing bad, because the next game against us, they’ll crush us. We can’t mention our stats against a certain team or that we feel we’re gonna get a goal aloud, because all of that will make the opposite happen. My biggest issue was that I needed to be the last person touching the ice. That wouldn’t be a

problem if I was talking only about my own team, because everyone would respect it and let me have the last step... but other teams have picked up on it now, and they try to fuck with me just to get personal. Now I end up going back to the locker room to sit for a minute fully dressed and then sneak back out to touch the ice again, just in case.

“Mine says, ‘good things are coming, just keep swimming.’” Garcia’s face cracked in confusion. “I think they stole that from *Finding Nemo*.” He shrugged and went back to eating.

Hassik opened his fortune and his face paled. “You will soon receive a letter from your lost love.” His eyes bounced between us.

“Shittt,” Garcia said with a tight grimace on his face.

Hassik did not need to be reminded of his lost love right now. As our goalie, he needed extreme focus. Just mentioning his ex-girlfriend’s name sent him into a downward tailspin, meaning he’d lock himself in his room and listen to old emo ballads and attempt to play really horrible guitar tunes for days on end. Actually, that better not happen because I’m pretty sure Garcia hid Hassik’s guitar after the last time and probably doesn’t remember where he even put it.

Hassik visibly gulped. “Do you think Fr-”

“Nope,” I cut him off with a stern look. “Remember the rules of the loft,” I reminded him. Number two on our list was that the name “Francesca” was banned from being uttered aloud.

I quickly cracked open my own fortune cookie to change the subject.

I carefully read the little paper once in my head to make sure I had it right, then cleared my throat. “Beware of strange changes in the last days of the year.

Bad luck will haunt you to allow for good fortune in the new year.” I flicked the tiny piece of paper away from me and rubbed my forehead. “Fuck guys. This sucks.”

“Tough break,” Garcia said, but the fucker had a giddy smile on his face.

I shook my head and brought my dinner to the couch.

I didn’t need bad luck or good luck, I needed things to stay the exact same. I finally masterminded things to be perfect. I was here with my buddies playing on a great team, I finally got my brother to move back to Michigan, and I set him back up with Addie, who I fucking loved. Now I was Godfather to one of their sons, and the other was named after me. I didn’t need any changes, strange or not.

“You guys ready for the Colorado game tomorrow?” Garcia asked, plopping on the couch next to me and grabbing the clicker.

“Yeah,” Hassik said.

“It’s gonna be a rough one, boys,” I sighed.

“Let the bodies hit the floor!” Garcia chanted. He was a fighter. He loved scrapping in the corners and picking fights with guys twice his size.

I shook my head. I didn’t care about the fights. I needed to get more points to pad my stats. Stats were always a point of stress for me, so I tried to get way ahead of the curve in the first half of the season. Plus, I was closing in on Duke, the leading scorer, pretty fast.

5. Tyler - Thursday night game

I knew it was going to be a tough game to get any points, but I didn't know it was going to be this bad.

Almost every time I touched the ice tonight, the whistle was blown for yet another penalty, and I was sick and tired of having to play shorthanded tonight.

At this point in the game, both teams' penalty boxes were packed to capacity.

Across the ice from me, Duke, Campbell, Griff, and Garcia, were all squished next to each other in our box, having to stand because there wasn't enough room for all of them to sit. I could see their shit-eating grins from where I sat on the bench waiting for my next shift, which was about to come up way too fast without them in the lineup. They were loving this. I shook my head at them as I squirted some water at my face.

Colorado's box didn't look much better. The ref just finished giving their third guy a five-minute penalty for targeting one of our rookies, Oskar, pretty badly. I thanked God I had a couple seasons under my belt and was no longer considered a rookie.

Seconds later, Oskar was hoping the boards to sit next to me on the bench.

"Rough out here, eh?"

I turned to look at him and immediately went into a gagging fit, dry-heaving and making yaking noises.

"Son of a bitch, Jetts, don't look at him, get out there," Coach said behind me, tapping me on the helmet.

I did my best to swallow down my queasiness, and I jumped the boards to put as much distance between me and Oskar's bloody mug as I could. Coach

knew my disdain for all bodily fluids that weren't my own— and sometimes even when they were my own. I barfed on the bench once when Duke's blood dripped on *my* skate. To make matters worse, the replay of me vomiting ended up all over sports blogs for a solid week, and that was enough for Coach to never want it to happen ever again.

“Let's see some clean play!” the ref yelled at us as we glided to the circle in our defensive zone for the next faceoff. “There's no more room to put any of you away. Get it together!”

The refs probably weren't surprised with the shitshow this game was becoming. We were tied-up 3 to 3 with two minutes left to go in the third period. This much tension would turn any game into an aggressive mess, but the fact that it was a Detroit versus Colorado matchup made it even worse. Our teams had a decades old rivalry.

The ref blew the whistle and I moved into position. I usually played wing, but right now, I'd have to play a bit of defense considering that it was a three on four.

As soon as the ref dropped the puck, Colorado won the face-off, and their center kicked it back to their D.

Things moved fast then. The three of us Crewmen players tried to box up the best we could. I played the high guy, which meant I was going on attack mode against their defense up by the blue line.

And it must've been my lucky day.

Their left D guy tried to slide the puck to their righty, but the righty fumbled the puck. I sprinted to get to it before he could recover his mistake, and I won.

I had a fucking *breakaway*.

My heart pounded as I realized I was going to be

the *hero* of the fucking game.

My jersey billowed back behind me as I skated up ice as fast as I fucking could. My legs were burning, but I could practically feel the crowd rising to their feet as I made a dash down ice to the net.

I looked at my stick for a split second, and that was enough to fuck up my entire opportunity.

Because in that split second, their goalie decided to skate *at* me.

My brain didn't even have enough time to process what was happening.

My whole world was suddenly upside down.

And then everything went black.

“Jetts! Get up, man! Get up!” My teammate, TJ Vonnie, yelled down at me while shaking the front of my jersey. “You okay?! Can you hear me?!”

I caught a foggy glimpse of the jumbotron behind his head. They were replaying what just happened.

There I was, number 17 with Jettensen spelled out in block letters on the back of my jersey, sprinting toward the net when their goalie absolutely trucked me. He slid-tackled me, taking out my skates, and I went airborne. My body did a full-out flip in the air, my feet coming over top of my head, and then I landed flat on my back with a thud.

I let out a groan and moved my limbs one by one.

The smack on the ice must've made me black out for a second or two. That had never happened to me before.

Colorado's goalie was now looming over my face too. He lifted his mask. “You good, baud?!” he

asked in a thick Canadian accent, pushing back his sweaty hair. The fucker was actually laughing at me. “I’m sorry, baby Jetts! Didn’t mean for that to happen!”

That nickname, “baby Jetts,” indicated he played with my older brother. I ignored him and rolled over on my stomach, then slowly got on all fours. My vision was starting to swim in and out and all around. I squeezed my eyes shut tight for a beat, but I knew I had to get back to the bench. Casey would have my ass if I didn’t skate off the ice on my own. He was an old-school tough-ass who still thought only pussies made the game stop for them—ask any hockey guy born before 1990 and I’d bet any amount of money that they’d feel the same way. I once went down as a PeeWee and the ref stopped the game for me and my coach ran out on the ice to check if I was okay and help me off the ice—Casey teased that I was a “boy who cried wolf” for a full month... and sure, maybe that should’ve just rolled off my young shoulders, but I never forgot it. There’s something about craving an older brother’s approval that will make even the greatest of men alter their actions. Casey treated me great growing up, but I had a feeling that even if he had treated me shitty, I’d still be clamoring to be his best friend ‘til the end of time, and I’m not even sure why.

I could hear TJ chatting and laughing with the enemy goalie now. I wished Duke was here by my side instead of him. Duke would be throwing punches for me. TJ was too much of a lover, not a fighter.

At least it looked like their goalie would be getting a tripping penalty for his dumbass stunt. But that didn’t make up for the fact that I went from Detroit’s hero to zero in point two seconds. Now, instead of making highlight clips with my shiny new goal, there’d surely be replays of me getting absolutely brickwalled all over the internet.

I slowly hoisted myself up, and I felt sick to my

stomach as I glided miserably back to the bench. Coach was full-on belly-laughing at me. The fucker had to cover his face because he was laughing so hard. To make matters worse, he pointed to the hallway, meaning I wasn't being invited back to the bench, I was being sent back to the locker room to check if I had a concussion. By the way everything was still off-kilter, I knew I had one.

6. Josie - Friday morning

I juggled my iced coffee, laptop bag, backpack, and a crumpled folder containing the new fire drill rules as I quickly made my way down the school hallway toward my classroom in my platform converse shoes— as a short teacher, I needed high shoes to give me at least a little more authority with the kids. I was running late again today— as per usual— so my first hour kids were starting to gather around my classroom door.

“Ms. Petersen!” a couple girls from my third hour called out, running to catch up with me.

“Ms. Peeee-Teeeee!” a boy from my sixth hour yelled as he ran down the hallway. “Merry Christmas break!”

“Happy Christmas break to you too, Johnny! No running in the halls!” I shouted back as I briskly picked up my own pace.

He snickered and slowed to a slow-motion jog, which was still faster than my power-walk. I just shook my head, but I couldn’t completely bite back my grin.

The kids were all overjoyed because today’s bell at 2:30pm marked the start of their two-week long break, and I think we all needed it. Big time.

The girls were now flanking my sides. “I finally finished season five of *Grey’s Anatomy* and *Oh My God*, Ms. Petersen, we need to talk. I pretty much bawled my eyes out last night,” Kendall said as she clutched a notebook to her chest.

“You coulda warned a girl!” Ciara said with wide eyes. “I was not prepared for that level of emotional trauma watching that! I was legit distraught.”

I bit my lip, trying to contain my laughter. “I

couldn't spoil it for you guys! We'll talk before third hour, don't you two need to get to class?"

They rolled their eyes at me. "We've been waiting for *you!* Can you believe the symbolism? The name of the episode alone. OhmyGod. I'm going to cry just thinking about it. I feel like I lost my own friend. We *need* to talk!" Kendall pushed.

"Yes! Can't you just write us passes?" Ciara tried.

It was my turn to roll my eyes, but of course I would write them a pass. I was only a disciplinarian when the situation actually called for it— and even then, I was pretty shitty at it because the kids usually made me laugh with their antics. Besides, wanting to discuss the symbolism in Shonda Rhimes' writing was more important than them getting to social studies class— in my opinion anyways.

"You guys both have Mr. Richard for first hour, right?" I asked them.

"Yes!" they chorused excitedly, sensing they were gonna get passes. Mr. Richard was one of the younger teachers on staff, and one of my friends. I'd just text him they were gonna be late and send them back with passes so he wouldn't mark them tardy. All us teachers were more relaxed the day before a break started so I doubted he would be too upset.

My first hour kids chorused their good mornings as I unlocked the door and let them all inside.

"Can someone please plug in—" The Christmas lights lining my entire classroom's ceiling suddenly flickered on without me even having to finish my question. "Thank you!"

I quickly attached my laptop to the big screen to play the morning announcements and was getting ready to discuss *Grey's Anatomy* when my cell phone rang.

Looking down at the caller I.D., I groaned. The school secretary calling before the day even started was never a good sign.

“Hi Kiley,” I answered hesitantly. I made a shush motion to my kids so I could hear her better.

“Good morning, Josie, thank you for answering,” she said dryly.

“Am I gonna regret it?” I laughed. I understood why people avoided her calls; she was usually tasked with asking for favors on behalf of other teachers.

“Eh... depends on how you feel about subbing during your prep today.”

I sighed. Working at a small K-12 school was amazing because you could really get to know all your kids and watch them grow into young adults. The downside was dealing with shortages. We could work around budget and supply shortages, but substitute shortage problems plagued us every day, which meant we were always having to cover for missing teachers during our prep hours.

I covered my eyes and groaned. “Are you serious? Who’s out?”

“Katie Keen. A nasty flu has been going around the lower elementary grades. It went around her room two weeks ago and finally caught up to her,” she sighed.

“You’re asking me to sub for *second grade*?” I asked incredulously. That caught some of my kids’ attention and they were now looking at me with amused faces. I pulled an annoyed face. I was a ninth grade teacher who usually tried to sub for high school classes only. While the elementary kiddos were always cuties, I didn’t have the patience that was required for teaching them. Kiley must’ve been really desperate to be calling high school teachers to sub for the little angels.

“Yes. And...”

“And?!” I asked. “There’s more?”

“Some of the Crewmen players are scheduled to come read to her class today, and we’d really prefer to have one of our own staff members there to supervise the whole thing. Katie’s really bummed out about missing today. She said she’ll owe you big time,” Kiley sing-songed.

I harrumphed. Of course this would happen.

Ever since the whole Garrett cheating scandal, I made a promise to myself to avoid hockey players at all costs. While a lot of the world witnessed my drama on social media, it was pretty much a guarantee that every single hockey guy knew about it because they were all best buddies with each other. If they didn’t play together as kids, they knew each other from tournaments or beer leagues or from golfing together. They literally *all* knew each other. The hockey community put the business bros to shame when it came to networking.

Don’t get me wrong— I still loved going to hockey games and was a very passionate fan. I just now embraced the mantra: hate the players, love the game.

And while maybe some hockey guys didn’t deserve the hate, the Garrett situation was enough to make me swear off their kind forever. And really, with my dad’s position as the head coach for the Detroit Crewmen, I should’ve known to stay away from them in the first place. The fact that Garrett only stayed with me to stay close to my dad still stung, and a girl’s ego could only handle that kind of mistake once.

Besides, I hated being known for my dad’s reputation. I thrived here at school because shock over my familial connections wore off very quickly when I was the one disciplining kids and handing out their homework every night. School was my place where I could be my own person, not Coach’s daughter.

Although— everyone here found out a little too much about my personal life this year because of that damn viral video.

The Monday morning after it happened, the Vice-principal stopped by my classroom and a kid yelled, “Leave Ms. Petey alone! Hasn’t she gone through enough?”

I groaned, but the VP actually laughed and said he was only there to check that I was okay and to warn me not to go viral again— which I had absolutely no plans on doing ever again.

But it didn’t end there. The kids had a field day over the whole thing. At the start of each of my classes, they all gave me a round of applause, and one of my kids even shouted down the hall, *Don’t be sad Ms. Petey! You’re a strong, independent woman who don’t take NO SHIT from NO MAN!* which I responded to with: *No swearing!* But as soon as I was in the privacy of my own classroom, I full-on cracked up. My kids were great.

“How about this,” Kiley said, pulling me from my thoughts. “I’ll double the typical wage for subbing if you take today?”

I rolled my eyes. “Not necessary, I’ll do it.” I didn’t care about the money subbing would bring, the only reason I didn’t want to sub was because I’d be losing out on precious prep time for myself to catch up on grading. Now, I’d be stuck having to enter grades over break.

“Sounds good. Katie left directions on her desk. We’ll expect you in her room at 12:30 when the kids are walking back from art class. Thanks, Miss Josie,” she said before disconnecting the call. I grimaced at the first name use, which signaled I’d be in one of our school’s elementary rooms.

7. Tyler

I hunched my shoulders, bracing against the light snow falling as I jogged across the packed school parking lot to catch up with four of my teammates. We were all expected to visit local schools before their break to count as our “holiday charity” time.

We all dressed in nice slacks and dress shoes and wore our jerseys overtop of button downs. I threw on some sunglasses because the bright day was not helping my pounding headache. Coach had been right— I sustained a minor concussion from the Colorado goalie’s little stunt.

I tried to sweet talk the team’s nice HR ladies into letting me use my injury to get out of our charity requirement, but it was a no-go. They said kids were asking specifically for Duke Callahan and myself— the lead scorers this year— and how could I really be upset about that? My only reservation was that I still fucking *hated* school.

I was experiencing some serious PTSD just walking alongside Duke into the school. How many times back in Northfield, Minnesota had we walked into school together? This felt all too familiar. I actually physically shivered as we got closer to the front door.

“So, who’s all reading to the kiddies?” Campbell asked. “They usually only choose two or three of us.”

“Not Jetts,” Duke said, shoving me clean off the sidewalk. “He can’t read.”

“Hey, watch it, I’m concussed!” I shoved him back. “And can to, asshole,” I said indignantly.

Griff pulled the two of us apart by the back of our jerseys and arched an unimpressed eyebrow at us. “Can

you two refrain from physical violence for at least the next hour? What kind of example will that show the kids?"

I tore my jersey from his grip. "You should read, Griff. You're the dad here," I said, trying to change the subject. "Aren't you used to telling bedtime stories?"

"Yeah, I vote the old man!" Duke called out.

Griff let out a resigned sigh, but I think he was secretly pleased. "Fine."

"I vote Jetts," Campbell announced, "for floundering the world's most beautiful breakaway."

"Oohhh," the rest of the assholes called out.

"Shut up. I'm not the one who got an assist to one of Colorado's goals," I threw back.

Campbell acted like he got shot in the chest and the rest of the guys laughed. Roasting was typically endearment to us. It only got out of hand when people touched a nerve.

"Well, who else is gonna read?" Duke asked.

"Jetts, because-"

I whirled on Hassik. "Oh, so now you wanna speak up, buddy?" I asked incredulously. "Why not you?"

My roommate at least had the decency to look a little embarrassed for trying to throw me under the bus.

"Nah, Hassy," Duke said, patting him on the shoulder. "Jetts can't. I already told you guys, he can't read."

And damn it all to hell because that did touch a nerve. "Fuck off, Duke. Yes, I can," I tried to say it lightly, but now the rest of the guys were looking at me curiously.

"Wait, you know I'm only kidding right?" Duke

laughed. “I’ve just been to a bunch of these with you and you never read. Unless... Can you really not read, bud?” He made a mock-pouty face at me.

I thought quickly, trying to get myself out of the situation. “You’re the one who failed sixth grade English, not me, smartass.”

“Ooof,” Griff’s face cracked into a grin and he went to slap me a high-five. “Hit him where it hurts.”

Duke was struggling not to laugh. He let it slip last year that he failed sixth grade English because he ditched it every day to hang out with Claire. We teased him for being a “loverboy” for months afterwards.

Campbell was now reaching for the school’s front doors, and I took in a deep breath, trying to settle my nerves.

This was so dumb. Why did these school visits shake me up more than playoff games?

I knew why though...

It was because I was relieved to finally walk away from school at 17 when I left for junior hockey. Casey set me up with a school in Pennsylvania, but I secretly dropped out. I knew Casey would feel like it was his fault if he ever found out, when really, it was mine. And honestly, what difference did it make? I’d never think twice about my education history if it weren’t for these school visits.

As soon as we stepped in the school, we were greeted with sounds of gym class—pounding basketballs and whistles—to the right, and smells of cafeteria food to the left.

I trailed after my teammates into the school’s main office. I hung back as Griff and Duke chatted with the kind secretaries who directed us to head down the hallway to room C-117 and introduce ourselves to Miss Josie before the kids got back from art class at 12:30.

I tried to fight off the shaky feeling coursing through my body, but as we walked down the halls, all my shitty school memories were pushing to the forefront of my brain. Kids yelling out, *Nooo, not him*, when I was chosen to popcorn-read, kids huffing while I then struggled to read aloud... But then I got smarter. I started cracking wise-ass jokes at the teachers so I'd be punished before I even got the chance to read aloud. I'd be told to stand in the hall and await a talking-to.

At least room C-117 was very inviting. The colorful room smelled like a pumpkin spice candle, and the little desks and scribbly art projects on the walls were pretty darn cute... But I wasn't stupid, school was a trap, and it always would be to me.

I thought we'd find an elderly teacher because they usually had first dibs on us hockey players coming to their rooms, but instead, Miss Josie was... *damn*... I swallowed but my mouth felt dry all of a sudden. I coughed into my hand to clear my throat. Miss Josie was pretty. *Really* pretty.

Her hair was thrown haphazardly in a messy bun on the top of her head, held together by a cheetah print scrunchy. She was very petite compared to me, and she was dressed very feminine, wearing one of those loose jumper dresses over a turtleneck, long-sleeved shirt. She completed the look with black tights and platform converse sneakers.

The way she looked and moved seemed eerily familiar, but I couldn't place why or where I'd seen her before.

She turned to us with a kind smile, but her hazel eyes looked a bit tired, like she'd been up way too many hours already, which, I guess was true for teachers.

I licked my lips. Fuck. I was not expecting this. I looked at my teammates to see if anyone else was noticing just how hot she was. I hoped not, because the

thought of anyone else liking her made me want to scoop her up and run away with her... *Fuuuck. Calm down, asshole*, I told myself.

“So, who would like to read to the class?” she asked us directly.

“Not Tyler, he can’t,” Duke quipped, reaching forward to shake her hand with a charming smile. “Duke Callahan, nice to meet you.”

My stomach instantly sank with disappointment. She’d for sure start crushing on him. The girls always fell for his pretty boy hair even though he was taken. I needed to put it in Claire’s ear to buzz his damn hair again to keep the girls away. Surprisingly though, the look on the teacher’s face said something else. Her eyes met Duke’s and she cocked her head to the side and pursed her lips, like she didn’t approve of his comment. Her gaze shifted to me then.

“I uh...” I coughed in my hand to lower my voice, “I can read,” I assured her. I reached forward to shake her hand and was shocked by the contact. With her dainty hand in mine, it felt like... like we had some kind of connection.

Her mouth dropped open for a split second before she dropped my hand and turned away from me.

Fuck. I needed to get my shit together. What did that say about me if shaking hands with a woman got me all hot and bothered?

She addressed the other guys standing to my right. “So, any volunteers to read?” she asked the rest of them.

I felt my eyebrows scrunch together as I stared down at her. Her head only came up to my mid-chest. “Hey, I actually *can* read,” I told her with a forced chuckle. I could feel heat climbing my neck, and I pulled at the collar of my jersey. Duke was now grinning like an

idiot, finding this whole thing way too funny.

She turned and touched my shoulder, and I'm not even kidding, my heartbeat quickened at her touch. But she pulled her hand back quickly like she just touched hot lava. "I didn't mean to..." Her throat rolled with a swallow. "Aren't you the one who just got a concussion?" Her eyebrows pinched together in concern. "You really shouldn't be reading in your state. I'm surprised they even let you come here today."

I licked my lips and nodded, liking her concern for me and feeling oddly pleased that she watched our game. "So, you know I can read though, right?" I pushed. I just wanted to make sure.

Duke rubbed a hand over his face to hide his laughing, and I felt my face burn with embarrassment. I just didn't want her thinking I was some stupid jock. I hated when people thought I was stupid, and for some reason, I really craved her approval.

Her petite face cracked in confusion as she looked up at me. Her eyelashes had some of that goopy makeup on them to make them longer, but other than that, her face was scrubbed clean. And I liked her style. I liked *her*. A lot. "Um... Yes?" she answered.

"I'll do it," I said awkwardly. *What the fuck was I doing?* Then, even though my whole body was shouting at me not to, I took a stupid book from her grasp.

"Uh... Okay then, suit yourself," she said pleasantly. "Boys." She motioned for us to stand in the reading nook.

She buzzed past us then to greet the kids by the door, and I appreciated the faint scent of sugar cookies and vanilla that trailed after her.

Campbell elbowed me in the ribs, hard, making me double over.

"Dude, what the-"

“Did you just... Did you just sniff her hair, dude?” Campbell asked, amusement playing on his stupid face.

“No,” I shoved him back. “Fuck off, dickhead.”

Griff cleared his throat and gave me a quick head shake. “Language,” he whispered sternly.

I nodded, then turned my attention back to Miss Josie.

“You know how you know her, don’t you?” Campbell asked.

I shot him a questioning look. It bugged me that he seemed to be able to place her, but I couldn’t.

“She’s the girl who went nuts when that Garrett Sanderson rookie cheated on her.”

“Huh?”

He looked at me like I was crazy. “You know, the one who did slapshots with eggs in the Columbus rookie’s apartment? It was on SportsCenter. Josie-Bosie on Tiktok,” he clarified. “She deleted her account after the whole thing, but you can still see it if you look it up.”

“Ohhh shit,” I breathed out. Now I remembered, but even when I first watched that video, I thought she looked familiar. And I specifically remember being floored that someone fumbled the bag with her. Like, someone actually cheated on *her*? What a fucking loser.

“Wonder how many times she gets recognized because of that.” He chuckled under his breath. “She proly dyed her hair because of it.”

Now my chest tightened for her. The whole world knew she’d been cheated on. That had to suck. Even though most people in the comments had been on her side and that Garrett guys’ name had been drug through the mud— college frats and sororities all over the country displayed banners that read: “Good morning to everyone except Garrett” – but still... That must’ve been hard as

shit to go through.

The other thing I remembered from that video—her hockey skills were pretty impressive.

But she was more impressive here at the school.

She was very motherly with the kids, greeting each and every one of them like they all mattered to her. I couldn't see her ripping into anyone, making them feel like an absolute dumbass in front of everyone. I couldn't see her spraying anyone with water like they were a misbehaving puppy. I flinched just thinking of the memory.

"Dude, a tip," Campbell whispered, "quit staring."

"I can't," I mumbled distractedly... then felt my face flame red when I realized I actually said that aloud.

Campbell held a hand to his face to cover up his need to cackle.

As soon as everyone was seated, she walked to the front of the class like it was so natural for her, and she addressed the little ones. "Okay class, we have some members of the Crewmen here today. Let's give them a round of applause for coming!"

They all clapped, and a couple of the boys whooped excitedly.

"Let's *calmly* go to the reading nook to hear them read a couple stories for us, okay?" She clapped her hands together and they all hopped out of their seats and obediently walked to the rug to sit down. A couple little girls hung back, wanting to sit closer to her. I couldn't blame them. I'd want to sit next to her too.

Miss Josie looked at me expectantly then and gave me a nod.

Shit. Nerves crashed into my body.

"Uh," my voice cracked slightly, and the guys

behind me snickered. Thankfully, Griff cut them a stern look.

“Okay, so today we’re gonna read,” I looked down at the title and breathed a sigh of relief. I knew the story from the illustrations on the cover alone, “The Polar Express.”

The kids let out cheers.

I turned the page and my body instantly felt hot and sweaty.

You see, I fully know how to read... but sometimes... Sometimes my brain goes too fast, and the words get jumbled up.

I tried to start reading slowly, but for some reason, even though I’ve seen each word like a billion times in my life, they still looked brand new to me, and I caught myself sounding them out. I tried to play it off like I was showing the words to the kids and sounding them out with them, and that kind of helped.

After finally finishing a full page, I looked up. Miss Josie smiled encouragingly at me, and I felt a bit better, I pulled at my collar. Things were going fine. They were going good.

I should’ve known the other shoe was about to drop.

Right as I began the next page, a kid sitting in the front row sneezed, and a big, fat, green snot-rocket landed right on my shiny shoe.

“*Oh fuuuck,*” I breathed out. The entire class let out a collective gasp. But I was too busy covering my mouth so no one would see me gag. I shook my shoe while hacking my lungs out, trying to dispel the snot. I finally had to rub it on the colorful reading rug.

And that’s when I finally noticed the room was dead silent.

The kids were staring at me like they just saw a ghost.

“What?” I searched around me, confused.

Griff sucked in his top lip and hung his head, the other guys were in states of shock and amusement, the kids were now staring between me and Miss Josie.

“What?” And then it dawned on me. “Oh sh-” I thankfully cut myself off that time.

Miss Josie looked flustered. Her jaw set firmly, and she pointed a finger to the door. “Out! Wait for me in the hall *right now*, Mr. Jetterson,” she snapped.

It was my instinct to argue back, to yell that it wasn't my fault, to throw the booger kid under the bus, but I knew it'd be better to listen to her in front of the kids. I was in the wrong, and I swallowed down my temptation to argue against authority. And even if I did argue my way out of the situation... What would I win? The chance to read *more*? Yeah, no. Fuck that. This was a lose-lose situation. I needed to take the L.

My shoulders slumped as I slid off the reading stool. I put the book down with shaky fingers and avoided looking at my teammates. I muttered an apology to the kids before walking quietly to the hall.

Closing the heavy wooden door behind me, I stared up at the tiled ceiling and shook my head.

Last night, I was sure my flubbed breakaway marked the worst moment of this year. Now I realized it was nothing compared to this level of embarrassment, and honestly, I was afraid of what would happen the rest of the days of this stupid year... All because of that fucking fortune cookie. What did it say? *Strange changes were coming? Bad luck til the new year?* Well, I was now

counting down the fuck—, scratch that, the *freaking* days.

I looked both ways down the hall. Sitting here and waiting for a punishment made me feel like I was shrinking on the spot. Did I really have to stay here? I was a grown ass man, not a student. I rubbed my eyes. I had my car here. I could drive away before anyone even knew I left.

But the way she looked so upset... I had to stay and apologize to her...

Seconds later, Miss Josie pushed the door open, bumping right into my chest.

I touched the small of her back, steadying her, and those wide hazel eyes stared up at me for a beat. The closeness between us felt so undeniably natural. I'd only once before felt this level of comfort around someone. I almost smiled, but the look on her face stopped me dead in my tracks.

She pursed her lips and quickly pushed me away, breaking our connection.

I backed a full foot away from her, knowing that I was about to get chewed apart. My nose flared with a deep breath as I prepared myself for the lecture.

She pinned me with those piercing eyes of hers. Little pieces of hair were falling out of her bun, and she looked tired as all hell as she sighed. "Mr. Jetterson... What were you thinking?"

I gave her my best flirty smirk. "Let me guess, you're not mad, just disappointed," I tried to joke.

Her eyes widened. "Oh, no," she shook her head and crossed her arms over her chest. She looked me up and down. "I am fully pissed off at you. Do you realize that all their parents will have to be notified about this? If you said this to high schoolers, whatever, but you slipped in front of *second graders*." She threw her arms up. "They're babies!"

She continued on her tirade, but I kind of tuned out her voice— it was a habit I developed a long time ago to deal with coaches and teachers. Instead of focusing on her words, I focused on her... The little faded freckles under her eyes, the way little wispy hairs were falling out of her bun, her full, pink lips, and that angular chin... The fact that all I wanted to do was tilt it right up and claim her mouth with mine.

“Tyler!” She practically stomped her foot, shaking me out of my daydream. “Are you even listening to me? Why are you grinning?” Her forehead creased with annoyance.

Shit. I cringed and scratched my cheek, feeling like a total asshole.

“What do you have to say for yourself, young man?!” she practically shouted in a teacher-voice.

“Uh... young man?” I struggled to keep a straight face. I hadn’t been called that in a while, and never by someone who was probably the same age as me.

Her face remained stern. She arched an unimpressed eyebrow at me, waiting for my response.

I tucked my hands in my pockets and leaned back on my heels. “I was just all flustered because that snot-rocket. I don’t do well with that kind of...” I waved a hand erratically in front of us, “thing. I am very sorry. Seriously.”

She stared at me for a beat, then, in a move that absolutely shocked me, she covered her face with her dainty hands and let out a high-pitched, frustrated screech. I’d never before seen a teacher break composure like that, and I wasn’t quite sure what to do about it.

“Uh...” I moved forward but was scared to touch her.

“I hate the day before breaks,” she grumbled

miserably more to herself than me. Her shoulders slumped, making her look defeated. She let out a sigh and that little sound instantly tempted me to pull her into a hug. It'd be perfect. She'd fit right under my chin. If this were under any other circumstance, I'd love to... to comfort her. To kiss her.

Fuck, no. Focus, Tyler. She's mad at you. She's having a rough day and you made it worse, I mentally chastised myself.

"I'm sorry I acted like such an ass-"

She cut me off with a pretty intimidating glare. "Don't you dare finish that word," she threatened.

I put my hands up in innocence, taken aback by how scary she looked. "Very sorry," I mumbled. In an effort to lighten the mood, I said, "So is this the part you give me detention?"

She cut her eyes to mine and her jaw set. "No, Mr. Jetersen. But I am going to give you homework. I want you to reflect on this experience. Kids look up to you. You could have a real impact on them. Do you really want that to be negative? Choose your words wisely. And you don't need to apologize to me, you have to apologize to them."

Jeez. I let her words wash over me for a second. She was right. I needed to take more responsibility when it came to speaking with kids, and fans in general. But I wasn't the irresponsible jerk she clearly chalked me up to be. I donated a shit load of money to Griff's charity every year, and I always donated my time for fundraisers.

"Do you understand?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

And I'll admit it, those words pushed me over the edge. My self-control over listening to authority snapped. "Just so you know, Miss Josie, I'm not some

irresponsible asshole.” I rubbed a hand over my eyes. She was making me nervous and the swear words just kept popping out of my damn mouth.

Her hands landed on her hips as accusation slid into those hazel eyes of hers. “I never said that you were. I am upset that you said the word ‘fuck,’ in front of children.”

Fuck. Now that I knew how the word “fuck” sounded coming from her lips, it spurred on a whole bunch of other imagery in my brain, only adding to my frustration.

“Now, do we understand?” She nodded while she said it, urging me to say yes.

I breathed through my nose, trying to regain control of my emotions. “Is that some kind of teacher trick?”

She snorted and crossed her arms over her chest, and dammit all to hell because that sassy look on her face made me like her even more.

“Do we understand?” she repeated.

I swallowed. I guess now wasn’t the time to argue. I nodded quickly. “I’ll apologize to the kids and explain why they aren’t allowed to say it.” I raked a hand through my hair. “Sorry... uh... thank you for uh...” *Why the fuck was I thanking her? Get it together, dude,* I warned myself.

She looked like she was debating whether or not I should be trusted to speak to the kids again. “Okay,” she finally said, letting out a deep breath.

I moved to head back in the classroom, but her voice stopped me. “Was there something else going on?” She squinted up at me curiously, and I felt hot under her gaze.

I shrugged, but my face was burning. “No.”

“Because, if you need-”

I gave her a tight smile, but my heart was sinking. She could tell. She knew I struggled. I needed to forget about her and put her far, *far* away from me so I'd never be reminded of my shortcomings... which was a shame. I hadn't felt like this about anyone in such a long time, maybe even ever. “I don't need anything,” I told her simply.

“Okay, well-”

“I'm good,” I assured her with a flat smile.

She gave a firm nod, all business again, and directed me back into the classroom.

8. Josie

“Mrs. Petey, I cannot *believe* you didn’t invite us to meet the Crewmen, what the heck? I thought we were your favorite! Basically slashed in the ankles and took us out, bruh!” a kid named Davey yelled out.

The rest of the boys in his crew sitting in the back of the room roared the same complaints: “Slashed our hearts, Petey!” “Disrespectful!” “Five-minute major for you!” “Can’t believe you did us boys like that!”

I shook my head at them and snorted. “Petey? Bruh? Mrs? How about Ms. Petersen?”

“She’s trying to change the subject, boys!” Johnny yelled. “Don’t let her!”

I struggled to keep a straight face... which was part of the problem. When they made me laugh, they tallied it as a success in their brains and wanted to keep it going.

I knew from the very first day of school that this hour, my last hour of the day, would be tough considering the fact that most of the boys came in wearing those little hockey team windbreaker jackets. Hockey boys were trouble on their own, but together? It was a shitshow... or “gongshow” as they liked to call it. I swear, they competed to get the last word every two seconds and it was their mission in life to get me off topic.

I glanced up at the clock. I just had to keep them occupied for five more minutes.

“What’s everyone doing over the break-”

“Tourney with the boys!” one of them shouted out.

I gave a stern look. “We’re going in order. Calm yourselves.”

I could feel the boys literally itching to tell me about their plans as I asked some of the kids sitting in the front to speak first.

As soon as the bell went off, my kids cheered loudly and ran out in the hall. I sat back in my chair and closed my eyes, not wanting to move or talk for the rest of the day, but knowing that I had to get going.

I slowly gathered my books, shut off the lights, and locked my door, feeling relieved that we finally made it to the end of the day. I swear, sometimes getting to a break felt like competing in an American Ninja Warrior contest.

Walking across the parking lot, I smiled and waved to kids, shouting out my own goodbyes. There truly was something to be said for having students know you, even when you’d never had them in class. It really showed how much of a positive impact you could have in people’s lives just by having good conversation.

My phone buzzed on my way to my car. I pulled it out and quickly answered, “Hey Dad.”

“Hi honey,” his gruff voice replied. “How was the last day?”

“It was interesting, I’ll say that,” I sighed. “One of your bonehead hockey players swore in front of a class of second graders,” I informed him. A mental picture of Tyler from earlier flashed in my mind... His boyish grin, the long eyelashes surrounding those warm brown eyes of his, and that strong jawline. Oof. He was a super attractive guy. Too attractive to be honest. Those were the dangerous ones... Plus, he played hockey. I shook him out of my head real quick.

“Shit,” he said, “which one?”

I rolled my eyes. No wonder the guy swore in a moment of distress, my dad’s vocabulary was probably rubbing off on him. “Tyler Jetersen.”

I could hear him laughing on the other end of the line. “He’s having a rough few days, honey, you see that goalie take him out? But don’t worry, I’ll deal with him.”

Hearing that did make me feel a little bad. Tyler had seemed a bit... sad. The way his fingers trembled as he set the book down to leave the room had me wanting to give him a hug to be honest. And really, had his swear word mishap happened outside the school, I probably would’ve laughed, but inside school? No way. I had no choice but to discipline him.

“I think I already did,” I returned.

“I bet you did,” he said with a wry chuckle. “When will ya be home?”

While I loved living at home, my days there were numbered. I needed to change up my life. I finally scheduled to move out during this break. When I first brought it up, my dad hated the idea of me living in downtown Detroit by myself, but we struck up a deal: He couldn’t bug me about moving out so long as he got to choose my apartment building. So, he did all the research and chose one close to the rink— no surprise there.

“Soon,” I told him. “I’m stopping by to get bundled up, then heading to Campus Martius.” I always took shifts monitoring the outdoor skating rink in Detroit’s little square during Christmastime. I grew up figure skating competitively, but these days, I just enjoyed outdoor skating during the snowy months.

“Great. Steak sound good for dinner?” he asked.

“Sounds perfect,” I smiled. I think part of the reason my dad didn’t want me to move out was because

with me home, we could overpower my mom when it came to dinner choices. My mom went vegan a few years ago and my dad hated eating anything green. She only ever cheated on her veganism when my dad took her to her favorite Italian restaurant in town.

“I’ll have it ready for when you’re back,” he said.

“Thanks, dad,” I added before hanging up.

9. Tyler

Holding my designated pond skates— my extra pair that I didn't care about getting trashed— I hurried down my apartment stairwell and pushed out into the snowy night.

I was meeting Casey and the rest of the fam for some outdoor skating. While his boys, Tyler Joseph, Ty for short, and Beau James, were only two-and-a-half-years-old, Casey had them pretty stable on skates already. Casey coached a U16 AAA team in metro-Detroit and had been bringing them to practices all fall just so they could skate here at Campus Martius by Christmastime. My older brother wasn't a sap, but he'd do anything to put a smile on his wife's face, and this was about to make Addie so happy she'd surely cry.

I jogged a few blocks down the street to the lit up little square in the middle of the city. Detroit really went all out for Christmas, making Campus Martius look like a village straight out of a Hallmark movie. Holiday music blared through the square, lit up trees lined the little rink, and a huge ass Christmas tree was erected right at the center of it all. There was also a huge tent housing skate rentals, and a long line of people waiting for hot chocolates and goodies from the concession stand that was decorated to look like a gingerbread house.

I quickly picked out my brother in the crowd, standing in line for the concession stand. He was taller and more built than the average guy. I was pretty sure he'd never let the term "dad bod" apply to him. He could still probably snap me in half even though I worked out almost every single day.

"Hey, guys," I said, a little out of breath as I came up to him holding one of the twins.

“Hey, took ya long enough to get here,” Casey said with a grin. “Me and Beau here are just grabbing some hot chocolates. You want?”

“You got trucked!” his son called out.

I cut Casey a look. “Dang. Was hoping you two went to bed and missed it,” I said.

“Oh, they did miss it in real time,” Casey said, his shoulders shaking with laughter. “They caught the replays, little brother.”

“Whatever,” I grumbled. “That goalie put them shorthanded and we won, so his loss.”

Casey grinned. “Nah, I think it was still yours.”

I shook my head.

“I wanna be goalie,” his son said confidently, and just by that statement, I noticed... Did my brother seriously think he was holding Beau? I pulled the kid’s little scarf back and his eyes widened in fear. He cut his eyes to his dad and then put a little finger to his mouth in a shush motion. Now that made me crack up.

Casey eyed me suspiciously. “What?”

“You sure you have Beau, man?”

“Beau” shook his head furiously at me with a grave look on his little face. Casey’s eyebrows furrowed. “I can tell my sons apart, asshole.” His face faltered for a second, then he whispered. “Let’s not tell mommy I slipped with a curse, okay?”

“You and me both,” I murmured.

“What’s that?”

I moved my beanie to itch my head. “Nothin’. So, if this is Beau, where’s my little namesake?”

“Ty is with his mother getting us wristbands,” Casey said.

“Cool.” I was about to turn and find them, but turned back. “I was gonna ask, how’d it end up going with Duke and Claire the other night?”

“Eh, unless he wises up, they might have a bit of a rough patch ahead.” He grimaced.

I rocked back on my heels. “That sucks.”

Casey blew out a breath. “Yeah, actually, wanna bring him to one of my U16 practices this week? I’ll pull him aside and force him to wise up.”

My eyebrows shot up. “You’d do that?”

“Uh yeah,” he said it like it should’ve been obvious, “he’s disrupting our delicate ecosystem.”

“Huh?”

He looked at me dryly. “Do you realize that when one woman is upset, they’re all upset? When one guy is in the doghouse, you’re up next.” He rubbed his hand over his scruffy jaw. “When Claire’s sad, Addie’s sad and stressed for her, and I don’t want Addie stressed right now.”

“Okay,” I drawled suspiciously.

“Ya know what? Both of you. My practice. Next Tuesday.”

It didn’t quite sound like a suggestion anymore, more like an order. “Yeesh, got it. I’ll go check on Ty and Adds.”

He nodded. “Thanks.”

When I spotted Addie holding hands with ‘Ty’ who was actually Beau, I snuck up on them and tickle-attacked the little guy, making him cackle.

A hand flew to Addie’s chest. “God, you scared me, Tyler!”

I cringed. “Sorry ‘bout that, was just excited to see Tyler junior here.” I wagged my eyebrows at the little guy, trying to relay to him that he couldn’t fool me. The real Beau lifted a finger to his lips to shush me exactly like his brother did.

“Wait,” Addie said. She pulled her son’s scarf down to see his full face. “Beau! You guys tricked us?!” Beau started cracking up. I grabbed him up and held him over my shoulder, rough-housing him a bit.

Addie shook her head. “By the way, how are you feeling? That hit was kinda yikes.” She covered her mouth to hide a giggle.

“Yeah, yeah,” I said, rolling my eyes. “I’m fine. Everyone overreacted. Stupid fortune cookie’s fault.” I muttered.

“Huh?” She looked at me like I’d lost my mind.

“Nothin’.”

I didn’t have to explain any further because that damn fortune cookie had run its course. To be honest though, I was still a bit wary over the “strange changes” part of the fortune. What the hell could that mean?

After Addie paid, she handed me a wristband, and I stared at the leftover ones in her hand. “You forgot one,” I pointed out, turning to get back in line.

“No, no,” she said quickly, grabbing my arm, “we’re good. I’m not skating.”

I looked her over. “Why?” She loved skating.

She chewed on her bottom lip, trying to hide a smile.

“No, you’re not...?”

She quickly turned away from me to find an empty bench where we could all sit to lace up our skates.

I followed after her and placed Beau down between us, then leaned behind him and mouthed, “Pregnant?”

She finally broke into a smile. “Yes,” she whispered. “We’ve been keeping it quiet, just in case. Casey wanted to tell you himself, so pretend you don’t know, okay?”

“Damn,” I said, happiness washing over me. I loved Addie like my own sister and I knew how much she had always dreamed of having a bunch of kiddos. Beau was busy studying the skaters, so I leaned in and quietly said, “Happy for you guys. Boy or girl? Better question— one or two again?”

“Just one this time,” she said with a giddy smile. “And we’re not finding out.”

“Wow,” I breathed out, looking out to the ice. Adults and kids shuffled around the rink, but there was a red scarf zipping through the clutter pretty smoothly.

“*Oh shit...*” I breathed out.

I whipped my neck around quickly, hoping the owner of the scarf wouldn’t see me. My heart pounded with panic.

“What?” Addie’s forehead creased with concern.

“No, don’t look over there, I am begging you,” I said through clenched teeth. “Please pretend we are engrossed in a super important conversation.

“Uh...” a laugh popped out of her mouth. “Why...?”

I used my little nephew’s body as a human shield, dipping my head low behind him. “The rink monitor. Red scarf.”

“Okay?” she drawled. “She’s helping a child to their feet right now. She looks nice. Do you know her or something?”

“Not really,” I grumbled.

“Then why all this?” She motioned to me looking all freaked out.

I pinched the bridge of my nose, feeling frustrated. I wanted to bury the whole afternoon away for the rest of my life and never address it again, which was what I tried to do with every source of embarrassment, but I guess that wouldn't be happening. “Okay, I'll tell you,” I finally said, looking at Addie's expectant face. “So you know how we have to go read in schools for community involvement? Well, I was reading to *her* second grade class, but then a kid sneezed and got a big, fat snot-rocket all up on my nice shoes, and I said...”

She looked at me and groaned.

I clamped his hands over Beau's ears. “Fuck,” I confirmed. “The whole class gasped and she yelled at me to go out in the hall and wait for her.”

“Did you?” she asked with worried eyes.

“Well, duh. What was I supposed to do?” I shook my head. “So then she met me in the hall and chewed me out like I was back in school. Humiliating.” I visibly shivered. “Gave me flashbacks.”

She clapped a hand over her mouth to stop from laughing. Addie was around through my teenage years so she probably remembered how many times Casey had to reprimand me over school problems.

“Yeah, yeah, very funny,” I grumbled.

“I'm sorry, that's kind of funny.” She patted my shoulder.

I shook my head seriously. “No, it's really not, Adds,” I said incredulously. “She probably hates my guts, and I...” I blew out a breath. “I can't get her out of my head.” It was true, I'd been waging an internal war all day, trying to erase her face from memory, but I couldn't.

“Aww, well, maybe I should go talk to her,” she said, smiling now. “It would be a bit of karmic justice for *your* meddling, I think.” She started getting up, but I grabbed her arm to hold her in place, silently begging her to drop it.

“I’m just-”

“Tyler Jetterson? Is that you?” a female voice interrupted us.

We both looked over to see the teacher in question leaning over the boards in her rink monitor jacket.

She pointed an accusing finger directly at me. “There’s a lot of kids out here. You *better* not forget what I said,” she ordered in a very authoritative teacher voice before skating off.

Addie died laughing. I dropped my head in my hands and groaned.

After lacing up my own skates, I helped Beau tie up his teeny ones.

“The bunny ears and the double knot, okay?” his raspy little voice asked.

“Definitely, dude,” I confirmed while fixing his laces. I loved that Casey was sharing the ice with his sons just like he shared it with me.

When we were all done, Casey led Ty to the rink, while I followed behind with Beau.

The boys immediately ran out on the ice, not caring who was near them or that the rink was pretty packed. I cringed as they zipped through people struggling to stand straight.

“Dude, they’re gonna get us thrown off,” I

whispered to Casey.

He ran his tongue over the teeth of his closed mouth, trying to cover for the fact that he was secretly proud his boys were tearing it up. He made eye contact with his wife then. Addie made a little motion toward her phone, wordlessly saying she wanted a picture.

“Boys,” he called out, motioning them over. They immediately slushed their way to us.

We whisked up a twin each and skated to the boards to grant Addie a picture.

“You guys gotta be careful out here. Don’t wanna take anyone out,” I warned them.

“You got taken out!” Beau accused, causing Ty to go into a giggling fit.

I cocked an eyebrow at Casey, who was struggling not to laugh as well. “Some discipline, here?”

“Well, you did get taken out,” he said with a shrug. He released his twin. “Let them live a little,” he said.

I released the kid I was holding and casually skated around the edge of the rink with Case. I wished I could say it was relaxing, but the whole time, I was hyper aware of where Miss Josie was at all times.

“What’s with you?” my brother finally asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You seem tense,” Case said.

I shrugged, but my eyes gave me away.

“Ah,” Casey let his head fall back, “Finally!”

“What?” I shoved him.

“What’s her name?” his eyes glinted at the prospect of some good gossip.

“Shut up, there isn’t a ‘her,’” I snapped too fast.

“Yes,” he chuckled, “‘Her’ is very clearly the rink monitor with the red scarf. I’m not stupid. What’s her name?”

“Dude, I’m not-”

“Oh shit,” Casey cut me off. “Was that my kid’s voice?”

I listened for a second, happy for the distraction. And yupp. His two rugrats were definitely chasing each other and yelling out the word, “bender,” at people, which was a hockey insult for people who couldn’t skate well because their ankles bent inward from not tying their skates up right.

He rubbed a hand over his tired face.

“There are worse words,” I offered.

“I guess. Wait, back to you,” he said.

“Nah,” I shook my head and glided off to catch one of his kids... which I immediately regretted.

Because up ahead, Miss Josie had both of the kids stopped. Their necks were craned way up as they looked at her.

I slowed up, suddenly wondering if I should pretend I wasn’t with them, but Josie chose that second to look up and make eye contact with me. Annnd, I was stuck.

I came to a stop next to them and adjusted my beanie.

“So,” she spoke, clearly amused at the prospect of lecturing me again, “should I assume all Jettersen boys need a talking to over their language?” She arched an eyebrow at me. Because of the cold, her freckles and red-tipped nose stood out more, making her look impossibly pretty, and I found myself at a loss for words.

Casey laughed good-naturedly next to me.

“Sorry about that ma’am.”

That brought me back to reality. *Ma’am*? When did my brother ever use the word ma’am? I side-eyed him.

“Is there a problem?”

It took me a second to realize she was talking to me. My face immediately burned despite the cold temperature out here. I pointed to myself in question, just for clarification.

“Yes, you, Mr. Jetterson. Is there a problem?” she insisted.

Shit. I didn’t think she’d call me out like that. I wracked my brain for something, anything to say, but I had nothing. “Uh, no,” I finally said.

“No...?” She arched a skeptical eyebrow.

Casey nudged me so hard I almost fell down.

I cleared my throat. “No, *ma’am*.”

And the way she stuck her nose in the air, like she just won or something... It just rubbed me the wrong way. I couldn’t help but let out a little grumble over her looking so stuck up.

Her eyes zeroed in on me. “What’s that?”

“Nothing. Sorry. Won’t happen again,” I mumbled.

Her eyes lingered on me for a second longer, like she was sizing me up. I shifted my weight to appear taller. “As you were,” she finally said, motioning us to continue skating.

All of two seconds later, Casey absolutely cracked up. “I never thought I’d see the day! I am so damn giddy right now!”

“Shut up,” I said, elbowing him in the stomach.

“No, no,” he warned, “I get to do this. You stuck your nose in my relationship life for years! I love seeing you thrown off your game, and boy, does that girl have you off your fuckin’ game! She put you right in your place.”

“Dude, stop swearing,” I said, cutting my eyes to his. “She’ll hear you.”

He shook his head and laughed even harder. “Oh, I love this. I love this so much.”

“F-off,” I spat out.

“F?!” he practically cackled. “I love it.”

“Dude, she doesn’t even like me. She thinks I’m a dumb-” I stopped myself from saying ass. “Butt,” I finished.

“Nah.” He shook his head. “Why would she think you’re dumb? And for what it’s worth, women are the brains of the operation anyway, but I don’t think that matters. She keeps looking over here. I think she *likes* you,” he sing-songed in a teasing voice. “I wonder what this one will make you do.” He rubbed his gloved hands together.

“What?”

He yanked on my ear, which to this day still had a hole in it.

“Ow, f-” I cut myself off. “Why do you always do that?!”

“Because I think it’s funny as shit, Loverboy,” he said with a grin.

I shook my head and sped off to catch up with his troublemaker sons, but I couldn’t help but replay his words. *Did she actually like me?* I swallowed hard and searched for her again... But just as I spotted her, she was stepping off the ice to switch with a new monitor...

And while I'd never admit it aloud, seeing her leave did make my heart sink a little. And I honestly hoped we'd run into each other again soon...

10. Josie

I woke up the next morning wrapped in my down comforter, embracing the absolute luxury that was sleeping in.

It was tempting to stay in bed for even longer, but I could hear other voices floating up from the kitchen, telling me that at least one of my sisters and her kids were over. Plus, today was the big day: moving day. As soon as my dad was out of practice at the rink, he was helping me move to my new apartment.

I lazily rolled out of bed and reached for my glasses, not bothering to put my contacts in yet, pulled my hair up in a messy bun, and threw a sweatshirt over my pajamas before heading downstairs.

As soon as my sock hit the foyer floor, my niece Amelia yelled out, "Aunt Joey!" and practically barreled into me for a hug. All of my nieces and nephews called me 'Joey' instead of 'Josie' because when my first niece, Ava, started talking, she couldn't pronounce her s's. Amelia's little brother, Matty, was right behind her, practically tackling me as well as soon as my sock hit the foyer floor.

"Woah, good morning, guys!" I said with a smile, patting them on the back.

I looked in the kitchen to see my older sister, Clara, pouring herself a cup of coffee.

I quickly swiped her cup. "Thank you!" I said sweetly, to which she just rolled her eyes.

"G'morning sleepy head. We've been here an hour already."

"It's only nine. The sun just came up," I protested.

“Well, we heard it’s your moving day. We came to lend a hand.”

“Yeah?” I looked at her two little ones who were nodding furiously. “Thanks guys.”

“First day of break and I need them to burn off some energy,” Clara said, giving me a hip-check.

“Ah,” I smiled. “So, they’re home from school so you needed to find a free teacher to help you out?” I teased.

“I mean... I’m not saying that’s not what I’m doing,” she said with a chuckle.

“G’morning sleepy head!” my mom sang out, repeating Clara’s exact wording. My mom would be described as a five-foot-flat, sixty-year-old pixie dream girl. She’s an artist who works based on her mood—meaning, when the inspiration strikes, she creates a ton; other times, she doesn’t lift a paintbrush for months at a time. She married my dad, a tall, rule-adhering, rigid athlete, her total opposite, when they were sophomores in college. Because of their height difference, two of my sisters ended up with model height, whereas me and my sister Katie, who favored my mom’s genes, ended up around 5’2.

I rolled my eyes. “The one morning I don’t wake up before everyone else in this family,” I grumbled.

“Ready for the big day?” my mom asked, ushering the two of us to take a seat at the kitchen island.

“Actually, yes, I think I am,” I said.

“I think this will be just great for you,” she said confidently.

“That’s quite the change in tune,” I said, eyeing her skeptically. She was on Team Stay Home for the longest time.

“Yeah, well, I’m very happy with the apartment your dad picked out. It’s really rather lovely. And maybe you’ll meet a nice neighbor boy.”

“A nice neighbor boy?” Clara repeated dubiously, cutting me a sketched out look.

“Oh pshh.” My mom waved her off. “Don’t dissuade her from the possibility, Clara. She needs to let someone new in. Replace that skeezy Garrett sonofabitch with a better lover.”

“Mom!” Clara and I said at the same time. Clara cut her eyes to her children playing in the living room.

“Really, I thought dad was the potty mouth, not you,” Clara accused.

“I’m just saying,” she said, innocently shrugging her slim shoulders. “I know you’re in the middle of a man-hating era, but not all boys are bad. Some are very sensitive actually, but you’ll never know that if you categorize them all as Garretts.”

I breathed out a sigh. She was probably right. But all the comments from the viral video drama still swirled in my head. Some hyped me up, but many tried to tear me down, calling me a bitter, scorned woman, others calling me a puck bunny who deserved to be cheated on... And to think— I actually only ever wanted to end up with someone who could skate because my dream vacations were to places like Switzerland and Banff and Alaska so I could go outdoor skating. Someone who loathed skating would hate that kinda thing. It was just too bad that Garrett tainted that future picture for me.

And while I really wished I could forget about him completely, it was really hard to forget when the entire internet posted thirst traps of him all the time. While the scandal made half the world hate him, the other half made him the face of hot hockey players

everywhere. I vowed to never date a guy that attractive ever again. I swear, his good looks just went to his head and gave him permission to have the astronomical level of audacity he possessed. Never again.

“Just be open with the new neighbors. Debra’s daughter met someone that way,” she said.

“Don’t make it sound like Debra’s daughter’s doing better just because she met someone. She had a one-night stand with a neighbor and now she’s struggling to track him down for child support,” Clara deadpanned. “She needs to raise her standards, not lower them. Just because someone’s a neighbor does not make them a contender.”

My mom rolled her eyes, “I’m just saying, be open.”

“But not too open,” Clara noted.

“I’m moving out for more independence, guys. Not to meet a guy,” I reminded them, feeling my face heating up. I was not a fan of discussing my love life before breakfast. “And what happened to de-centering guys from our conversations?”

My mom rolled her eyes. “That’s only for when your sister Katie’s here.”

“Mom!” we both shouted in unison. Katie was currently going through a rough patch with her husband.

“What? It’s true! You guys need different talks. Parenting isn’t one size fits all, ya know? She needs to be more independent, you need to be maybe a tad bit less independent,” she said, scrunching up her face as she looked at me.

“Mom,” Clara clapped back, “she totally doesn’t need to be less independent. Don’t tell her that.”

She rolled her eyes. “I just mean she can let someone in, ya know? She can use some help with

letting her guard down... maybe the help of a hunky guy!" she said, wagging her eyebrows.

"Hunky?" I smacked a hand to my forehead. "Make it stop," I begged Clara.

"Yes, hunky!" my mom repeated, sticking her chin in the air, completely unashamed of her adjective of choice. "Your father was very hunky," she said, her eyes glinting at the thought of him.

I made a mock-barf noise and cut my eyes to Clara, telepathically asking, *seriously?*

My mom's face transformed into a cringe then as she eyed my ratty sweatshirt, glasses, and greasy hair. "Just don't go around your new apartment like this," she said before turning to dote on her grandchildren in the living room.

Seeing my face in response to that, Clara practically choked on her coffee.

"Thanks for the backup, sis," I grumbled as she continued laughing.

11. Tyler

I ran down the hallway after Hassik and Garcia, trying to mentally prepare myself for the absolutely verbal beatdown we were about to get over being late to practice. It wasn't my fault to be honest, it was Hassik's. Apparently Francesca, the she-devil— did reach out to him last night— not with a letter as the fortune cookie predicted, but with a text— and this morning, he would not get the fuck out of bed for practice.

We finally got him up by threatening that we were going to reach out to Francesca personally with not the nicest of phone calls if he didn't move his ass.

I rounded the corner of our locker room and slammed right into Hassik's back, who was standing straight up with everyone's eyes on him. Garcia's cubby was right by the door, so he slipped into his seat to my left without anyone really even noticing. Hassik and I had to cross the damn room.

"Nice of you boys to join us," Coach said dryly.

"Yeah, nice of you to join us," Garcia mimicked under his breath, grinning like an asshole.

"Fuck off, dickhead," I muttered back at him.

"Mr. Jetterson!" Coach boomed, pointing his finger to the hall. "Wait in the hall!"

My teammates immediately burst into laughter. Damn it. I was really hoping he wouldn't find out about my mishap at the school reading. My shoulders tensed up as I looked at Coach's stern, weathered face. He was still pointing to the hall. "Wait... really?" I stammered out.

"Well, what did you just say to your good friend here?" Coach gestured to his ear.

“Uh...” I cut my eyes to everyone else’s. We always cursed in here. Hell, Coach was the biggest offender.

“Fuck off, dickhead?” I asked more than said.

Coach spat on the ground and shook his head. “That’s it,” he said, sticking his hands in his hockey sweatpants. “We need to address this. We need a swear jar in here.”

Everyone roared in protest.

“Choose a charity! We’re doin’ it!”

“Fucking Jettensen’s fault!” Whitty yelled out. “Couldn’t just shut his trap in front of the kiddies.”

Great, I thought bitterly, like I’m the only one who swears in here.

Coach unscrewed an empty water bottle.

“Whitty! Twenty to the jar!”

“Wait, seriously?” Duke asked with wide eyes.

“You think I’m joking, Callahan?!” he roared.

“N... no,” Duke responded, looking a bit shaky.

“No?!” Coach boomed, his face turning red.

“No, sir!” Duke yelled back.

Whitty dug in his bag to find his wallet before forking over the twenty to Coach.

“And Jettensen, you too for the fucking dickhead comment.”

“But you just-”

He cut me off with a scary look.

I plucked a twenty out of my wallet and stuffed it in the water bottle.

“Now that that’s settled, get dressed. It’s gonna be a rough one boys.”

“But we won the last game!” Duke protested.

“Barely,” Coach ground out. “Let’s go.” He twirled his hand in hurry-it-up motion

Coach wasn’t kidding when he said it was going to be a rough one. Not only did he have us running drills up and down the ice non-stop, but then he had Ellie, the power skate instructor, come out onto the ice after our practice was technically over.

And let me tell ya, every time Ellie gracefully skated out in her figure skates wearing a Crewmen hockey warm-up suit with her long auburn hair fluttering behind her, we all let out a collective groan.

“Why the long faces, boys?!” Ellie sang out, fucking loving that we were scared of her.

“Babe, we’re already dead,” TJ Vonnie, her fiancé, said. “You gotta go easy on us.”

She stuck her hands on her hips and pursed her lips. “Well, you all can thank your teammate TJ for making today even harder.”

Duke looked like he was actually going to cry.

Ellie zipped by the line, giving TJ a little shove in the chest. “What did I say about calling me ‘babe’ at work?” she asked, arching an eyebrow up at him.

“Shit,” he muttered.

“Vonnies! Twenty more to the swear jar!” Griff yelled out with a grin.

“Dude!” TJ protested.

Griff shrugged. “I like this initiative. I think we can raise a lot of money.”

By the time we were finally dismissed, my

muscles were already protesting, and I was afraid I wouldn't even be able to walk tomorrow.

I hightailed it to the trainers after leaving the locker room, and I was now walking out of the stadium with ice packs taped to my right quad and my left shoulder.

"What's for dinner, boys?" Garcia asked, running a hand through his damp spiky black hair. "Chinese again?" he asked with his signature troublemaker grin.

"No," I snapped. "That fortune cookie's trying to ruin my life."

"You can't believe-"

"Uh, yes, I can," I countered.

"No more," Hassik agreed warily.

Garcia and I made brief eye-contact, wordlessly agreeing that we needed to keep Hassik away from his phone and thoughts of Francesca tonight. "I'm treating myself tonight, boys. Getting takeout from Pop's on Third. You guys want? Then Xbox tourney when I get back?"

"Sounds perfect, man," Garcia said.

Hassik just nodded.

Hassik must've rubbed off on me a little in terms of music taste because I was listening to some old emo tunes while I carried up our takeout tray from Pops. I was fully convinced that Pops' Chicken Parm was made with a recipe from heaven itself because my mouth was watering from the smell alone, and I couldn't wait to dig in.

I waited for our elevator for about five full minutes before losing patience. It must've been busted again. Today was not the day for that to happen, I

internally whined. My legs were already hurting, and we lived on the fourth floor. But my hunger outweighed my soreness, and I hurriedly made my way to the stairwell.

I picked up my pace even though my muscles were screaming at me, but I just wanted to get this over with then lay out on my couch for the rest of the fucking night. I started taking the stairs by two at a time and was just rounding the second floor's little platform when I was absolutely clotheslined.

My body was smacked to the ground, and I legit saw stars.

I stayed laying there on the concrete, blinking a few times to try and regain clear vision and gather what the fuck just happened to me.

“Oh my God, are you okay?!”

I squeezed my eyes shut. Was I hallucinating? Did I just hit my head that hard? Because that couldn't be.... Was that really *her* voice?

“Can you get up? I'm so sorry! I shouldn't have swung the door open like that. But really, what are the chances that you'd be walking by at that very second?” she shrieked.

I breathed out and looked down my chest to see pasta sauce covering my favorite shirt and jacket.

And... the worst thing about it... it looked like blood.

I immediately gagged, then tried to control my mind. *It was fucking pizza sauce, get over it*, I sternly told myself as I shoved the sauce off me and searched for napkins.

“Oh jeez,” she let out, then she was kneeling by my side.

Her concerned hazel eyes met mine, and I swear to God my heartbeat fucking stuttered.

“Miss Josie?” I asked breathlessly.

She bit her lip, trying to tamp down a chuckle. “You can call me Josie,” she said with a warm, genuine smile. She looked way less guarded and more comfortable than she had in the classroom and at the rink, which I guess made sense, those were her workplaces. My eyes skimmed over her outfit— socks with slides on, soft gray sweatpants, and a cut-off t-shirt that exposed a thin sliver of her skin. I liked her comfy look. I honestly never would’ve guessed she dressed this way after seeing her put together teacher outfit earlier.

I slowly sat up, holding my head. Seeing our amazing food spewed all over the ground made me want to cry like a damn baby. And that’s when a laugh bubbled out of her.

“I’m sorry!” she said, covering her mouth. “I’m so sorry! It’s just... I can’t believe...”

“Why do females always laugh at my pain?” I groaned to myself, which just made her laugh harder. And I’m not gonna lie, it was suddenly hard to keep a straight face.

“Honey?” a gruff voice yelled from behind her door. “Everything okay?”

My neck whipped around to her. I stared wide-eyed. Because I *knew* that fucking voice. I eyed her door. What the fuck was going on here? Coach was a *married man*. Was she some kind of sugar baby? Was Coach her *sugar daddy*?

Oh my God.

I needed to get the hell out of here, but my head was still fucking spinning.

“Is that... Is that...?” In my state of shock, I couldn’t seem to find the words.

Her eyes widened in concern, and she knelt

back down by my side in a second. She grabbed my chin with her dainty hand, and with a surprising amount of force, pulled my face to hers. “Are you okay? You’re stuttering. How many fingers am I holding up?”

But I wasn’t looking at her anymore, because a second later, Coach was looming over us, scratching his salt and pepper, close-cropped hair.

“Jetterson, what the hell happened to you, son?”

I licked my cracked lips, and my eyes darted between them. What the fuck was happening here? “I uh.. Stairs, Miss Josie... Food.”

Josie cringed and dropped my chin. “I hit him with the door. Pretty hard. Isn’t this the one with the concussion?”

I sat there rubbing my forehead, and there was her twinkling laughter again.

“Wait, what’re you doing here?” she asked suddenly.

“Uh...” I looked at her confusedly. Wasn’t it obvious? “I live here.”

“You... you live here?” she questioned. Her tone was now laced with... accusation? Her jaw angled out to the side, and that guarded look was right back on her face.

I looked to Coach for guidance... and he looked... caught?

“How many of you players live here?” she asked with disdain. She stood up now. I immediately missed her warm presence by my side.

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Coach frowning, giving me a small negative head shake.

“I live with two guys on the fourth floor. Hassik and Garcia,” I responded, trying to avoid answering

directly.

Her jaw clamped shut and she was now looking furious with Coach. “Just three of you?” she demanded in a clipped tone.

“Uh...” It was really hard to lie to her, despite Coach practically boring holes into me with warning eyes.

“How many, Mr. Jetterson? The truth, please,” she demanded in a low tone.

“Shit...” I rubbed my head.

“Language!” she snapped.

What the fuck? She was just concerned for me a minute ago, now she was yelling at me with that damn teacher voice again?

I was about to protest, but she cut me a look—one that basically worked like a fucking truth serum because I found myself spewing everything out. “Fine, there’s...” I mentally tallied everyone up. There were us three in the penthouse, and then Duke, Campbell, TJ, Reggie, and Whitty also lived here with their girls. “There’s eight of us players living here.”

“Eight?!” she practically shrieked at Coach.

“Honey, there’s no need for-”

“If you say dramatics, so help me God, Dad,” she warned through clenched teeth.

Dad? What the... Coach was Josie’s *dad*? Miss Josie? Teacher Josie... was one and the same as Coach Petersen’s *daughter*?

It all hit me at once. *That’s* why she looked familiar? But she didn’t even really look like Coach...

My head was really spinning now as she yelled at her dad... Which was shocking. She was giving him a verbal beatdown. Who would’ve thought anyone in the

world would go toe-to-toe with Coach like that? And he just hung his head and walked back inside her apartment like a kicked puppy. She stood in her doorway and looked down at me on the ground.

“You’re dismissed,” she snapped.

My mouth dropped open in shock. I pointed to myself. “Me? Dismissed?”

“Yes,” she said, sticking her chin in the air... and why did that look so familiar?

“Um... I think you’re forgetting that *you’re* responsible for me being down here like this.”

“Yes, well...” She sucked in her top lip and her nose flared. “I am sorry about your food. I’m sure you can go get some more.”

My jaw clenched. “That’s it? That’s all you’re gonna say?” I eyed my food glumly. That chicken parm held a lot of responsibility. It was the only thing that could make this shitty day end on a good note. “This is from Pops,” I told her.

“Pops?” Her face cracked in confusion. “Whatever, I’m sure some girl out there is very happy I smacked you in the face with a door. Goodbye now.” She turned and slammed the door shut in my face.

I stared at the door.

Now what the hell did that mean? Some girl would be happy she smacked me? Did she think she was some kind of karma police and that I was some playboy hockey player who needed punishment? I would’ve loved to inform her that she couldn’t be further from the truth. I barely ever talked to girls, let alone hooked up with them. Sure, there were puck bunnies that hung around the rink, but I wasn’t interested. I wanted someone who truly wanted me— the kid from Northfield, Minnesota who got teased for reading slow, not the NHL star— and that was something I’d never

experienced before, besides with Fi, and what we had wasn't even a full-blown relationship because our story was cut so short.

I stared down at my pasta sauce mess and the food strewn all over the floor and sighed. There was no way I wanted to tell the boys what happened here, but unless I wanted to clean it all by myself, what other choice did I have? I pushed myself to my feet and slowly climbed the last two flights of stairs.

An hour later, I trudged through the snow back to Pops, and I couldn't help but replay Josie's words. It seemed she definitely had it out for men... and after that cheating scandal went viral, I couldn't exactly blame her.

What she said was out of hurt, and for some reason, it felt like I was supposed to show her that there were better men out here.

I mean, crossing paths three times in the space of 24 hours? That was a sign, right? And the fact that I definitely felt a connection when I looked at her— like we were meant to find each other— that had to mean something. And watching her be all motherly and soothing in the classroom honestly felt healing to my inner kid heart. Plus, the way she pretty much cackled at the sight of me on the ground told me she'd be game for a solid flirt-to-roast ratio, which was super attractive to me.

But if she was in a man-hating era, which was definitely what it sounded like, I needed to play it safe and slow and extend an olive branch to let her know that I wasn't some kind of ass— scratch that— butthole.

While rounding the second floor platform for the second time tonight, I plucked a white paper bag from the top of our carry out tray and left it by apartment #202.

Little Miss Josie obviously wasn't aware of just how good Pops food was, so I'd leave her a little bag of garlic knots to show her why I was so devastated seeing ours strewn all over the floor.

An hour later, I was screaming at the TV with the boys when our doorbell rang.

"I'll get it." I popped up from the couch and ripped my headset off, not giving a shit that we were in the middle of a war.

My heart pounded in my chest, wondering if it could possibly be Josie coming to thank us for the garlic knots. I did leave a little note on the bag telling her to come to apartment #400 if she ever needed anything.

I quickly pushed a hand through my hair and tried to smooth out my rumpled shirt as I slid across our hardwood to the door. I fixed a smile on my face and leaned against the doorframe before reaching for the knob and swinging it open.

But then my hand slipped, and my head smacked against the doorframe. I immediately wiped the smile clean off my face and rubbed my forehead.

"Fuckin' dufus." Coach sighed like he was very tired.

"Coach?" I coughed in my hand to clear my voice. "Uh... what's up?"

He gave me an unimpressed look and pointed at my face. "I don't like that," he grumbled. "Don't like it one bit."

"What?" I feigned innocence as best I could, but this old man was known for thinking five steps ahead and catching every single detail about a play, despite his bad eyesight.

"That flirty face, dumbass," he barked in his

gravelly voice. "You're not fooling me." He shoved a garlic knot in his mouth. "These are great, by the way."

I scratched my cheek, realizing it was a big fucking fail on my part to leave the bag at her doorstep while her dad was still there. I hoped Josie had at least seen my peace offering.

"Your head alright? My daughter knocked you flat on your ass," he said with a chuckle.

That caught the boys' attention behind me, and I could already hear the chirps that'd be flying my way as soon as I closed the door.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I mumbled distractedly.

"Well, my daughter moved in," he said with a sigh.

"Yeah..." I raked a hand through my hair feeling awkward as all hell over the fact that he probably read the little note I left on the take-out bag.

"I picked this place on purpose. You all keep an eye out for her, you hear?" His hard gray eyes landed on the boys behind me, and that made my chest feel tight. I selfishly wanted him to be entrusting only me with her safety. Coach poked me right in the chest then. "And no funny business, Jetterson. No sniffin' around my daughter. Security only, *or else*," he ordered with a grunt.

I rubbed where he poked my chest and couldn't keep a grimace off my face as I eyed his beefy fists. He was an old dude, but he could still throw down. He played hockey back when people didn't even care about wearing helmets. The man was tough as nails.

And I knew clear as day that I'd be getting in trouble with him eventually, and by the way he was looking me over with unease, I think he knew as well.

And really, I didn't quite care about taking a beating from him if it meant I got to be with his

daughter...

12. Josie

“Mom, he chose this apartment because a bunch of his players live here,” I complained into my phone while pulling my winter boots on.

“I know!” She giggled. I could hear some 70’s hippy music playing in the background, telling me that she was in her art room, either painting or sculpting. “They’re just your type, honey! Don’t tell your dad I said that, he’d have an aneurysm. But who cares if he doesn’t like that, they’re hunky, honey.”

“*Oh my God*, Mom. If you say that one more time,” I warned.

“Just keep an open mind. Make some new friends,” she said in a placating way.

“Yeah, whatever,” I grumbled. It would’ve been easier to have an open mind if I was in an apartment complex where I thought a regular meet-cute could happen. Now things just felt scripted by my dad. And while that Tyler guy was cute, I knew his type. He was probably just looking for a good time and thought his dimples could get him out of anything. Plus, from his little stint at school, I could tell from a mile away that he very clearly had issues with authority figures. That was a dangerous combo.

“You have skating again this morning?” my mom asked, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Yupp.” It was the first day of holiday skating hours at Campus Martius. “I’ll be out on the ice for a while, but I’ll stop by for dinner.”

“Perfect! I’ll have some hot chocolate ready and waiting for you.”

We said our goodbyes and I headed out into the

cold, blue sky day.

I typically loved monitoring the rink. There was a group of about ten of us monitors and we ran shifts in twos. Today, I was partnered with Jack, a twenty-year-old who interned at a CPA firm through the day, and then lived it up as a self-proclaimed “pond hockey star” at night.

The rink was much more packed today, seeing as most schools let out yesterday. The only issue was that as I skated around the tiny rink, I started to feel a bit wobbly— which was definitely unusual for me seeing as I was more solid on skates than I was in tennis shoes.

I pulled at my leggings band, thinking maybe they were too tight, then adjusted my beanie... but nothing helped.

During our zam break, I chugged a hot chocolate, thinking maybe my sugar level was too low, but that didn't help either.

I could practically hear my mom's voice in my head yelling at me not to ignore my body... but that's what I always did. I pushed through. I made things work. I would *not* succumb to feeling sick like a baby. As a teacher, I was used to this. I couldn't afford to take sick days— I mean, look at our subbing situation. So, I was *fine*. And I would repeat it to myself until it was true.

But around 1pm, the dizzy feeling got drastically worse, and it dawned on me: I was falling victim to the second grade flu.

Un-fucking-believable.

I leaned over the side of the boards and held my head, trying to still my nausea.

Jack came to a hockey stop next to me. “Hey, Josie, y'alright?”

I winced. "I'm not sure."

"Well, that doesn't sound too convincing. Not feeling well?" He backed away from me and held his hands up in innocence. "Sorry, I can't get sick right now. I have a hot date later tonight."

I rolled my eyes at him. "You think you can manage the rest of the shift alone? I'm really not doin' so great."

"Yeah, get out of here. Hope ya feel better soon, J," he said, patting me on the back.

I muttered out a thanks, but even forming words made my head hurt. I walked back to our locker room in a complete fog and stipped off my skates as quickly as I could.

On my way back to my apartment, I tried to keep my head super level, because it felt like the whole sidewalk was swaying.

My phone started ringing, and I quickly fished it from my pocket. I pulled my jacket tighter because it suddenly felt twenty degrees colder.

"Hey honey," my dad said, "what do you think about ribs from B'dubs tonight?"

"Uh..." I held my head and stopped walking. "I don't think I should come."

"Josie?" his rough voice was alarmed now.

"I'm fine," I reassured him, but my own voice sounded like it was coming from underwater. "I just think I'm getting sick. The damn second grade flu. It should be over after 48 hours if that's what this is, but I really hope I didn't pass it to you and mom already." I felt like crying, which was alarming in and of itself because I never cried.

“Don’t worry about us, sweetheart,” he replied. “Can you make yourself some soup? Rest up. I’ll tell your mother. You need anything?”

“No, I’m good. I’m just gonna try to sleep it away.”

“Okay, I’ll check in later, good?”

I swallowed hard. “Okay.”

“I’ll be banging down your door if you don’t answer,” he warned in his hoarse voice.

“Oh I know,” I chuckled, then winced from the pain in my head.

Changing back into my pj’s, I experienced full body chills, which pretty much told me that I had a fever. I slipped on some fuzzy socks and wrapped myself in a heavy blanket before marching into my new tiny living room. I turned on an episode of Gilmore Girls and then laid on the couch to sleep.

I’m not sure how much time had passed when my phone woke me up, but it was definitely dark outside and I hadn’t kept any lights on. My TV screen only gave off a light glow because it now read the ‘Are You Still Watching?’ message. I frantically fumbled to find my phone and made the unfortunate mistake of getting up too quickly, completely forgetting I was in fuzzy socks on this new slippery hardwood floor.

I slipped off my feet and my head hit the corner of my coffee table on my way down. I let out a frustrated groan and laid there flat on my back, completely ignoring my phone now.

I reached up to gently touch where I smacked my head, and my fingers came away feeling slippery. *Great.*

All of two minutes later, there was a pounding on

my door. How the hell did my dad get here so fast?
Maybe he'd been on the way here?

"One minute, please!" I yelled, then winced. My head was pounding worse than it had this morning, and now I wasn't sure if it was from smacking it or the flu.

I ripped off my fuzzy socks before gingerly padding over to my kitchen. I threw on the lights, blinking hard against the starch brightness, then grabbed a paper towel to hold against my bloody forehead.

My dad chose that second to start banging on the door again. The man really needed to learn some patience.

"Please stop," I practically begged on my way, and he must've heard me because he did pause.

I took the paper towel away from my forehead for a second and was shocked by the amount of blood. Jeez. The sight of this would send my dad into a tizzy of child-proofing my apartment.

The pounding began again, so I reached for the knob and swung it open... then stood completely still, shocked.

Because instead of my dad, to my absolute *horror*, I faced Tyler Jetterson.

And while I was in a robe holding a bloody tissue to my head, he was standing there looking like his effortlessly hot self with his high cheekbones, strong jawline, and swoopy hair, wearing a hoodie and gray sweatpants... and I'd one hundred percent be lying if I said the sight of him didn't send some kind of electroshock through my body.

I briefly questioned if I was dreaming, because why of all people would *he* be standing there?

Annnd all thoughts of attraction quickly evaporated when he *gagged*.

“Ugh!” I screamed and tried to throw the door shut on him.

He quickly shoved his arm out to stop me. “Sorry... You uh... You just don’t look so good.”

I rolled my eyes. “Just what every girl wants to hear,” I muttered.

“Oh no!” His eyes bugged out. “I didn’t mean it like that. I promise.”

“I’m gonna go... fix this,” I said, motioning to the bloody tissue on the corner of my forehead.

“Yeah, yeah,” he nodded, “good idea.”

I tried to close my door again, but he pushed inside and briefly held a large hand to my lower back as he passed me. I tried to ignore the little part of me that liked the protective feeling of his hand on me.

“Uh, excuse me?” I stammered.

“I’m here to help. Your dad asked me to check on you, and you obviously need some help,” he said, sticking his hands in his sweatpants pockets.

I closed my eyes to focus. “Let me get this straight, he sent *you*?” I cracked. God. I was standing so close to his perfect abs, I could practically reach out and touch them. And his cologne. *Such* a turn on. My sandalwood candles couldn’t hold a flame to the smell of guy cologne. But here I was, looking ‘not-so-good’... I could literally kill my dad. And really? Why would my dad send *him* of all people? I looked back up at him. Standing this close, I could see a faint scar above his lip. I cleared my throat and pursed my lips. “For one, I don’t need anyone, and two, you’re really telling me he sent the one person who can’t even see someone sneeze? What a load of help,” I said sarcastically.

And let me tell you– the way his face dropped had me wanting to shove the words right back into my

mouth, but in my defense, I was starting to feel pretty low.

“Yeah... Well, I’m the only one here right now,” Tyler said quietly.

I blew out a sigh. “Thank you for stopping by, Tyler,” I said in a gentler tone. “But you can leave. I’ll tell my dad you came to check on me, but I am fine. If you stay, you’re just gonna get sick and then the whole team will get sick. This flu is nasty.” I turned and headed to my bathroom, hoping he’d take the hint and go away... But lo and behold, I felt his strong, solid presence on my heels, trailing after me.

I walked up to my bathroom mirror, and he loomed behind me in the doorway that connected to my bedroom.

“I don’t get sick,” he said. “So you don’t have to worry about that.”

“Huh?” I winced as I changed paper towels. My forehead really was still bleeding pretty badly. I nicked the right corner of my forehead right below my hairline. I tried to stay standing, but my knees were starting to feel really wobbly, so I slowly sat down on my toilet seat. Tyler kept his eyes trained on his feet, probably so he wouldn’t barf at the sight of me. While it felt shitty to be *physically gagged at*, it was maybe slightly endearing that he had a weakness, most hockey players were practically allergic to showing vulnerability.

“Yeah, I don’t get sick,” he repeated. His broad shoulders shrugged. He held the sides of my door frame. “Wished I did when I was a kid so I could skip school, but always a clean bill of health.” He smirked.

His words brought a mental picture of him looking super shaky and insecure at school to the forefront of my mind. “You didn’t like school much, huh?”

His face flinched. “I’m setting a timer,” he said,

changing the subject. “Ten minutes of pressure on that, okay? If the bleeding doesn’t stop, we’re going in.”

I was momentarily surprised by how commanding he sounded, and by how attractive that was. Jeez, I was losing my mind. “Oh no,” I scoffed, “it’s really not that bad. You may go,” I said sternly.

He snorted, like what I said was funny.

My face slightly burned. “Why are you laughing?”

He scratched his cheek and a lopsided grin slid onto his face. “It’s funny you think I’m gonna listen to you just because you use that whole teacher-voice thing.”

My mouth dropped open. “What? What are you talking about?”

“You may go,” he said, sticking his nose in the air, mimicking me. *And OhmyGod I looked like my mother.* “Does that work on everyone?” A teasing smile tugged at the corner of his lips.

I sat there blinking, feeling dumbfounded. “Well, yeah. Mostly.”

He chewed on his bottom lip, holding back a chuckle. “Not on me, Miss Josie,” he said in a husky voice that sent shivers through me. Wow, okay, I was definitely attracted to him. But in the back of my mind, I screamed at myself to get my shit together. He was just another hockey player. And he was only here because my dad made him come.

He left the doorway before I could say anything else. I watched him wander into my bedroom. He poked at the stack of books on my nightstand and briefly picked up a framed picture of me and my parents before laying back on my bed like it was no big deal at all that he was encroaching on my personal space. To be honest, even if I did care, I didn’t have the energy to discipline him.

“Woow,” he breathed out. “This is like laying on a cloud. What the heck is this girl magic?”

Despite how bad I felt, a laugh actually popped out of me. “A mattress pad?”

“Interesting.” He patted the bed. “Can you get that on Amazon?”

“Probably, yeah.”

“And you have so many pillows. This is amazing,” he said in awe. “How do you even leave this bed in the morning?”

I snorted at that. “Lemme guess, you have only one pillow?” *And probably no bed frame*, I mentally added.

“Yupp, just the one.”

“You need some upgrades,” I told him.

I sucked in a deep breath. It was taking effort just to stay sitting upright. I mentally chastised myself for not eating more today. I slept through dinner.

I heard him roll off my bed and wander further into my apartment, and I really had no concern over where he was going because I was busy counting back the hours and questioning whether or not I was allowed to take any more pain medication for my headache. Plus, I felt oddly safe with him here. He was very clearly a golden retriever kind of guy, not threatening in any way. And his presence did put my mind at ease, like if anything happened, at least I wasn't alone.

He came back into the bathroom and unscrewed a Gatorade and water and left them within my reach on the counter. “You should drink,” he suggested.

I paused, shocked by the kind gesture. There's no way Garrett would've ever handed me anything without my asking— begging— first. God. How did I let Garrett get away with giving less than the bare minimum

for years? My bar was currently on the ground if I was impressed with a boy handing me a Gatorade. I quickly swiped the drink. "Thank you."

He resumed his place in the doorway, this time, reaching up to rest his hands on the top of the doorframe so that his hoodie slightly lifted, giving me a glimpse of his impressive abs.

I pushed myself up, thinking it'd be a good idea to check on the cut in the mirror, but his voice cut me off. "Nope. Don't release pressure just yet. Couple more minutes. Rest."

"You know, I think it'll be fine to just—"

His eyebrows pinched together. "Where did you live before?"

"What?" I looked at him confusedly. Where did that question come from?

"Sit. We'll chat. Take your mind off it," he suggested.

I rolled my eyes but decided to humor him. "Fine. Don't laugh," I said, eyeing him with a bit of unease.

He hopped up on my bathroom counter and kept his eyes trained on my bedroom. "Why would I laugh?"

I shrugged. "Because I lived at home."

"That's really nice," he replied.

I studied his profile, and there wasn't a hint of joking on his face. "Really? At 27?"

"Yeah. I hope one day if I have a wife and kids, I'll make it so good that no one wants to leave. How nice would that be? Living all together like that... I've never had that." He paused. "Is Coach a good dad?" he asked suddenly. "I bet he is."

"Wow, well, that's kind of an intrusive question," I

responded. My mind was still trying to process what he just said.

“Sorry, I’m just curious,” he said simply. “Like was he a disciplinarian? I’ve always wondered what that’d be like. Casey was tough but he was also my best friend, and we went through a lot of shit at the same time, so he didn’t have the best advice to give back then, ya know? Like how was he gonna give me a curfew or tell me not to drink when he was out partying with buddies in the backyard ‘til 2am?” He laughed. “And how was he supposed to know how to win a girl back or maintain a healthy relationship when he was still trying to figure that out for himself?” He gave me a pointed look then. “I basically had to orchestrate him reuniting with his now wife. I’m not trying to bash him or anything. It was just... different. He’s great with hockey stuff though. He still calls me with advice to help me out all the time.”

“Casey’s your...?”

“Brother.”

“Gotcha.” I was surprised to hear all that about him. I assumed he was just like every other hockey player— meaning Garrett— who grew up with parents who helped him make it to the NHL. I had a theory that’s why so many players ended up kind of egocentric— everything was always focused on them and their hockey. They grew up as the star of the show, and it seemed like some of them thrived on that mindset and never gave it up.

But... apparently not Tyler.

He wanted to know what it was like to have a curfew and to receive fatherly advice. Looking at him on my counter now, I felt the urge to give him a hug.

I swallowed. “Well, yeah, my dad was tough, but he was fair. He always listened to all sides of an argument before dishing out discipline. And he did his

best to always show up for us when he could. Skating competitions, art fairs, choir concerts, soccer games. He tried to come to it all.”

“That’s really nice,” he said quietly.

I nodded.

He gave me a lopsided grin then. “You can’t be mad at him for having me come check on you. He was really worried.”

I shifted slightly. “I should probably call him back.”

“Nah,” he pointed to the Gatorade. “Drink more. I texted him.”

“Well that’s not weird at all,” I quipped back.

He shrugged. “It’s really not.”

I sighed and looked down at my ratty robe over my pj’s, remembering what my mom said about not going around my apartment looking like a hot mess. I instantly regretted not listening to her. “I cannot believe you’re seeing me like this right now.”

He laughed. “You’re fine. You’re the prettiest sick person I’ve ever seen, Josie.”

I rolled my eyes. “Nice try, but you gagged at the sight of me, hot shot.”

“Hey, I only gagged because I wasn’t prepared to see blood. But you’re obviously in a vulnerable position right here, so how about I tell you a secret and then we’ll be even?”

Well... I was never one to turn down a secret. “Deal.”

He looked down at his socks and the tips of his ears turned a little red. “Your dad actually called me and told me to send one of the other boys down because I’m all... ya know.”

My eyebrows scrunched together. “So why—”

He eyed me for a split second with a little grin playing on his lips before looking away again. “Couldn’t stand the thought of them helping you.”

I paused for a second at that, then chose self-deprecation to make the situation lighter. “What, you were afraid of them being near the crazy girl who trashes guys’ apartments?”

“No. That fucker deserved what he got and so much more.” He snorted like he was disgusted. “Good work by the way.” And from the serious look in his eyes, I could tell his words were sincere.

I took a deep breath, feeling oddly relieved to hear that opinion coming from a guy.

“Nah, I just didn’t wanna risk them coming down here and falling for you.”

My whole body froze. *Did I hear him right? What did that mean? That he liked me himself?*

He hopped off my counter and wandered into the doorway again. “Okay, I’m gonna look at that cut in one minute.” He started doing some... air squats? Then he swiftly punched himself in the jaw a couple times.

A laugh actually bubbled up inside me. “What are you doing?”

He shook out his arms then cracked his neck both ways. “Gearing myself up, duh,” he said with a grin. His phone timer started beeping and he quickly switched it off. “Okay,” he walked closer to me on the toilet seat. “Lemme look.”

“Nope,” I wagged my finger at him. “I think it stopped. I really am fine.”

A stubborn look overtook his face. “Why can’t I look then?”

“Because you’re just gonna barf,” I argued.

His nose flared. “I know when things need stitches, and I’m mentally prepared to look. Now lemme see.”

I set my jaw and stared him down, but he wouldn’t budge.

“C’mon. Stop acting so damn tough. Let me help you, dammit,” he said under his breath, and that made me pause. He said it with such... warmth, like he really wanted to help me, and he genuinely cared.

“Okay, fine,” I relented.

He inched forward and lifted the paper towel.

“Don’t touch it,” I hissed.

“Wouldn’t dream of it, Miss Josie.”

“You can drop the miss, you know,” I quipped.

“I know. I just like it,” he said, and I could practically hear a smile in his voice.

I rolled my eyes. “You’re turning white. If you pass out, I cannot help you right now.”

He cleared his throat and backed away. “I’m fine, but we need to go in. That’s super deep. Where did you say you hit it?”

“What? No. I’m not going anywhere.” I shook my head.

“Uh, yes, you are. We’re going in.” He was already walking in my bedroom. “They need to stitch it or glue it. Besides, they could probably hit you up with some fluids, knock the flu out faster. Where’s your jacket?”

13. Tyler

“We are not going anywhere because I am fine,” she said stubbornly.

In a quick motion, I lifted off my hoodie and extended it to her. “C’mon, lose the robe, put this on,” I ordered.

“Tyler! I am not going!” she repeated with wide eyes.

I ground my back teeth. Was she always this stubborn? I had a feeling she was. “That doesn’t look like it’s stopping anytime soon and you’re already feeling weak, let’s go.” I nodded at my hoodie.

She reluctantly took it, which felt like a major win. I went out to her hallway and grabbed her small boots and the big Northface jacket hung up by the door.

Coming back to the bathroom, the sight of her in my hoodie made my heart kinda swell. I knelt down by her feet and shoved her left boot on.

She was being awfully quiet now though, and a little regret seeped in over ordering her around, even if it was for her benefit. “Josie, Coach asked me to check on you, and I gave him my word,” I explained.

She crossed her arms over her chest. “Oh, of course,” her voice dripped with disdain. “If it’s for Coach, then *sure*. Anything for Coach.”

“Huh?” My face cracked in confusion. What did that mean? I shook my head, it didn’t matter right now because she needed medical attention. I held her jacket out so she could easily put it on. “Let’s go.”

She went to stand, but her knees gave out and she fell back on the toilet seat.

“Josie—”

“Wait.” Her eyes were wide and panicked. She reached out and grabbed the counter ledge with a shaky hand. “I really don’t feel so good,” she said in a wobbly voice.

“Oh, sorry, I—”

A second later, she was turning and leaning over the toilet, vomiting.

And despite being very proud of myself for keeping it together around the blood, well, vomit was a totally different story. So you can’t really blame me for what happened next...

I gagged about five times, then thought I was in the clear.

I was wrong. I leaned over her sink and lost my dinner.

“*Oh my God!*” she complained.

“I’m sorry!” I coughed. “I feel really bad.” Things had been going too well here, I guess. My throat and eyes fucking burned as I stared down at the mess I made in her nice white sink.

She wordlessly followed me down to the dark, concrete parking garage. I beeped my truck to warm it up as we walked.

I went to the shotgun side of the truck to open the door for her. She kinda stood there looking dazed and confused.

“What?” I asked her.

She snapped her mouth shut. “Nothing. Thank you,” she squeaked out before scurrying to get in.

Had no one opened the car door for her? That

had me irritated as hell. Who the hell had she been dating? It was the least someone could do for her.

While buckling up, I made the mistake of looking over at her in the passenger seat. A Bandaid was covering the cut on the corner of her forehead by her hairline, but the dark blood was starting to seep through it.

She side-eyed me. "What's wrong?"

I cringed and reached over to pull my hoodie up over her head to cover her forehead a bit. "I'm sorry. I can't see that right now. I had my fill of blood and barf today and my stomach's a little weak."

"Wow." She shook her head incredulously, but I could detect a smirk pulling at her lips. "You really are somethin', Tyler."

"A good something, I hope." I gave her my best flirty grin, to which she just laughed dryly.

As soon as we were out of the parking garage, I cued up my phone and relaxed a bit as soon as I heard the first few notes of Fleetwood Mac's 'Dreams.'

"Interesting choice," Josie said.

"Calms me down." My eyes flitted to her profile before focusing back at the road. "You like it?"

"I do, Stevie Nicks walked so Taylor Swift could run," she said. "But..."

I felt my eyebrows pinch together. "Watch what you say here, Miss Josie," I ordered.

"Taylor Swift is the queen." She giggled at my shocked reaction.

"Absolutely not. She's good. She can be a princess. Stevie is my queen," I said firmly, but I switched the song to a Taylor Swift one to make her happy.

“Oh. You didn’t have to change it,” she said, staring at my dash in surprise. “Wait, that reminds me... You haven’t by chance been on Tiktok lately, have you?”

“Nope, I don’t do social media.”

“Really?” Now she sounded shocked. “I tried to get rid of it but only lasted a week. That’s surprising for you though.”

“Me? Why?”

“I don’t know... all hockey players love themselves so much. Figured you’d need it to feed your huge ego.”

“Uh, ow.” I held my chest with one hand like I’d taken a hit. “That hurt, Josie. But no, I’ll never download any of it ever again. I catch what I need to on SportsCenter.”

“Why?”

I shrugged. “With fantasy leagues and sports betting, it’s all become way too personal. It’s like a wave of hate after a shitty game. Couldn’t handle that during my rookie year.” It was true. Social media messed with my head way too much and it altered the way I played my game.

She cocked her head to the side. “I never thought about it that way.”

“Why did you ask about the Tikitytok?”

She smirked. “You were trending.” Then she rolled her eyes. “Before my mess topped it at least.”

“For wh-” I cut myself off and sighed. “You mean my whole locker room performance?”

“Yeah. There was a whole debate going around arguing over which influencer or model broke your poor little heart,” she teased.

I whipped my neck to look at her.

“Watch the road!” she shouted.

“Sorry. It’s just... that’s not true,” I let out an incredulous laugh. If she thought I was heart-broken, there’s no way she’d view me as boyfriend material. “No one broke my heart or anything. I just love Fleetwood Mac.”

She shrugged. “Doesn’t matter. I thought it was pretty funny.” I could hear the smile in her voice and that eased the tension I was feeling in my chest a bit. “And don’t worry, *a lot* of women loved your performance.” She patted me on the shoulder, and I liked her touching me.

I almost said I only cared that she liked it, not that a bunch of other women also found it funny, but I worried that’d be coming on too strong. I already basically told her I liked her, and the way I caught her eyes dipping to my lips a couple times, I’m pretty sure she felt something too, but I wasn’t sure how to play this to win her over.

While she filled out paperwork on her lap sitting next to me in the waiting room, I shot off a quick text to Coach filling him in on what happened.

When Josie was called back by a nurse, she quickly stood up, took two steps forward, then paused. I eyed her back, wondering what was going on in that head of hers. She hesitantly turned and her shoulders tensed.

“You good?” I asked her.

She chewed her bottom lip. “Can you come with me?” she whispered.

As soon as I nodded, her face relaxed, and that made my heart fucking soar. As much as I hated hospitals, I had a feeling that seeing that scared look on her face could make me do just about anything for her. I

followed close behind her to a little sterile looking room with a patient bed at the center of it and two chairs on either side of it.

The nurse nodded at the bed, and Josie noisily sat on the crinkly paper.

I took a seat in the armchair and finally responded to my group chat with the boys while the nurse chatted with Josie and stuck an IV in her arm.

Duke - *Yo Jetts, where are you? Bricks tonight?*

Garcia - *Haven't seen him in hours actually. Jetts, bud, where'd the fuck you go?*

Hassik - *I think he was talking to Coach when he left our place...*

Garcia - *Oh Shit.*

Casey - *Coach? You in trouble, little bro?*

Reggie - *Nah guys, I saw him heading to the parking garage with a girl...*

Duke - *WTF? Who????? Casey, do you know if your dumbass brother is coming out tonight? And are you coming out?*

Casey - *No. I'm not coming out, dumbass. Y'all need to start having kids too so you stop asking me that.*

Tyler - *Not sure if I'm coming out tonight. Prolly not. Maybe tomorrow.*

All of them were now doubling down with asking me where I was, but the nurse was finally leaving the room, so I ignored their texts and shoved my phone back in my pocket.

Josie was looking extra small and vulnerable in the hospital bed, but I was happy she was still wearing my hoodie. One large sleeve was rolled way up to avoid

touching her IV though, and she was currently itching the skin around it.

“Stop messing with your IV,” I told her.

She rolled her eyes but dropped her hand away. “It’s itchy,” she said in a small voice.

“Ya gotta stop thinking about it. Let’s talk about something else,” I suggested, leaning forward to rest my elbows on my knees.

“Okay, like what?”

“What’re your plans for your winter break?” *And would you be down if I asked you on a date?* I mentally tacked on.

She shrugged. “Not much. We have Teachers Get Trashed night on Wednesday.”

“What’s that?” I laughed. “Sounds fun.”

“Ya know, I’ve never actually gone before, but I’m looking forward to it. Apparently everyone just gets together and gets trashed because we’ve made it halfway through the school year. I’ve always heard the stories after and they’re pretty funny.”

“Interesting. Well, you better rest up and get re-hydrated if ya wanna be ready. Why haven’t you gone before?”

She shrugged. “Because I lived at home. Kinda weird to come back sloshed, ya know?”

I shook my head. “Nah, I really don’t know. I’ve called Casey to pick me up from the bar plenty of times. That’s actually how I got him and his wife together.”

She looked at me skeptically. “Wait, really?”

“Oh yeah,” I laughed. “Saw her across the bar, pretended to be drunk off my ass and need help, then Casey came charging in to save me, sees her, completely forgets I even exist. The rest is history”

“Wow,” she nodded, looking perplexed, “that’s good wing-man work.”

I brushed off my shoulder and smiled. “Thank you very much, Miss Josie. Where are you guys going for the big teacher night?”

“I think that Blitz bar... you know that one?”

“Ha! Do I know that one? Of course I do. That’s our bar.”

She looked at me dubiously. “Who’s bar?”

“The Crewmen,” I laughed. “We go there after every game. They even have an unofficial drink named after me.”

“What?” she exclaimed with a smile on her face. “Are you serious? What kind of drink? And how does that even happen?”

“Well, it actually wasn’t my finest moment, but I take pride in it now. Ya know how we lost last year in the conference finals? Well-”

I swallowed the rest of my sentence because the doctor chose that minute to walk in, and the smile immediately dropped from my face. Because *of fucking course* they’d send the best looking guy in here to save the day like we were living in some kind of *Grey’s Anatomy* episode. He had to be about 6’5 with bright green eyes and a fucking glowing smile.

I quickly looked at Josie’s profile and immediately knew she was thinking the same thing.

He leaned forward to shake her hand. “Doctor Jaxon. But you can call me Jeff,” he said with a charming smile.

Josie was looking all daydreamy as she smiled and nodded at him. *Damnit*. I breathed out, trying to calm myself. It wasn’t his fault he was a male model, he was just trying to do his job, I reminded myself.

“So,” Model Doc looked at his clipboard,
“Josephina,” he looked back up with his bright eyes.
“What’s going on today?”

Two thoughts hit me at once. One, I’m not sure why it never occurred to me that “Josie” could be short for something. And two, I had to bite back my urge to say, *what the fuck do you think?* Because the big Bandaid on her head was pretty obvious.

14. Josie

“She bumped her head,” Tyler spoke, standing up and seemingly puffing his chest.

I looked at him in confusion before turning back to the doctor. “Yeah, I unfortunately have the flu and was feeling pretty weak when I got up too fast and fell. I cut my head on my coffee table,” I explained.

Tyler stood close to my bed while the doctor came closer to inspect my cut, but he turned his head before the doctor revealed any blood.

“Well, if you have the flu, should this gentleman really be standing so close? Unless you live together?” Dr. Jeff asked.

“Oh, no, we don’t-”

“I’m fine. I’ve been with her for a while now,” Tyler interrupted, making it sound like we *did* live together...

“Uh... we don’t live together. We’re not... together,” I said, eyeing Tyler strangely. The tips of Tyler’s ears reddened a bit.

When I met Jeff’s gaze, he was smiling wider.

“Great. Okay, well, we’ll get that fixed up for you no problem,” Jeff said in a soothing tone. “It doesn’t look too bad, but it’s good that you came in. You’ll probably need about three to five stitches I’m guessing.”

“Okay, thank you,” I said politely.

“I’ll be just a minute. When I come back, we’ll numb you up a bit, throw in those stitches, and then you’ll be on your way. Sound okay?”

I nodded.

He gave me a wink before turning on his heel to leave the room.

Tyler whirled on me. "What the hell was that?"

"Uh... what was what?" I asked skeptically.

"I had to fight tooth and nail to get you here, and now this guy wants to *literally* sew you up and you're all like, teehee, okay!" he said, mimicking me.

"Hey, I did not sound like that," I bit back defensively.

"Uh, yes, you did." He raked a hand through. "Of fucking course," he muttered to himself.

"Tyler, what the hell is going on with you?"

"Fucking *Grey's Anatomy* or some shit. Of fucking course," he muttered.

"OhmyGod," I laughed, "Tyler, calm down."

He clasped his hands behind his neck and hesitantly made eye contact with me. "Do you... do you like him?" he asked, and I swear to God, he looked like he was sucking on a sour lemonhead. A laugh bubbled out of me.

"Tyler, I don't even know him!" I whispered-shouted. "And so what if I do?! What's it to you?"

He rubbed a miserable hand down his face. "You're wearing my hoodie and he was openly flirting with you. He *winked* at you. He knows no boundaries. He's a dick!" he said with outstretched arms.

"Okay, he was *not* flirting with me, Tyler," I deadpanned. *Was he?* "And who cares if he was?"

"Me!" he exclaimed, looking miserable.

I stared at him. "What?"

He rubbed his hands down his face before looking back at me skeptically. "Aren't you a romance

reader? Because those books on your nightstand, they're all romance."

"And...?"

His eyebrow furrowed. "I just really feel like you're not grasping the plot here," he said, wagging his finger between the two of us.

I burst out laughing. "What?"

"I care. I like you, Josie. I was gonna ask you out on a date after this."

"Tyler," I said gently, feeling my heart pound, "We're not in some kind of book or movie, okay? I like you too, but as a friend." And that was the truth. In the last couple hours, he proved to be a nice guy... but at the end of the day, no matter how attracted I was to him, he was just another hockey player who traveled all over the country playing a game, and I wasn't about to make the same mistake again. Actually, he'd be worse, because he played for my dad. "You're really not my type."

He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Of course," he muttered. "The first girl I like in *years*, and she says the same damn thing." He let out an incredulous laugh and shook his head.

What the heck did that mean? I was the first girl he liked in *years*?

He leveled me with hurt brown eyes. "Can't you at least give me a shot?"

I honestly felt myself wavering as I studied his handsome face. But then the door swung open to reveal my dad.

15. Tyler

Coach strode into the room with authority and extended his beefy hand to give mine a bone rattling shake. “Thank you, kid. I’ll take it from here,” he said gruffly.

I looked back at Josie in the bed. She just gave me a tight-lipped smile, but her eyes were full of something else... *pity*.

Fuck.

With my head dropped down, I left the room, feeling the same shakiness that I did when I left the second grade classroom. Because I knew I fucked up. Big time. I practically begged her to go on a date with me. How fucking pathetic? Totally not secure masculine energy. Casey would probably laugh his ass off... because he was right. I really was majorly thrown off my game by her.

But really? I wasn’t her type? What the hell? Only two girls had ever said that to me and they were the only two I’ve ever wanted, and the only two who ever looked at me like they wanted me back.

On Tuesday night, I still hadn’t seen or heard anything back from Josie. I kept playing with different excuses to knock on her door every day, but I couldn’t come up with any that didn’t sound completely lame. I figured I’d throw some ideas around with Duke and Casey at his team’s U16 practice tonight.

I threw on a hoodie and smoothed a hat over my messy hair. I showered earlier, then laid on the couch playing video games like a bum the rest of the day. I was actually kind of pumped to get to Casey’s practice so I

could stretch my legs out.

I hoisted my hockey bag over my shoulder and headed to the stairwell, but last minute, I decided to check the elevator. I hit the down button and heard a hum, so I figured it was finally working again, it was just taking for fucking ever.

When it finally dinged open, I walked to the corner so I could rest my bag on the railings lining the sides.

The elevator quickly passed the third floor but then came to a grinding halt at the second, and I groaned in annoyance at the slow up.

But when the doors finally opened, my irritation disappeared, and I sat there struggling to tamp down a grin...

Because there she was, head down, super engrossed in something on her phone, completely unaware that I was standing right here in front of her. She walked into the elevator without even looking up, and I tucked away a mental note that I needed to warn her about not doing that, it wasn't safe.

"Miss Josie," I said with a small grin.

She jumped and almost dropped her phone. For a split second I felt bad about startling her, but I was afraid if she'd seen me first, she would've chosen to take the stairs.

"Oh," she held a hand to her chest, "uh, hi, sorry, I wasn't even paying attention. Work email." She was even cuter when she was all flustered.

"Over Christmas break? Ya gotta turn that off." *And pay more attention to your surroundings*, I internally added.

"Yeah, well, of course Admin emails out a bunch of changes over break so no one can even push back or

argue with them.” She rolled her eyes and stuffed her phone in her back pocket.

And that’s when I noticed she wasn’t dressed in her teacher clothes or comfy ones either. I’d never seen her dressed like *this* before. She was dressed hot... *really* hot. Ripped, tight jeans hugged her curves, showing off her ass, black boots went up to her knees, and her puffy-sleeved, cream-colored crop top showed off a sliver of skin above her jeans. Her hair was down and straightened, and she’d pushed the front forward so it covered the corner where she needed the stitches. She was also wearing a lot more makeup than usual and her eyes looked all shimmery, but to my disappointment, she’d covered those faded freckles under eyes.

I cleared my throat. “So where ya headed?”

“Oh, just getting the mail right now,” she said tightly.

There was no way she dressed that way just to get the mail. She reached to hit the lobby floor button, which somehow wasn’t lit up even though I’d pushed it right when I walked in.

“You look nice,” I said as casually as I could. *Smelled nice too*, I mentally added, and I really hoped she wouldn’t judge my hockey bag stink. I was practically immune to it at this point so I had no gauge on its current state.

“Thank you,” she said shyly. “And I don’t think I’ve properly thanked you for helping me on Saturday. I know that was probably hard for you,” she laughed lightly, “but it was really nice of you to stay with me.”

“Wasn’t hard.” But thinking back to Saturday had my face burning up. The past few days, I’d successfully blocked out the fact that I barfed in her sink and pretty much verbally threw up at her in the hospital. I shifted my weight, mentally snapping at myself to get it under

control, but I'm not sure that ever works. "And I'm sorry about the whole sink thing. I think that makes us even."

Her lips twisted with amusement. "No problem."

"So, Josie, the other day—"

She waved me off. "Oh, we don't have to talk about it," she said, leaning to hit the elevator button again. I'm not sure we even moved yet.

"No, we do," I urged. "Because I'm sorry for coming on so strong." My hands started sweating with anticipation. "I was wondering, could I buy you an apology drink? The guys are going out to The Blitz tonight. Just a friendly neighborhood hang out?"

She bit her lip. "I'm sorry, but I'm actually going on a date tonight."

My composure slipped. "Wait really?"

Her jaw angled to the side and she propped her hands on her hips. "What? Like it's surprising to you that I'd be asked out, Jetterson?"

"Oh, no, no, no. I didn't mean it like that, I just mean..." My face scrunched in frustration. "I mean, fuck, how did someone beat me to it?" I forced out an uncomfortable laugh. "You were just sick in bed."

Her cheeks pinked up again. "The doctor," she said quietly, looking away. "Have we even moved yet? What's going on with this elevator?" She smacked the lobby button a few more times.

I scratched my cheek, trying hard to look unaffected, but her words hit me like a sucker punch to the gut. I *fucking knew* that guy was trying to make a move on her. "Well, where are you going with him? You should probably tell someone for safety reasons."

With a sudden jolt, the elevator finally started moving. She leaned back against the railing. "He said I could pick." She blew out a sigh and her shoulders

sagged. She was silent for a beat, and then, “Maybe that Pops place you’re so fond of.”

My jaw clenched. That was a low blow. *My* favorite food spot? *Seriously?* But when I met her eyes again, they practically twinkled mischievously, like *ah ha, got him.*

I took a step closer to her and could practically feel the heat simmering between us. *How the hell could she say I wasn’t her type?* I licked my lips. “I see how it is. You trying to push my buttons, Josephina?”

Her eyebrows flew up in amusement. “Josephina?”

“Yes, Josephina,” I said with a swift nod. “What time are you gonna be back? You should tell someone so they know to look out for you.”

“Um okay, Dad.” She rolled her eyes. “No, I don’t have to tell anyone. That’s why I moved-”

The elevator shook violently, cutting her off. She released a high-pitched yelp and lost her balance. My arm automatically juttied out to catch her around the waist, and my heart pounded as the elevator rocked.

Josie continued gripping my arm for dear life even after the elevator finally stilled. A second later, the lights cut out.

“Fuck,” I muttered in the dark. I went to straighten up, but she held me in place, her nails digging into my arm.

“Wait, Tyler,” her voice was laced in panic.

“One second,” I said calmly. “Just dropping my bag.” She held onto me as I slouched my bag off my shoulder.

“Check your phone,” I directed her. I pulled mine out of my pocket. No service. I flicked on my phone’s flashlight and she clung to me as I moved slowly to the

elevator's button panel. I hit the little call button. It buzzed a few times, and I sent up a quick prayer that someone, *anyone*, would answer.

"Heyyyyyllo," a raspy voice finally answered.

Josie lightly whimpered, which took me by surprise. She didn't seem like the type that got shaken up very easily. I gave her arm a comforting squeeze.

"Hey man, we're trapped in The Stratford's elevator."

"Shit, we just repaired that one. Not to worry, we'll be there in a few. Just hang tight. Everyone doing alright?"

I eyed Josie a little uneasily. She wasn't necessarily "alright." I cleared my throat. "We're good," I said with conviction, trying to steady her nerves.

The other end of the line clicked off. Damn. I was hoping he'd stay on the line with us.

"OhmyGod, OhmyGod, OhmyGod," Josie murmured with wide eyes while pacing the small space.

"Hey, it's okay," I said in a soothing tone. I rubbed my hands up and down her arms. "We're fine. We're probably on the ground, we were only moving one floor down. This elevator's always screwing up."

"This has happened to you before?!" she practically shrieked.

I had to tamp down a chuckle. "Yes, it'll be okay. The last time this happened, the doors were just jammed, but we were on the ground."

"I am never taking this again. Never ever *ever*." She was practically trembling, and that made a protectiveness surge through my chest.

"Hey, c'mere." I caught her elbow and tugged her to sit on my hockey bag beside me. I pulled her into

my side so she could calm down. Her shakiness was making me worry a bit. “We do not need a panic attack over this. Breathe,” I ordered. I tossed my phone on the floor in front of us so we could see each other in the glow from the flashlight.

I felt her take a deep, albeit shaky, breath.

“How are you so calm right now?” she asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

I lifted my hat and raked a hand through my hair before placing it again. “Whatever happens is meant to happen. Sometimes ya gotta just go with it.”

“We were meant to get trapped in here?” she responded incredulously.

“Maybe,” I smirked in the dark. “But the way I see it, maybe we’re both being delayed by a couple minutes for a reason. Maybe this little delay is making us avoid an accident or running into someone we’d rather not see.”

She nodded and her breathing seemed to settle a bit at that.

I shrugged. “Or maybe the universe wanted to throw us together again so we could talk more.”

“OhmyGod,” she let out a shaky chuckle and patted my thigh. “Should’ve known you were gonna say something like that.”

“Yupp,” I smiled, feeling encouraged by her laughter, “I think that’s it. The universe wants you to miss your date with Mr. Grey’s Anatomy and be stuck here with me.”

“Mr. Grey’s Anatomy?!” she laughed out loud now and swatted my shoulder.

“Um, ow,” I said, holding my arm.

She rolled her eyes, but a smile played on her

lips.

“That reminds me... We should pick up where we left off. I’m not trying to be your dad,” I said using air quotes. “Just trying to look out for you.”

“You don’t need to,” she responded quickly.

My nose flared with a quick breath of frustration. “But what if I *want* to.”

She angled her neck to look up at me, and I would’ve thought she was mad at me, but those hazel eyes of hers darted to my lips, giving her away.

Feeling more confident, I gently brushed her hair back, tucking the silky strands behind her ear.

“Why him?” I rasped out.

She visibly gulped. “Huh?”

“Why him? Why not me?” I demanded in a low, calm voice.

She slumped against me. “Okay, I did not see you going there.”

“But didn’t you?” I pressed. I wrapped my arm tighter around her so I could brush my thumb against the exposed skin by her hip; she made no move to break away. “What does he have that I don’t?”

She blinked furiously. “You’re just... you’re not my type, Tyler.”

I fought off the temptation to release a frustrated groan. Instead, I dipped to whisper in her ear. “Yeah, I heard you the first time, buddy. I just don’t believe you.”

“Buddy?” her eyes narrowed to mine. *Ooh. She did not like that.* Her irritation almost made me smile.

“Yupp. You’re the one who wants to only be my buddy, Josie.” I sighed. “You could change that title in a second if you wanted.”

“|-”

The elevator doors chose that second to jostle open. I held a hand above my head to shield my eyes from the bright lobby lights.

My teammates, Reggie and Whitty, stood there in big puffer jackets carrying pizza boxes. Both their mouths were dropped open in shock.

Reggie nudged Whitty. “I think we interrupted something.”

Josie popped off my bag and scurried out of the elevator. “Good evening, gentlemen. No, you did not,” she clarified.

Whitty’s eyes slid to mine, and his mouth did that funny thing where it was caught between a smile and a grimace. I slowly got to my feet and dumped my hockey bag out onto the lobby’s tiled floor.

“You boys might wanna take the stairs,” I advised, basically telling them to get the hell out of here.

They both gave head nods and wandered up the stairwell.

As soon as they were gone, Josie turned and bumped right into my chest. I had to steady her again, placing my hand at the small of her back. She seemed a bit shaky on her feet.

My eyebrows scrunched together. “Hey, you good?”

She nodded quickly, but her body was still slightly trembling, and I immediately felt bad for pushing her like I did when she was clearly freaked out by the elevator mishap.

She wasn’t making a move to step away from me, so I smoothed my hand up her back and massaged her neck. “Relax, babe.” The words popped out of me so naturally, and I didn’t regret it.

We stood there for a minute, and I could feel her tension draining. Her forehead dropped against my chest, and she let out a breathy little sigh. I bet she had no clue what that did to me. *How the hell could she say I wasn't her type?*

And of course, I couldn't hold my stupid self back from wanting more. The competitor in me needed to know if stupid Jeff would have the ability to calm her like this... If Jeff would care for her like this...

I rested my chin on her hair. "I think you'd have more fun with me at dinner," I whispered.

She took in a deep breath, then pulled back to look up at me with wary eyes. "I refuse to date a hockey player, Tyler."

Ah-ha. There it was. I knew her other excuse was bullshit. There's no way she wasn't feeling the connection between us. And hearing that honestly made me kinda relieved, because now I knew the barrier standing between us was terribly flimsy. I just had to convince her to look past my profession— which was so fucking ironic because women usually found it attractive.

"But I'm not even a good one," I said with a chuckle.

She rolled her now misty eyes. "Be serious."

"I am!" I urged with a smile. "Just ask my boys. I'm practically a bender," I joked.

"Shut up." She was trying to maintain a steely exterior but she was struggling to keep her lips in a firm line.

"Is that the only reason?" I pushed.

She nodded against my chest.

In a daring move, I hooked a finger under her chin to bring her hazel eyes to mine. "Then why won't you date a hockey player?"

“Isn’t it obvious?” her voice was high-pitched now, nervous.

“Um... no?” I responded calmly.

She took a huge step back and flung an arm toward me looking completely flustered. “You’re all just trying to suck up to my dad.”

“No, that’s not-”

She was shaking her head, shutting down, becoming guarded with that fake pretentious front she got when she was trying to control a situation, but I could see right through her facade. I wasn’t imagining those goosebumps that erupted on her neck and arm when I whispered in her ear, nor her irritation at the “buddy” title. She wanted me too, but she wasn’t letting herself have me.

“I have to go. Have a nice night, Tyler,” she said tightly before scurrying to the stairwell, completely forgetting to grab her mail.

I chuckled as I turned to the door. Because she was thrown off by me too, and I finally found out my exact hurdle. Now I just needed to know how to clear it.

16. Josie

I released a frustrated growl as I threw my door shut behind me. Stupid Tyler and his stupid warm eyes and stupid soothing voice.

I ripped my fridge open and grabbed the wine. I needed a quick pour to steady my nerves. Because getting stuck in an elevator and Tyler being in my personal space like that? I wasn't sure if I was trembling from panic or the way he whispered in my ear in that deep growl of his... *Ho-ly goosebumps...*

But wasn't that how I felt about Garrett at first too?

Wait, no... Garrett *never* made me feel this level of butterflies. I never secretly wished to bump into Garrett all the time. And while dating Garrett, I had truly thought he cared about me, but the way Tyler was looking out for me the last few days was way more attention than Garrett *ever* really gave me. My skin didn't tingle at Garrett's touch like it did with Tyler's. And Garrett could never settle my panic the way Tyler just did...

But if Garrett was able to cut my heart into a thousand pieces, what could a betrayal from Tyler do to me?

He could destroy me.

I tried to shake him out of my head.

My date— who was *not* Tyler— was on his way. Jeff had a regular-person-job. He'd be tired at the same times as me. He'd have to go to bed early and wake up early for work just like I had to. He wouldn't be going out to party in the middle of the week with his buddies. He wouldn't be traveling to a bunch of different cities all the

time to see side chicks.

Doctor Jeff was safe. Stable.

I needed to be with someone like Jeff.

I spoke too soon.

Just one hour later, I was thinking I needed to be with someone *not* like Jeff.

For someone so good looking and so smart, he really didn't have an understanding of how conversation actually worked. Sitting across from him at dinner, I felt like I was interviewing him the whole time. I had to initiate every single question, and he never asked me the same question back. He just answered then smiled, almost as if he was internally saying, *yes, nailed that one, next!*

And when he did finally ask about me, it was in the worst possible way.

"I'd never be able to pay attention in your class." He let out a light chuckle. "Do the boys just stare at you?"

I sucked on my top lip for a second, wishing that hadn't just come out of his mouth. "Uh no, definitely not," I retorted. "It's not like that." I loathed when guys sexualized my profession. It minimized the work we actually did in the classroom, and it was honestly downright gross.

"It's true though," he urged, shoving another bite of glorious ravioli in his mouth. Tyler was right about this restaurant. *Damnit. No thinking about Tyler*, I ordered myself.

I took a gulp of my wine before explaining, "No, I'm like their older sister or even mother sometimes. If only I had a dollar for every time a kid mistakenly called me 'mom.'" I forced out a chuckle.

Completely unaware of my discomfort, he wagged his eyebrows as he said, “I don’t know. I’d be writing you sexy love notes, Ms. Petersen.”

Barf. I forced myself to control my face so I wouldn’t cause a scene. And I couldn’t help but think of the difference between him and Tyler. While Tyler called me “Miss Josie,” it was more of an endearing title. The way he said it, it wasn’t sexual at all, it was sweet, cute even. Nothing like the way Jeff just said “Ms. Petersen.”

I stared at Jeff’s neatly coiffed black hair. He was bent so far over his food he might as well have been licking his plate. He briefly glanced up. “Did you want to get dessert after this?”

Did I? Not really. But I also knew that if I went home after one hour, Tyler would probably gloat like crazy over the fact that he was right... I’d never admit it, but deep down, way way deep down, I would’ve preferred to be on a date with him. “Uh... sure,” I answered.

“Great.” He flashed what I now realized was his fake-charming smile. “Where would you like to go?”

Maybe it made me bratty, but I internally groaned. This date was starting to feel more like work to be honest. I didn’t want to have to take the lead— I typically did that day in and day out. When I was out, I wanted to just enjoy and follow, not have to research and direct where to go. This guy needed a take-charge kind of girl, and that just wasn’t me.

Now, I could’ve sucked it up and overlooked that specific dynamic. But the real nail in the coffin of this little date came when the check arrived.

I don’t care what anyone says, the check part of a first date is always awkward. As soon as our waiter came near, my mind fired off both sides of the debate at once— Like, should I pretend to reach for my wallet?

Should I insist on paying my half? How were you supposed to play this? He was the one who asked me out, so technically, he should be the one to pay, right? But if he paid, did that mean I was obligated to kiss him at the end? I also didn't want to offend him by acting like I deserved a free meal or anything. And I really didn't mind paying my half either. So, I pulled out my wallet and reached for my card.

He shoved his hand up to stop me, but he didn't say the usual, "*Don't worry about it*", or, "*I got it.*" Nope. Instead, he chose to say, "My treat. I doubt a place like this fits into a teacher's budget," with a sly smile.

My mouth literally fell open, but he didn't even skip a beat.

I wish I could've snapped at him, but I sat there stunned. Like, I fully knew my salary wasn't as high as other jobs, but that was a pretty damn rude thing for him to say. He made it sound like he was paying because he pitied me or something. And I'm sorry, but being a single woman who enjoyed her job and brought home a respectable salary was not something to ever be pitied.

I was suddenly exhausted from forcing conversation with Jeff all night and from trying to stop myself from thinking about Tyler... And most of all, I was annoyed with myself for being so wrong about the two of them.

All I wanted was to be back in my bed in comfy sweatpants so I could turn on *Gilmore Girls* for background noise while I binge read my latest romance novel. I had a feeling the only thing that could overshadow this date and allow me to continue being interested in men would be spending some time with a fictional man written by a woman.

17. Tyler

Casey blew his whistle then let it drop from his mouth. “Again!”

“Jeez, dude, really?” Duke asked him with wide eyes. “How many times are you gonna make them run this drill?”

Casey looked at him like he was stupid. “Til they get it right, duh.”

I had my eyes on his twins playing in the corner with some of the players. Beau threw off his gloves and was boxing up, ready to fight one of the guys. Ty was lightly slashing the back of guys’ legs with his little stick.

“Looks like Beau takes after you,” I told my brother.

Casey rubbed a hand over his scruffy jaw to cover a smile. “Okay, let the counseling commence. Duke, what’s goin’ on with you and Claire? Give me the details.”

Duke blew out a sigh and hopped up on the boards to take a seat. “It’s bad,” he said, tugging on the brim of his hat.

“Yeah, I don’t doubt it,” Casey said, keeping a sharp eye on his players. “Halsey!” he yelled to a defenseman. “That was your guy! He cut right through the middle!”

“Well, it started last week when I was having pizza for dinner and she was eating her dumb meal prep stuff again,” Duke started. “I told her since she’s not competing right now, she could have some pizza if she wanted it, it wasn’t a big deal. But she flew off the handle the way Claire does...”

“And I’m guessing you did too.”

He cringed. “Maybe.”

“Yeah, you did. Take responsibility,” Casey demanded.

“I had to defend myself, dude. I wasn’t talking about her weight or anything, she’s just still eating so damn restrictive all the time. She ramped up before the Olympics and she’s never stopped. Now for the rest of my life every time I indulge she’s gonna give me sad eyes at my food and grumpily eat a protein bar? I don’t think so. Like, let go and eat the fuckin’ pizza with me sometimes,” he said miserably.

“Dude, you’re being a *total* asshole,” I told him.

“And that’s why she doesn’t want to eat in front of you, dickhead,” Casey added, giving him a menacing glare.

“I know, it was bad. I regret it. And things got worse...”

“Worse than that?” Casey asked, briefly taking his eyes off his players to stare at him.

“Separate occasion,” Duke explained.

“Go on, we need all the facts,” Casey said in a low tone.

“Well, she announced she was going to retire and go into coaching, and I...”

“What?” I pushed.

“I made a joke that she’s maybe a little too intense for coaching,” Duke finished.

Casey rubbed a frustrated hand over his forehead. “So what it seems is you’re just criticizing her life after skating while she’s trying to find where she fits in and what works for her.”

Duke's face morphed into a look of horror. "It was a joke!"

"Doesn't matter. You're in the wrong, bud. You're being super critical instead of helpful," I chimed in.

"Fuck. I wasn't trying to be mean."

"Okay, I'm putting this in hockey terms so you can understand," Casey started. "The way you and Claire communicate, think of it as passing the puck. If you keep your stick stiff, the pass is just gonna bounce off. If you cushion it a little, compromise a little, then you'll actually catch the pass. You need to give her some *give*, dude. Stop talking in absolutes with her and start finding solutions."

Duke nodded. "Okay, yeah."

"So, the pizza fiasco— that was you having stiff hands. I'd start making an effort to take her out. Find places that offer a healthy medium for the two of you. Let's face it, you'd be happy eating shitty concession stand food for the rest of your life, and she's obviously not feeling that. But you're expecting her to break routines that she's had her whole life practically overnight, and that's not gonna happen. Be cautious, be gentle, and be non-judgmental. Give her some cushion."

"Cushion. Right." Duke nodded.

Casey tugged on his hat brim, thinking. "And as for the coaching thing, you're going to tell her gently that she'd make a great coach, but you were coming to her as someone who has had some rough coaching experiences, so you had concerns, but you'd like to be helpful. Good?"

"Yeah, that sounds good. Can you repeat that so I can write it down?" Duke asked, pulling out his phone.

"No," Casey practically barked, then he slid his blue eyes to mine. "Your turn little brother. You make a move with Red Scarf Girl yet?"

How the fuck did he already know I was gonna talk about her?

Before I could answer, he blew his whistle twice and the guys started gliding back toward the boards to grab some water. His twins were wrestling with each other in a heap on the ice by the far blue line.

“Fine. I like her. A lot. But she doesn’t date hockey players. I’m in the friend zone,” I told him.

Casey’s face broke and he actually laughed. “How the fuck did that happen to you again?”

“Huh?” Duke hopped down from the boards and retrieved a puck to stickhandle with while listening in on our conversation.

“Fiona Haley. From high school. Ring a bell?” Casey asked Duke.

“Ohhh,” Duke laughed. “Yeah, you were whipped, bud. Forgot about her.”

“Shut it. Not as whipped as you were back in the day,” I countered, stealing the puck from him.

“So what is Red Scarf Girl like?” my brother cut in.

“Josie?” I sighed. “She’s super independent. Very bossy. She has this teacher voice trick that she uses.” I laughed just thinking about it. “She tries to boss everyone around... even Coach.”

Casey whipped around to meet my gaze. “Wait, what? Coach?”

“Yeah...” *Damn*. I forgot he didn’t know about that yet. “She’s Coach Petersen’s daughter,” I admitted.

Casey paused for a second, then let out a loud bark of laughter. Duke practically doubled over.

“What’s the big deal?” I shoved my brother, feeling super defensive now. “Stop.”

In point two seconds, Casey had me in a headlock. *How the hell could he always do that so quickly?*

“That is probably the one girl on this planet I’d advise you to stay away from, little brother,” Casey said, laughing in my ear.

I tried to break free of the headlock, but he wasn’t budging. After wrestling for a minute or two, I finally had to tap out.

Casey shoved me away from him and shook off his hockey glove to wipe at his eye— yeah, he was literally laughing so hard he was fucking crying. “Damn. That’s funny.” He turned his attention to his players, who were looking between all of us confused as hell.

“Suicides,” Casey announced to the group, pointing his stick to the far end of the ice.

His team groaned.

“Let’s get moving, c’mon!”

His players begrudgingly skated to the end of the ice, and Casey blew his whistle to start them.

“You sure you’re equipped to date Coach’s daughter? That could come with a lot of repercussions. I’d hate to see you end up banished and playing in, like, Russia. And really... If any of these guys wanted to date my future daughter?” He snorted. “Hell fuckin’ no. Not with the way I hear them talk in the locker room.”

My face faltered. I’d kind of forgotten about Coach’s “no funny business” warning until right then. But honestly, that didn’t change anything in my mind. I couldn’t stop thinking about her. The world was practically throwing us together. School. Campus Martius. Our apartment building. There were so many signs, it *had* to mean something. The actual fucking spark when we touched... it was impossible to forget. And the way she leaned against me to gather her

bearings after the elevator fiasco? I felt like her hero, like I actually meant something to her and could help center her. It wasn't every day that you found that kind of comfort; I just had to convince her of that. Because I couldn't just move on and try for a different girl, not when I knew she was the one.

"I'm not some bad guy," I said defensively.

"No." Casey cocked his head to the side. "And Coach probably knows that, but it still might be kinda bumpy."

"Whatever," I muttered. "Are you gonna help me or do I have to go find Griff?" My teammate Griff was also known for doling out solid advice.

He laughed. "He might have better advice, but I'll give it a shot. Just remember, this is all your choice, and I did warn you." He held his hands up in innocence. "So, she's a teacher, right?"

I rested my chin on the butt of my stick. "Yeah."

"Teaching is an exhausting job. It's like coaching, but *all day long*, and on top of that, you have to always be on and be nice." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "She's like a one-woman show, a captain of the ship if you will, for eight long hours every day while having to deal with little shits like you were back in the day."

"Hey, I-"

"Um, do not argue against that. Remind me, how many detentions did you get?" he deadpanned.

"They weren't all my fault," I grumbled. Besides, I had a feeling that if I would've had more teachers like Josie, things wouldn't have gotten so bad.

"So, maybe if she's used to always being in control, you have to be more patient with her." Casey shrugged. "Addie's super independent, and I had to learn to be patient and just let her know I was a strong,

protective presence there for her when she was ready. Even today, I stand down and let her do things her way until she comes to me.”

“Interesting,” I drawled. “But you weren’t competing with anyone when you were trying to win her over. Not sure I can be patient when she’s literally going out with another dude right now.”

He rolled his lip between his teeth. “Tough. But I’d still play the long game. Hold out. Patience, brother.” His heavy hand fell on my shoulder. “And then when you do get a chance, I’d go all out.”

I took in the hum of the rink around me and fell into my own thoughts. Yes, Josie was the captain of her own metaphorical ship all day... but didn’t that mean she wanted to hand over the steering wheel at night? I think I’d shown her I was a patient and protective presence already, then again, I basically had to boss her into letting me help her. And weren’t those the times when her eyes darted to my lips? When I demanded that she let me help her? The only times I felt a little slip in her bossy front was when I took charge. And, thinking back to her in the elevator only confirmed my way of thinking, because I definitely detected a slight bit of disappointment when she mentioned she had to pick out where she and the doctor were going to eat on their dumbass date. That made me feel pretty confident it wasn’t going to work out with Doctor Grey’s Anatomy.

Josie wanted a leader, I was sure of it, now I just needed to prove I could be one for her. I needed to-

My thoughts were interrupted when the goalie glided into the boards and barfed over the side.

I choked on a gag and had to turn away.

“Jackson!” my brother yelled at the goalie. “Take a seat. Get some water.”

“Can’t they be done yet?” Duke complained. I

knew from skating with him for years that he *hated* suicides.

Case turned his attention to him. "Shut it or I'll make you skate too," he said, which made Duke quickly snap his mouth shut.

"Isn't this a little much though?" I asked my brother. His team was looking ragged.

His face flinched. "They won't stop fighting. One more fight and I'm off the bench for three games. They need to get it together."

"We're dyin' Coach!" a kid yelled as he passed us.

Casey rolled his eyes then finally blew his whistle three times, signaling the end of practice.

When I got back from practice, I pulled the couch over to the window so I could play video games and also keep an eye out for Josie.

I told myself I was doing it to make sure she got home alright, because I really didn't trust that doctor guy, but the other reason was that I wanted to see her again tonight.

Around 10pm, I got my wish. Unfortunately, Hassik and Garcia were also loudly wandering into our loft right then.

"Dude, why's the couch all the way over there?" Garcia complained.

"Shh!" I warned them. Within seconds, they were by my side, leaning against our window next to me.

"What are we looking at?" Garcia asked.

"Is that the teacher?" Hassik inquired, cupping his hands around his eyes to inspect further.

I pulled his shirt back, afraid she'd somehow see us up here.

Josie and the doctor were now standing in the lightly falling snow like they were in some kind of fucking Hallmark movie.

I begged God that she wouldn't invite him up to her place. I wouldn't be able to fucking take it if that were to happen...

The doctor leaned down in a move like he was going to kiss her, and Josie turned at the last minute, dodging his face and going for a hug instead.

"Wooo!" Garcia and Hassik erupted like we'd just gotten a goal and slapped me on the back.

"Shh!" I warned again, trying to shut them the hell up. For some reason, even though we were four floors up, I was still paranoid she'd hear us.

As soon as the doctor wandered away, Josie turned and just stood there on the snowy sidewalk, and I swear to God, she stared straight up at our loft, directly at us, directly at me. I felt her stare straight down to my soul. But there's no way she could see me all the way up here, right? Then again, why would she be looking at our loft? Was she thinking about me? About what I said to her earlier? She had to be...

A second later, she shuffled forward toward the lobby door, breaking our connection.

I stood against the glass, my heart pounding.

"What are you doing?!" Garcia threw his arms wide.

"What do you mean?"

"Go get her!" he urged with wide eyes. "She's clearly thinking of you. She practically eye-fucked the window!"

I looked to Hassik, who was nodding furiously in agreement.

Feeling suddenly shaky, I slipped on my slides and quietly made my way to the stairs. I'd leave it up to fate. If we ran into each other, great. If not, well, then it wasn't meant to be for tonight...

18. Josie

“How’d it go?”

I jumped at the sound of his gravelly voice and dropped my keys on the ground. I turned to look at him and wished I hadn’t... because I couldn’t ignore the little thrill that punched into me at the sight of him leaning up against the wall all casually hot like he was in his gray sweatpants and thin t-shirt.

“I don’t know,” I said as casually as I could.

He looked down at his feet and clucked his tongue. “I think you do know,” he said, meeting my eyes with a steely gaze. “You didn’t like him.”

I didn’t want to lie, but I also didn’t want to give him the satisfaction of telling him he was right. I just shrugged, trying to look unaffected.

He pushed off against the wall, his long, strong stride carrying him toward me.

“Let me guess,” he said. He was so close to me now, and that damn smell of his cologne muddled my brain, making it hard to focus on anything else. He dipped down to pick up my keys and tucked them in my front pocket. “He wanted you to pick everything, didn’t he? You had to be the leader, huh?” His eyes narrowed. “Didn’t like that, did you?”

How the hell did he know? I honestly felt caught red-handed, like he was some detective shining a bright light right on my face. I arched an eyebrow. “So what if I didn’t?”

“I know what you do want,” he continued confidently, a lopsided grin sliding onto his face.

His voice sent jitters through me, and I found his

commandeering attitude extremely attractive, but I forced out a scoff. “Right, okay,” I bit back sarcastically.

“I do...” He moved closer, boxing me against my door, and I knew I could push him away at any second, but my body was at war with my brain. His face was now angled down to mine, inches from me. He licked his lips, and I suddenly craved his touch... *his kiss*. But I also knew he wouldn't dare touch me first. He was teasing me, tempting me, wanting me to break the barrier between us. Two could play that game.

I cocked my head to the side and pursed my lips. “Okay, Tyler. What do I want then?”

“You want to be romanced. I saw those books on your nightstand.”

I snorted. “Yeah, me and every other girl on the planet,” I responded in a bored tone.

He just smiled slowly, and his intense gaze had me squirming uncomfortably... because for some reason, it felt like he could read my mind.

“And you want a leader. You're in charge of everyone all the time, you look out for everyone...” His fingers lightly skimmed across my skin as he moved my hair from my neck. My body was practically screaming yes, wanting more. But he quickly tore his hand back and whispered, “but who looks out for you?”

The feeling of his minty breath on my skin made my body go haywire. I wanted more, but my stubborn brain wouldn't let me give in. “Not you,” I whispered.

He froze, his brown eyes locked on mine. His jaw ticked. “I'm the only one feeling this then, huh? Do you want me to stop?”

I bit my lip and closed my eyes. “No.”

“No? No to which question, Josie? It's very important,” he ground out.

My eyes flew open. “No to both.”

He clenched his jaw, and his rough fingers lightly trailed up my stomach. My brain shot off a warning that if he kept going, he'd realize I wasn't wearing a...

“No bra, huh?” He flashed a wolfish grin. “Such a shame he couldn't close the deal. You deserve to be touched, cherished...” His thumb swiped over my center, making me gasp. “And maybe a little punished.”

“W-what?” I forced out, searching his face. My breathing felt labored, my mind was spinning, trying to keep track of what he was saying.

His strong hand jammed up under my shirt then, and his calloused hand made my knees go weak. “For lying, baby.” He rolled me between his fingers, shooting off a jolt through my entire body, making me release a whimper.

I swallowed hard and searched his eyes. “You could come inside, just this once.” I was never one to just hook up, but he... He was so damn tempting. A voice whispered in my head that I'd break my rules for him.

His forehead dropped against the door above me. “Don't say that if you don't mean it.”

My hand wandered up his chest, skimming across his tightly coiled muscles. “I mean it,” I reassured him. “I do.”

Internal struggle was written all over his face. His nose flared as his eyes studied mine, and it's like something snapped between us.

“Fuck patience,” he muttered, and then his lips crashed down on mine.

My body immediately responded, touching his neck, drowning in him. His hand dropped down and scooped up my butt, bringing me closer, his other was

suddenly in my hair. His tongue explored my mouth as he swung me around, and I felt drunk on this all-consuming kiss. I needed... *closer*... I needed *more*. Attraction pooled in my core. He tugged my hair, like he was thinking the same thing, like he couldn't contain himself.

But when my shaky hand wandered to my keys, he broke away, breathing heavily. He let me slide down him, back to my feet.

"And what about tomorrow?" His forehead creased as his chest rose and fell. "You'll give me a shot?"

My heart pounded furiously, just wanting to make out again, wanting to *feel* that again... But realization was penetrating the moment. He was very clearly not on the same page as me. I slowly shook my head. I would not break *that* rule for him. "This wouldn't change anything, Tyler. You play for my dad, and-"

He immediately pulled back and my heart sank. I hated it; I hated the space between us, making it suddenly feel twenty degrees colder in the hallway.

"And what?" he demanded.

I dropped my hand away from my door. "And I can't go near that."

His jaw throbbed angrily. "Can't or won't, Josie?"

"Does it really matter?" I asked weakly.

His dark eyes briefly flickered to mine and his nose flared. "Yeah, it does," he said with finality.

I knew I was responsible for the pissed look on his face, and I honestly felt bad. I desperately wanted him, no, *needed* him, to see things my way. "Look, I need to be more realistic with who I date, okay?" I said gently. "I'd love to follow my passions and feelings for you and have some lovely little fling, but I need to make

smart choices. I can't repeat the same mistakes."

His jaw clenched. "And I'm not the smart choice?"

My shoulders fell. "You're... You're not the realistic choice, Tyler. We wouldn't work. I need someone who..." I breathed out, trying to come up with some kind of metaphor. "Like... I need someone who knows where the 401K money goes, I only know where commas go. I've decided I need to be realistic now."

He choked out an incredulous scoff and shook his head. "That's what you're worried about? Screw realism," he practically growled.

"W-what?"

He narrowed his eyes to mine, like he was challenging me. "So you're telling me you're going to settle? That's what this is all about? You don't even want to give me a shot because you have it in your head that I'm not boring or booksmart enough or some shit?"

I sat there blinking at him, at a loss for words. That wasn't what I-

"Screw realism," he repeated. "Even realistic choices fail, so why *not* be romantic? Why not be swept away with passion and suck the absolute most out of it while it lasts? I'll let you in on a little secret," he paused, and his eyebrows drew together in desperation. "The other shoe eventually drops on *everything*, Josie. So, you're gonna settle with Mr. Grey's Anatomy or some dentist or random accountant and live just fine and dull and stable... For what? To run the same risks as you would with me? Why not live in color 'til you can't? Then when things fall apart, wouldn't it at least be worth the heartbreak?"

He wasn't right. Stable things didn't fall apart. I schooled myself to calm my breathing and remain careless, even though a tiny part of me knew he made a

good point. My heart wanted him completely, my body was screaming at me to give in to him, but my brain had me frozen in place.

“Tyler, that wasn’t what I-”

He shook his head, cutting me off. He was biting the inside of his cheek so hard I wondered if he drew blood. He suddenly pointed to my door with an angry index finger. “I’ll tell you right now, I’m not doing this. I won’t be just a hook-up guy for you.”

I wanted to argue back, to reassure him that I didn’t think of him that way... but how would I defend myself if I wasn’t willing to give him more?

My heart felt like it was lodged in my throat, but I forced myself to swallow it down right along with all my internal rebellion. “Fine.”

“Fine,” he matched my careless tone. He stood there with his hands on his hips, staring at his feet for a beat, as if he were deciding something. With his mouth firmly shut, he ran his tongue over his teeth, and then he turned away from me.

And I felt like crying out. In that moment, I knew just how much I wanted him, and I hated myself for it, because that meant he was right, and I was wrong.

Right before he rounded the stairs, he looked over his shoulder at me and something flashed in his eyes. He rolled his lips together for a second.

“Ya know what, Josie? Go on as many bad dates as you want.” He stalked toward me and was suddenly, holding my hips in place with his firm hands, pinning me against the door. He pushed against me so I could feel how hard he was, and I involuntarily released a gasp. He paid attention to my neck then, sucking, biting, kissing, and I couldn’t get enough. My knees buckled, but he firmly kept me in place by jamming a knee between my legs. My body felt on the edge of an

explosion and my nails dug into his back. I thought he was going to kiss me again, but instead, his mouth found my ear, and he whispered, "But I'll be stuck in your head the whole time." He gently tugged my hair so I was looking up at him. He planted a soft kiss on my lips, then bit my bottom lip, making me gasp. "And I'll be here waiting for you when you finally realize we're perfect for each other."

In one quick motion, he released me and turned to leave.

My body was practically shaking, just wanting him back in front of me. I stomped my foot like a damn toddler, trying to regain any semblance of control. "We are not perfect for each other, Tyler," I shouted at his back.

"Keep thinkin' that, buddy," he said casually without looking back at me.

He paused at the steps and looked over his shoulder one more time. "Have a goodnight, Miss Josie," he said with his signature, lopsided grin. But the grin didn't make it up to his eyes this time; instead, those brown eyes of his remained dark and stormy.

And then he was gone, climbing back up the stairs where he came from.

I fell against my door and stared up at my ceiling for a beat, wondering how the hell exchanging a few frustrating words with Tyler could make me feel more than I had in the whole last two and a half hours with Jeff... How he could make me feel more in a minute than I had in the last few years with Garrett.

And that knee-weakening kiss... It felt nothing like an awkward first kiss and everything like a passionate happily ever after. Our bodies were in sync on a completely different level than I'd ever experienced, our chemistry was like a drug. And I desperately wanted

to feel that high again, but I'd never admit it aloud. Because just like a drug, I knew I'd get addicted, and that he was bad for me.

He was wrong about me wanting to settle, and he was wrong about stability.

I'd find what I was looking for. I'd find someone who wasn't risky, who didn't play for my dad, who also made me feel electroshocks of arousal down to my core with just a single look.

But... Tyler's words replayed on a loop in my brain, threatening to crush my neat little picture of stability.

And a little voice in the back of my head whispered, *what if he's right?*

Would I give up a colorful passionate relationship for a boring one just to have the boring crash and burn too?

Shit.

Before bed, I tried to get lost in a romance novel, but every few sentences, my mind stupidly wandered to Tyler.

Feeling incredibly irritated and unsatisfied, I covered my face with a pillow and released a muffled, frustrated screech.

I could practically kick myself in the ass knowing that tonight could've ended so differently had I only agreed to go on date with him...

But the more I thought through his words, the more I moved from feeling regretful to feeling angry.

What a *cocky bastard* for saying I'd think of him on all my future dates. Who was he to say that? Fine,

yes, there was a definite connection between us, but I could, and I *would*, find that with someone else. In fact, now I was determined to find it as fast as possible just to make him eat his stupid words.

19. Josie

On Wednesday night, I threw on a tight, black, long-sleeve dress and paired it with off-black nylons and tall high-heeled boots before heading out to meet some of the teachers at The Blitz for Teachers Get Trashed night.

The Blitz was your typical hole-in-the-wall sports bar. It had low-lighting and signed Detroit sports flags and jerseys hung up all over in disarray, as well as plenty of flat screens for watching games. The bar was basically a large square island, with seats on all four sides, and then tables and lounge areas surrounded it. The dance floor, as well as an elevated stage for when they had live music, were toward the back of the bar.

I'd only ever really gone to The Blitz for dinner before hitting up one of the Crewmen games with family, so I'd never seen the nighttime crowd, but from what I heard, it definitely got rowdy some nights, and I was excited to finally be a part of it.

Because it was a Wednesday night, there thankfully wasn't a line to get in, which was a good thing because I decided to forgo wearing a heavy jacket, even though it was December in Michigan. I knew it was kind of a stupid decision, but I figured the bar was only a quick brisk walk away from my apartment and I didn't want to risk losing a jacket or having to lug one around the bar all night— a definite dance floor mood killer would be having to carry a big puffer jacket under your arm. Plus, what would I do with it if a guy asked me to dance? I'd end up leaving it at a table for it to be stolen. And that's honestly what I was after tonight— finding a nice, cute guy to dance the night away with. A guy who was *not* Tyler Jetersen.

Because I'll admit it... what he said about getting stuck in my head... it was somehow frickin' true. Because here I was, thinking about him, wondering if I should try the unofficial drink named after him, and wondering if he'd show up here tonight— because this was apparently where his team hung out all the time.

But what would be the point of seeing him? Yes, I wanted to get under his skin and see that grin of his, and yes, I desperately wanted him to touch me again...

But would any of that change my stance?

No.

So, as I scanned the bar for my fellow teachers, I very maturely decided I would not think about him anymore for the rest of the—

“Josie!” Sabrina, a fellow English teacher, stood and waved her hands, beckoning me over to the table they had in the middle of the bar.

I quickly made my way over to the group and was surprised to see a lot of the middle-aged teachers who had kids had also made it out for the night.

They called out their hellos and I sat at the end of the table next to Sabrina, an older math teacher who was usually all business named Lisa, and the new home-ec teacher named Suzie.

Lisa quickly passed me the pitcher of margarita. “Drink up, Josie. You’ve gotta catch up.”

“Catch up? Didn’t it just start?”

“Yes, but I think the history guys at the end of the table have been going at it since the Lions game at noon. Poor Greg’s been trying to keep up. Should’ve known better.”

I peeked at the end of the table and clearly saw what she meant. The history department mostly consisted of larger men who also coached our school’s

football team and looked like they manned the O-line back in their athletic days... But poor Greg, “Mr. Richards” to the kids, was a light-weight beanpole. His eyes were currently bloodshot and he was shoveling a cheeseburger in his face to try and sober up a bit.

We fell into a comfortable rhythm of our usual conversation— mostly swapping stories about our troublemaker students. Believe it or not, teachers usually cracked up laughing when talking about the crazy excuses kids dished out to us day in and day out.

“Brady actually made me a little mock ‘Get out of jail free card’ like the ones you play monopoly with? Because I took his phone away and put it in “cell phone jail,” Lisa said.

We all busted up laughing about that one.

“I mean, it was actually pretty detailed, I should show it to Trish,” Lisa said with a harrumph. Trish, who dressed in long, pretty dresses every day, was our school’s resident art teacher. She was currently looking three sheets to the wind along with the history guys.

“Ugh, speaking of Trish!” Suzie announced, slapping the table.

“Nope!” Trish complained.

Suzie rolled her eyes. “I was trying to set her up with one of my boyfriend’s friends,” she said quietly. “It was a no-go, apparently she doesn’t like athletes.”

“Finally, someone I agree with!” I lifted my frozen margarita towards Trish and we clanked our glasses together. I took a large gulp then and had to squeeze my eyes shut against the brain freeze. “And please,” I said, “no talk of men right now.”

“Why? It’s my favorite topic,” Suzie said, wagging her eyebrows. I’m sure it was, she was the teacher all the girls went to for guy advice and to gossip about their crushes.

I blew out a sigh. "This guy is stuck in my head, and he's driving me nuts. Not how I want to spend my break."

"So *that's* where that hickey came from!" Suzie exclaimed. My hand slapped my neck and my face burned red. I spent extra time applying makeup to try and cover it up, but I guess it hadn't helped. "I wasn't going to say anything about it, but I could totally tell," she said with a giggle.

Lisa shrugged. "Why not just make out with him or sleep with him? Get it out of your system?"

Suzie, Sabrina, and I all looked at her with our mouths dropped open.

"Hey, just because I'm a responsible forty-year-old mother does not mean I wasn't in your shoes not so long ago!" she said, wagging her finger at us.

"Well... I kinda tried that," I said, feeling my cheeks burn.

Suzie almost spit out her drink next to me, and Sabrina cracked up laughing.

"I'm sorry, but what?!" Suzie sputtered. "I never would've guessed you'd say that!"

I rolled my eyes. "I didn't sleep with him... I, uh, offered, and he turned me down," I admitted.

Suzie frowned. "Really?"

Lisa arched a curious eyebrow. "Why? Kind of a rarity for a guy to turn it down."

"Yeah, well, he did." I took another large gulp of my drink, feeling the slight sting of embarrassment over confiding this information. "Because he wants a date first," I said quietly.

"Okay... Well, that's actually very sweet," Sabrina pointed out.

“No, he’s not sweet!” I exclaimed. “He’s frustrating. And cocky, and a hockey player.”

“Okay, are those complaints?” Lisa asked dubiously. “Sign me up. Just don’t tell my husband I said that,” she joked.

Suzie’s eyes flashed. “Wait, a hockey player? Maybe he knows my boyfriend. We’ll ask when he comes.”

Oh God, I internally groaned. Her boyfriend would definitely know him... The hockey world was way too small. I honestly had no doubt in my mind that Tyler knew my ex as well, a thought that made me squirm uncomfortably.

“You need to get out of your head,” Lisa announced. “Every time you think of him, we do shots!”

“Oh no, I will never admit that I’m thinking about him,” I fired back.

“Okay, then we do shots anyway because you are way too tense right now and it’s finally our night,” she said, standing from the table to wander over to the bar.

When Lisa came back to the table with a bunch of shots, I looked at them doubtfully, but the girls urged me to take part in the cheers.

I was never really a shots person, I was a sip-on-one-cocktail-all-night kind of person, but after downing a shot or two, I was feeling light and floaty... and then I got the bright idea to tell Suzie about how Tyler had an unofficial drink named after him here. Suzie convinced me we needed to try them for “research purposes.” And that’s how both of us ended up double-fisting very strong, very green drinks called “The Tyler Springs.”

“So, how did this come about?” Suzie asked Adrienne, the Blitz’s bartender.

Adrienne flipped her long, pitch-black hair over her tattooed shoulder. “Well,” she gave us a wicked smile, “did you guys catch Tyler Jettensen’s whole ‘Go Your Own Way’ locker room performance on social media?”

Suzie’s mouth dropped open as she stared at me. “Tyler *Jettensen* is your boy?”

Now Adrienne was looking at me with more interest. I needed to shut this down. “He is *not* my boy,” I said firmly.

“Oh whatever, you know what I mean,” Suzie said, waving away my concern. “He’s teammates with *my* guy.”

“Who’s your guy?!” I asked desperately. Teammates were a totally different kind of connection than just knowing each other. This was a little too close for comfort. How had I not known that?

“Charles Whittman,” she said. “He plays for the Crewmen.”

I gave her a confused look, because I had never heard that name before.

She rolled her eyes. “Whitty?”

“Ohhh.” My dad only ever referred to the guys by their nicknames. My sober brain would’ve probably put two-and-two together. “Wow, learn something new everyday,” I said, then hiccuped.

Adrienne looked at us warily. “Maybe I should cut you two off after this.”

“No way,” Suzie announced. “This is our night to cut loose. We have to live responsible lives literally the rest of the school year— getting to bed at 9, waking up at 5:30, we *need* this,” she said, shaking her drink and spilling a bit on the bar.

Adrienne blew out a resigned sigh and wiped

down the bar where she just spilled. “Well, back to Tyler, one night after a bad game he kept ordering angry pirates, what you guys are currently holding, and he ended up getting on stage and belting out ‘Silver Springs’ for everyone in the bar.”

I almost choked on my drink. “Oh my God, do you have a video of this performance?”

“Nah, but I bet you can still find it somewhere online. A social media mob came for him the next morning though because apparently ‘Silver Springs’ is for the girls only.”

“I mean, that’s kinda true...” Suzie said, to which we all busted up laughing. “Was he any good at least?”

Adrienne shook her head vehemently. “Absolutely not. There are two things hockey boys cannot do, and that’s sing and dance. Think about it.” She gave us a pointed look.

“Whitty can... oh,” Suzie covered her mouth to muffle a giggle. “Actually he is quite bad at dancing, but he gives it his all. That counts for something.”

“Definitely,” Adrienne agreed. “But watch next time. They just beep-bop around kinda awkwardly,” she laughed. “I love watching. They have no rhythm.”

I laughed at that. I could totally see Tyler bouncing around the dance floor... *Shit, no thinking about Tyler*, I desperately ordered my tipsy brain.

20. Tyler

I was pissed.

Pissed at my teammates for leaving our loft a mess all the time. Pissed at Duke for getting in another argument with Claire and moping around all day, because really, he had no clue how lucky he was to have her. And I was pissed at Casey for canceling our weekly dinner with absolutely no warning and no real explanation. I went off on him about it, and felt kind of bad as soon as I hung up. Deep down, I knew I was just taking out my frustration on everyone else.

The person I was truly pissed at... was Miss Josie Petersen.

Last night in the stairwell should've been a high for us. Because I figured it all out for us. She wanted to be the boss, but she folded as soon as I manhandled her. I felt those knees of hers go weak, I saw those bright eyes of hers dart to my lips, wanting me to take hers, and I felt her heart pounding just like mine when we kissed.

But then she tripped me right back into high school: The guy who was good enough to hook up with, but not good enough to date. And while I knew it wasn't the same situation, it stung like hell being relegated to that position again.

I couldn't handle playing that role with her. Not when I knew we had such a strong connection. And I knew I shouldn't have touched her like I did, shouldn't have kissed her like I did, but her stubbornness snapped something inside me. And the thought of her going on dates with other guys drove me fucking crazy... So crazy that I marked her neck as my own. Knowing that she most definitely had a hickey tonight was the only thing

helping me keep it together.

Because she fucking branded me too. Thoughts of touching her again swamped my brain all day long.

So, I hit the weight room hard, trying to forget about her, and then I was supposed to find reprieve playing floor hockey with Beau and Ty all night, but of course that couldn't happen.

So, now I was on the couch struggling to research fucking 401K's— even though I pay a guy to take care of all my financials, while trying to ignore my buddies who went out tonight to The Blitz, because I knew Josie would be there with her teacher party.

But Reggie had called five times now, and my phone was buzzing yet again with his name on the screen.

The sixth time, I finally picked up. “What?” I answered in a resigned tone.

“Yooo, so you know that girl you got stuck in the elevator with? You gotta thing for her?”

My chest tightened with apprehension. “What about her?” I ignored his second question completely.

He let out a bark of laughter. “She's pretty blitzed here at The Blitz, bud.”

I sat forward and rubbed my forehead. “What do you mean?”

“She's bein' all loosey goosey. Pretty funny actually. I guess it's Teachers Get Trashed night? But most of the teachers left. There's only like four of them here. They're still goin' hard though.”

“Well, is she alright?” I asked, feeling completely exasperated. What was I supposed to do about it?

“I... guess so?” he asked more than said.

My heart pounded harder. “Dude, what the fuck?”

Is she alright or not?" I demanded, getting to my feet.

"Well, she's hangin' around a regular who's got a pretty bad rep, and we just thought you'd wanna know."

"Fuck," I spat, feeling frustration building up in my body.

I marched to the door without really thinking it through and slammed it shut behind me. At the end of the day, as annoyed as I was with her, I'd still look out for her and be her friend, no matter what. Plus, a little voice in the back of my head egged me on, saying Coach would be in total agreement with me marching in there.

I swung open The Blitz's door and scanned the bar. My jaw tightened as soon as I spotted her. There she was, pretty much sprawled over a man's lap. Her motions were super languid, taking me two seconds to realize she was way too far gone to be talking to someone new.

Long strides carried me across the bar, and I stood, towering over them.

"Josie, who's your friend?" I ground out.

She slightly jumped at my voice, but then her lips quirked up into a smug smile. She was being a little brat and she knew it. "This is Brian. We just met."

I ground my back teeth, struggling hard to keep my composure intact. But the way this guy's hand slid across her pretty jaw paired with the taunting look on his face were not helping.

She patted Brian's cheek. "So what was I saying?"

"Where you live now, baby doll," he whispered, hooking a finger under her chin.

"Oh right! I just moved into-

Panic ripped through my chest. “Nope.” I reached forward and grabbed her small forearms, forcing her up and out of Brian’s arms. I roughly set her on her feet and shot him a menacing get-lost look. He matched my gaze with his own daggers as he slunk away toward the men’s bathroom.

Josie whirled on me and shoved my chest, but I barely budged. “Tyler! Why’d you do that? He was supposed to be your replacement,” she whined.

“My replacement? Ha!” I scoffed. “Him?”

She crossed her skinny arms over her chest. “Yes. So I can stop thinking about you.”

My anger all but dissipated, and I smirked down at her. Now that I knew she was safe, I liked loosey goosey Josie. “You were thinking about me, eh?”

Her mouth slightly dropped open in realization of her admission. “My stupid drunk brain,” she grumbled. “Stupid Tyler Springs.”

It took all I had in me not to bust up laughing, and I *loved* hearing a curse word pop out of her prissy mouth. I tugged her wrist and she easily fell into my chest. “It’s okay, Josie. I’ve been thinking about you too,” I admitted, rubbing circles in her back. “But you can’t go telling strange men where you live.”

She practically stomped her foot as she pushed her index finger into my chest. “I can if I want to. Just because I like you does *not* mean I have to listen to you, and it does *not* mean I have to be with you either. I already tried a hockey player once and look where that got me.” She dropped her head back. “Gah, and just because you smell so stupid good,” she pounded on my chest with her little fist, “does not mean I should keep standing here.” She hiccuped. “I need another drink.”

My eyebrows furrowed together. “Wait, let’s rewind that little rant-”

But she ignored my words. She turned on her heel and almost toppled over, and I had to catch her hip to steady her.

“Woah, dizzy,” she giggled, patting my hand on her hip. She promptly marched out of my arms and over to the bar.

She pounded her dainty fist on the wooden ledge. “Adrienne, I would love another vodka sprite if you have any left in this fine establishment.”

I sucked in my top lip to keep from laughing, because even in her drunk state, she could still somehow manage to pull off her teacher-voice.

Adrienne eyed her warily, probably debating if she should cut her off or not.

I leaned forward. “She’ll have a water too,” I added.

Josie waved her hand in front of my face to shush me. “No, she will not.”

“Fine, I want the water.” And I’d hold it ‘til she did want it.

As soon as Josie was handed her drink, she sucked down a large amount.

“Might wanna take it easy with that,” I hesitantly warned. I honestly just didn’t want her to get sick.

She cocked an eyebrow and sucked down even more, daring me to break eye-contact. I just shook my head wryly. I had a feeling she would’ve downed the whole drink right in front of me, but the first few chords of TLC’s “No Scrubs” floated through the air, distracting her. She let out a happy little shriek and immediately scampered out to the dance floor. On the way, she spilled some of her drink and almost did a complete bambi slide, but she righted herself at the last minute. *Jesus*. I rubbed my forehead, she was looking real

wobbly.

While she met her friends on the dance floor, I made my way to the edge of it and sipped on her water.

I turned a chair backwards and plopped down. While she didn't invite me to stay or ask me to dance with her, she couldn't kick me out of a public restaurant, and I sure as shit wouldn't be leaving, especially not with that guy lurking around. A bad fucking feeling settled in my gut over the way he touched her jaw, and I knew I'd be a nervous wreck if I left. So, I'd be keeping watch to make sure her and her friends were safe.

Scanning the rest of the dance floor, I noticed Reggie and Campbell with their girls smooshed close to them. As soon as they spotted Josie, both of their heads snapped to me.

I gave a silent head nod and they both cracked up laughing. Assholes.

"Hey bud." Whitty pulled a chair out and sat next to me. He was a hulking 6'7 man made of pure muscles. He was currently rocking a beard that I was quite jealous of and a backwards CCM hat. All in all, he resembled a modern-day Viking, and he was definitely our most intimidating looking defenseman, but what people didn't know was that he was actually a teddy bear on the inside. I was kind of happy to have him as back up just in case that Brian guy did come back.

"Where's Suzie?" I asked him. He usually never went anywhere without his girl.

"With your girl, also shwasted." His large shoulders shook as he laughed at my shocked face. "Should've told me your girl was a teacher, could've helped you out. What're the chances they're coworkers?" He ran a hand over his beard.

I snorted. "The chances were actually probably high, my friend. The universe keeps throwing us

together. It's insane how many times we've crossed paths over the last week or so."

I watched her teacher friends point me out to her and whisper in her ear.

I fixed a flirty grin on my face and waved to them, making them all giggle. Josie's cheeks flushed pink and she rolled her eyes, but a minute later, she made eye-contact with me, daring me to break it as she started dancing suggestively. I swallowed hard and adjusted myself in my seat. She was turning me on, and she knew it. She threw her head back laughing, and I shook my head at her.

As I watched her with her friends, I played her drunken ramble back. What had she said? *I already tried a hockey player once and look where that got me.* I was still missing the full picture, but things were making more sense. I somehow had to prove to her that I wasn't like that asshole from her past...

Out of the corner of my eye, I caught that Brian guy stalking out of the men's room. He sat at the bar and ordered drinks, then watched the dance floor. I hated how his eyes seemed to land directly on Josie and her friends.

After Adrienne handed him two drinks, I watched his hand roam over the top of them, then he reached for a little wooden stirrer.

"Shit." My stomach twisted. "Did you see that?"

"What?" Whitty asked, alert now.

"Black leather jacket. Dark five-o-clock-shadow. Sitting at the bar, to the left of Adrienne. Think he messed with those drinks."

The two of us watched like a hawk as he wandered out to the dance floor. I'd stop anyone from drinking from those cups, but a nervous terror ran up my spine as he wound up right in front of Josie and her

friends.

My leg bounced as I tried to convince myself it was just my jealousy pushing me to see the worst in that guy. But when he didn't take one of the drinks for himself, I knew I was right. He drugged them, and he was handing them to Josie and Suzie.

I popped out of my seat in a second, shocked that it was happening right in front of us, but I guess these kinds of things always did happen right in front of everyone.

"Right behind you," Whitty growled.

I took three strides across the bar and quickly swiped Josie's drink away before she could take a sip. I dumped the contents on the floor, then threw the plastic cup back at the guy's chest.

"Tyler!" Josie gasped.

Whitty had a calmer approach. He grabbed the guy by his shirt, balling the material in his fist, and he held Suzie's full drink up to his closed mouth.

"Take a sip, c'mon," Whitty growled. "Take one."

The bouncers flanked our sides a second later, and they quickly took the fucker off Whitty's hands and roughly carried him to the back door to throw him the hell out of the bar.

Whitty and I wordlessly communicated for a second. "I'll make sure the friends get home safe," he said in a gruff tone, patting me on the back.

Suzie's hand slid up his bulging arm in a comforting motion.

Before Josie could protest, I bent down and threw her small frame over my shoulder, keeping my hand on the bottom of her dress so she wouldn't flash everyone in the bar. A protectiveness coursed through my body, growling in my head that her undergarments

were for my eyes only... *if she ever let me look*, that is.

“Tyler!” She pounded on my back.

“We’re leaving,” I muttered.

“I’m having fun!” she complained.

“Bar’s closing in ten minutes anyways.”

Reggie and Campbell started clapping as I walked her off the dance floor.

“Wait, no! I have to pay!” Josie screeched.

I turned back around to the bar. “Adrienne, can you put hers on my tab?”

“No,” Josie whined miserably.

“Why?” I nodded for Adrienne to do it, then turned to walk out of the bar.

“Don’t you dare say anything about this place being out of a teacher’s budget,” she warned.

My face cracked in confusion. “Why the hell would I ever say that?”

She was quiet for a minute, then, “Jeff did.”

I let those words sink in for a second. That comment clearly hurt her. “Anyone who insults someone’s salary or work is a grade A douchebag, buddy.”

A little tension seemed to leave her body. “Yeah, maybe,” she responded quietly.

“Not maybe. It’s true. He’s clearly insecure in his manhood and wants to brag about his salary because that’s the only thing he can offer you. And it doesn’t matter how much money teaching brings in, it’s one of the most important professions. Having a good teacher at the right moment...” A mental picture of Northfield’s art teacher flashed in my mind. I’d never forget her. “It can make or break a person,” I told her honestly.

The bouncer held the glass door open for me and we headed out into the cold.

“And I fully know you can pay,” I continued, “but I wanna get out of here and don’t feel like putting you down.”

“Why?”

“I like holding you,” I said truthfully.

“Oh.” Her voice sounded small.

I smiled at her surprise. “You know Adrienne?” I inquired.

“Yes, she made us yummy drinks.”

I snorted. “Too many drinks, buddy.”

“How do you know her?” she asked, and then, “OhmyGod did you date her?!” she shrieked in an accusing tone.

“No,” I laughed, and I felt way too much satisfaction over the jealousy in her voice. “We went to high school together. She’s dating a teammate named Brody. He’s pretty quiet though, keeps to himself, no one really knows him too well.”

“Broody Brody,” she said with a giggle, and now I could hear her teeth chattering.

I paused. “Wait, where’s your jacket?”

“D-d-didn’t bring one,” she said simply.

I spat out a curse. “That’s a bad idea, buddy. Need to change that. Always bring a jacket with you.” I picked up my pace.

“You’re so c-critical. I wanted to look c-c-cute,” she said, her body now shivering from the cold.

“You’re always cute. But while we’re on the topic of personal safety, you should make sure to look in elevators before walking into them, and you should

never let first dates know where you live, meet them out, have them walk you to an uber or your car if you feel safe enough to let them, but don't bring them back to where you live."

"Well s-s-sorry I'm doing everything wrong. This is the way I live *my* life."

"Your way or the highway, huh?" I smirked.

"That's what I'm s-s-sayin! I turn my brain *off* after school, okay?"

"Well, then you should really just stick with me so I can think for you then."

"Wow," she bit back sarcastically.

"What?" I laughed.

"Trying to pump your own tires while I stare at your man booty."

"You're staring at my booty, eh?" I asked with a grin.

"I can't help it. It's r-r-right here!"

"Ow!" I yelped. "Did you just pinch me?"

She giggled. "Payback."

"Two can play at that game, Miss Josie." I grunted before bouncing a bit so she'd slam into my shoulder.

"Oww!" she complained. She tried to wriggle out of my grasp, but I held her body firmly in place. She finally gave up and slapped my butt.

"Ooh baby, I like it when you get feisty," I said with a grin.

"You are too much, Tyler Jetterson," she huffed out.

"Too much what? Too much fun?" I teased. I pulled open our lobby door and let her body slide down

the front of me 'til she was standing on her own.

“Oh, thank you.” She swayed a bit on her feet and squinted her eyes, like she was trying to see me more clearly. I held her hips, steadying her.

“Jeez, how much did you drink, buddy?” I laughed.

She stomped her foot. “For the love of God, stop calling me buddy,” she shrieked.

I stifled a laugh as she turned on her heel and made her way to the stairwell. I fell in step behind her, and about halfway up the first flight of stairs, she almost toppled face-first into the concrete steps. I caught her waist and hoisted up her limp, giggling body.

“Annnd you’re done,” I said, hooking my arms under her back and knees. This time, instead of fighting, she wrapped her arms around my neck and laid her head against my chest, making me feel about ten feet tall. Damn. I liked her way too much for my own good. I was in deep with this girl.

“Don’t let it go to your head,” she grumbled.

“Don’t let what go to my head?” I was breathing heavier from taking the steps two at a time.

“You know.” She shyly lifted her eyes to mine.

“Oh,” I grinned, “That whole bit about you liking me? And thinking I smell good?”

She groaned and squeezed her eyes shut. “I can’t fight it when I drink my brain cells away.”

I chuckled. “Why fight it? You made my night.”

She sighed and patted my chest. “All my secrets. Woosh! No more Tyler Pirates for me.”

Now I really laughed. “You’re a funny drunk, Miss Josie.”

As soon as we entered her apartment, I maneuvered to her bedroom and tossed her unceremoniously on her bed.

I went to her kitchen to retrieve a glass of water and a bottle of painkillers to put on her bedside table, then leaned back against her bathroom door frame. "Drink," I ordered, nodding to the water.

She sipped it. "You're different," she mumbled.

My eyebrows pinched together. "What do you mean?"

"Different than... the other hockey player," she said quietly.

Needing to touch her, I pushed forward and took her leg in my hand to pull off her boot. "You're gonna have to clarify more than that, Josie girl." I tossed the boot over my shoulder.

Before I even realized what was happening, she was grabbing my t-shirt and pulling me down beside her. I gave in and fell on her comfy bed. Seconds later, she was straddling me with her gorgeous legs.

I held my hands up, not daring to touch her. "Josie, you're drunk," I said flatly.

Her hair hit my face as she came an inch away from me. My body simmered from being underneath her, my groin ached. "Doesn't matter," she said coyly.

"Nope." Twisting my legs around hers, I rolled us back around so I was on top of her. I pinned her wrists together above her head.

Her mouth dropped open. "Tyler Jetterson, you're turning me down again?"

A chuckle punched out of me. "Josephina, you are drunk as a skunk right now and I'm sober as a judge. Either we're both drunk or we're both sober. Your choice."

“You’re so frustrating, Tyler.” She squinted, trying to read me. “What is your middle name?” she demanded.

“Ha! So you can add that in with your teacher-voice? No way.” I let go of her hands and tickled her sides ‘til she went limp. “And remember, you *like* me, Miss Josie,” I teased.

She released a harrumph, looking stubborn as hell that she wasn’t about to get her way.

In a daring move, I brushed her hair back and kissed her forehead. “Goodnight. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

The bed creaked as I stood. I was about to leave, but she reached out and tugged my wrist. “Can’t you just stay?” She implored me with round, puppy dog eyes.

I closed my eyes tightly, hating that I couldn’t just say yes, hating that I needed assurance from her, but needing it all the same. “And what about tomorrow?” I breathed out.

Her eyes searched mine. “You can stay tomorrow too,” she said quietly. “If you, ya know, want.” She shrugged, trying to look neutral.

“Well, that’s a little better I guess,” I chuckled.

She rolled her eyes. “I’m *trying* to be a romantic like you said, but it’s going against everything I’ve been telling myself lately.”

“Hmhmhm,” I responded, not wanting her to think too much or change her mind. I lifted my t-shirt over my head and dropped it to the ground, willing myself not to smile too hard and freak her out, because I absolutely loved that my words got to her.

“You’re kidding me,” she deadpanned.

I looked down. “What?”

She flopped back on her bed and stared at the ceiling. “Guess I need to get back to the gym over this break too.”

That made me laugh. I climbed in bed beside her and pulled her body close. “No you don’t, you’re perfect.”

I’d never held someone like this before, it felt so incredibly intimate. She felt *mine*... but I had to make sure. I needed confirmation before I could fully relax.

“Josie...”

“Hmm...” She turned and traced my jaw with her delicate finger.

“Can you just date me and we can skip over the part where you date a bunch of douchebags to prove me wrong?” She was silent and I suddenly felt way too vulnerable. I played back what I said and felt like I’d just begged her to date me again, and my brain scrambled to make a joke to play it off. “I mean, think about it this way, it’ll be way less clean up for us if we just date each other now, babe.”

Her face cracked. “Clean up?” She swatted me. “Clean up, Tyler? That implies that I’m a mess.”

My eyebrows popped up. “No, but did you not almost bite my head off for wanting to pay for your drinks tonight because of something the last guy said? And let me be clear, I was about to make a huge fucking mess in that bar if that guy took one step closer to you, and that’s my favorite bar, Josie.”

She sighed and patted my cheek. “Thank you for that by the way.”

A protective surge coursed through me, and I pulled her into me. “I wouldn’t let anything bad happen to you, you know that right?”

“Yeah, I do,” she said casually, and that

loosened something in my chest.

“And I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings by turning you down the other night, it’s just, I’ve been that guy in the past. Good enough to hook up with, but not date. I mean, I know there were more factors than that, but that’s what it felt like, ya know?”

She chewed on her bottom lip, contemplating my words. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“It’s okay, the past has a way of running to catch up to us at the worst times.”

She snorted and poked a finger into my chest. “Maybe you, but not me, I’m speedy fast.”

I laughed. “I’m sure you are...” I stared into her eyes and loved that they weren’t so guarded with me anymore. “But some other douchebag from your past is still clearly messing with your head, and you won’t even give me a chance to fix it. He’s why you won’t date anyone who plays hockey. Why are you giving him that power over your life?”

21. Josie

Was I giving Garrett power?

It's almost like Tyler heard the question I asked in my head, because he said, "You're letting him stop you from being happy with me, Josie. Don't give him that."

My throat felt painfully tight and I'm not sure if it was his round honest eyes, or the alcohol that fueled my need to confide in him.

I think he could sense where my head was at, because he slung his arm over my waist, holding my back, and I felt so incredibly safe and close to him.

"Well, it sucks to be the girl being cheated on. It sucks worse when it gets millions of views. The whole world found out before I did, and it felt like everyone was laughing at me. Everyone thinks it's a fun mystery to track down the cheater and the person getting cheated on, but no one thinks about how bad it hurts to read all those comments." My face cracked and I turned away from him. He gathered my hair and stroked my back. My throat burned, but I knew I needed to get it all out in the open right now while I had the courage. I'd never shared all the dirty details with anyone before. "Multiple girls in different cities messaged me after the whole thing came out. He was cheating on me for *two years*. Two full years worth of me being the butt of the joke in a group chat with all his college buddies. And they knew me. I just don't understand that. How did all of them just play along with it? Then I got an anonymous screenshot where he was literally saying he couldn't break up with me because he needed to stay close to my dad so he could make it into the NHL."

"I'm sorry, Josie." He leaned over so he could

see my face and he gently brushed a tear away with his thumb.

I kept my eyes on the wall in front of me because I didn't want to see the pity in Tyler's face. "How was I played for so long?" My voice cracked. "How do you trust someone after that?" I searched his eyes now. I hadn't asked these questions aloud to anyone, but they were thoughts I wrestled with every day. Now I was laying it down at his feet, looking to him for guidance.

"He was a complete asshole. His name was Garrett, right?" he coaxed.

I felt my shoulders slump. I turned and laid on my stomach so he couldn't see me anymore. I shouldn't have expected him to have any answers. "Yeah." I swiped my own tears away. I wasn't crying over losing Garrett. I knew he was an asshole. I was crying over the hurt of it all.

"Garrett... Sanderson?" Tyler tested.

I let out a weird, jumbled noise.

He sighed. "Noted."

I stayed silent.

"Don't worry," Tyler said, placing his heavy hand on my hip and giving it a squeeze, "I'll take care of it, babe."

That had me quickly rolling over to face him.

"Ah-ha, there you are." He smiled, clearly trying to cheer me up.

"You will do no such thing," I told him.

He put a hand through my hair, massaging my head. "I thought I told you your teacher-voice doesn't work on me, babe?"

I rolled my teary eyes.

His hand stilled in my hair and his eyes sobered. “And to answer your questions... How did you get played? That sounds like you’re taking on blame that’s not yours to take. His actions don’t say anything about you. You were willing to love. He was the asshole who took advantage of that, and that’s not your fault at all. And two, you trust someone after that by communicating any and all concerns out loud so we can tackle them together. And we’ll go slow,” he said confidently. “Just let me know when you’re feeling insecure about us and need reassurance.”

I swallowed hard.

“You like hanging out with me, don’t you?”

“Yes.” I traced a finger over his scruff, over the tiny scar extended out of his lip, happy that I could finally touch him. He turned and kissed my hand.

“Then it’s settled,” he said.

“What is?”

“We’re gonna hang out a lot more.”

I bit my lip, still feeling unsure about all of this...

“Let me be the better man, please,” he whispered, pushing a kiss into my hair. “I know I can be who you need. Please give me a shot.”

His voice sounded different, and his statement felt loaded. It was almost like he was begging me for permission to be his full self with me.

“Plus, one good thing about me is that I can’t lie. I have an absolute shit poker face. Growing up, I’d try to lie to Casey, he’d pull me into a headlock, take one look at my face, and he’d know.” He laughed.

“A headlock? Jeez, sounds like a violent childhood.”

“Nah, just a hockey one. Headlocks and locker

boxing solved all our problems. Just throw your helmet and gloves on and duke it out.” He sighed. “Simpler times.”

“Wow.” I snorted. “Maybe us figure skaters should’ve done that instead of just being passive aggressive and catty with each other all the time. We only ever got along during ice show season because we were working together to put on a show instead of competing.”

“That’s when you guys had that big black curtain covering part of the ice and all the lights and the sparkly costumes, right?” he asked.

“Yeah.” The curtain covered the part of the ice where we’d warm-up before the show. “I loved skating in the spotlight.” I smiled thinking about it. “That was my favorite.”

He sucked in his top lip. “Noted.”

“Noted?” I laughed. “What’s that mean?”

He just shrugged. I swatted him on the shoulder, wanting more than that.

“Well, I’m glad we had this little talk,” he said. “Look at us communicating.”

“You’re changing the subject,” I pointed out.

“But to one you’ll like, babe.” He shot me a wink. “Now, when we’re both sober-”

“Or drunk,” I interjected.

“We can take this further,” he finished. “I think sober because I want to as soon as we wake up.”

“Oh my God,” I grumbled and flopped on my back. “Great, now I won’t be able to sleep.”

His body shook with laughter next to mine. “I take it you like that idea.”

I turned to look at him. "Yeah, I think so, but no more hickies." I wagged a finger at him. "Everyone could see this one," I complained.

"Good," he said with a wolfish grin, to which I swatted him again. He pulled me on top of him then, and laying against his bare chest felt more comfortable than my extensive mattress set up that he loved so much.

"Tyler." I raised my head.

"Hmmm?"

I squinted to see better as I reached up and touched his ear. "Do you have a pierced ear?"

His eyes snapped shut and he tried to gently force my head back down. "Time for sleep, G'night," he said immediately.

I laughed out loud. "I'll get that story out of you one way or another," I warned before relaxing back against him.

22. Josie

The next morning, I woke up and rolled over to find a completely empty, cold bed. My heart rate skyrocketed until I saw a crack of light coming from the bathroom door.

He must've heard my bed creaking, because the door quickly popped open and Tyler stood there brushing his teeth, shirtless with his sweatpants hanging off his hips.

I squinted to get a closer look. "Tyler, is that my toothbrush?"

His face split into a shit-eating grin and all the toothpaste made it look like he was foaming at the mouth. "Maybe," he mumbled.

"Ew," I threw a pillow at him, which he snatched in a second. He kept it tucked under his arm and laughed as he turned back into the bathroom to clean his mouth.

Seconds later, he was leaning against the doorframe, his impressive abs on full display. "We're about to do a lot worse, baby." His eyes roamed over my body.

Feeling a bit self-conscious, I tugged my blankets higher.

His eyebrows pinched together. "Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Did you change your mind? About giving us a chance?"

I bit my bottom lip, trying to contain my giddy smile. "Nope."

He grinned so hard I could see his dimple. “Then why the hell are you covering up?” He stalked toward the bed, grabbed my ankles, and pulled me down the bed so I laid at the edge of it.

I giggled at his eagerness, but my giggling quickly stopped when he kissed me full on the lips and his hands roamed to the exact spots I needed them, almost like he already knew more about my body than I even knew myself.

“So beautiful, Josie,” he whispered against my skin as I completely lost myself in him.

After our stomachs started growling, we finally decided to leave bed and find some breakfast. He led me through the downtown streets to a cute hole-in-the-wall bakery, and I thought we were going to stay there, but he surprised me by ordering take-out.

“I want you to myself,” he whispered in a husky voice that sent shivers down to my toes.

Now we were back in my bed eating our feast and throwing questions at each other while reruns of *New Girl* played in the background.

“Favorite kind of day?” I asked him.

“In bed with the girl of my dreams,” he said, shooting me a wink.

I nudged his shoulder. “I mean outside, dufus.”

“Oof,” he pulled a sour face. “Let’s retire the term ‘dufus,’” he said carefully. “Your dad calls me that all the damn time.”

That made me burst out laughing, and he couldn’t tamper down his own chuckles either. I would definitely *not* be retiring that word.

“Okay, I like freezing cold, blue sky days,” he

answered, shoving his last syrupy forkful in his mouth.

“Hmm, those are underrated. I like summer nights where you can wear a hoodie and shorts. What’s your sign?”

“Aries,” he said. “Yours?”

I moved our takeout boxes away. “Makes sense.” I could’ve guessed his birthday was toward the beginning of the year. Hockey players grew up competing against other kids in their birth year, and it’s always assumed that gave the older guys a leg up. If you looked at an NHL roster, you’d notice most players were born between January and March, but there were definitely underdogs in the league proving that theory wrong.

He arched a skeptical eyebrow “Does it?”

“Yes, you’re very passionate, strong-willed, you love the chase, you love to be number one, which is clearly apparent with hockey. And…”

“What?”

“You’re kind of domineering,” I teased.

A wolfish grin slid on his face, and in a second, he pulled my body down and he was overtop of me, sucking and kissing my neck.

“Ow!” I cackled, playfully shoving his head away.

He buried his arms under me to hold my waist and laid his head on my stomach, spreading out on the bed. “What’s your sign?”

“Gemini,” I responded.

He lifted his head and eyed me fearfully. “Aren’t gemini’s crazy?”

“No, jerk.” I swatted his head. “It means sometimes I’m super introverted and chill, sometimes I—”

“Sometimes you snap.” He nodded. “Called it. And baby, I loved that crazy you displayed in that dickbag’s apartment. Hot as hell.”

“Oh shush.” I waved his words away, laughing. “I think our signs are pretty compatible actually.”

He sighed dramatically and laid his head back on my stomach. “Been sayin’ that for years, babe,” he said exaggeratingly, making me chuckle. He had a way of making me feel completely light and happy. I ran my fingers through his hair, and he nestled further into me. I wondered if he’d act all cuddly and affectionate like this in front of his boys or if he was just like this because it was only us.

“Okay, what’s something you hate?” I asked.

“Change,” he answered immediately.

My eyebrows popped up. “That was fast.”

He smirked sheepishly and shrugged his large shoulders. “I thought I had everything perfect before, but *now* I have everything perfect.” He lifted my shirt and smacked a noisy, messy kiss on my stomach, tickling me in the process. “What’s something you hate?” he asked.

I pondered it for a moment. “Storms.”

“Really? That surprises me. I like falling asleep to the sound.”

I shuddered. “Absolutely not. It wasn’t bad when I lived at home, but I have a feeling I’ll really hate living alone when the next storm hits.”

He hugged me tighter. “Nah, I promise I’ll keep you company.”

A giddy smile tugged at my lips.

“I have a question for you, and the answer is very important...” he drawled.

“Oh?” I smoothed a thumb over his bushy

eyebrow.

“Favorite movie?”

I rolled my eyes. “Well, I know what you’re going to say.”

“Me? I asked you,” he pointed out.

“Yeah, but every millennial guy thinks *The Dark Knight* is a masterpiece.”

His body froze.

“You were totally going to say that!” I teased. “Weren’t you?” I poked his side.

“It’s a great movie, okay?” he defended. “That line about dying a hero or living long enough to see yourself become a villain? Cinematic gold, babe. I felt that line deep in my bones.”

I laughed and patted his stomach. “So deep, babe.”

“Mean. I bet I can guess your favorite too, Ms. Millennial.”

I arched an eyebrow.

“The Notebook,” he tested.

“RRR, wrong. Although I do love that movie. Actually, I think I just love all the love *around* that movie.” I sighed. “Long live Ryan Gosling and Rachel McAdams. Their kiss at the 2005 MTV award show? Absolute perfection. The song, the outfits, the chemistry, and the way he continued holding her after the kiss? Swooooon.”

His brow furrowed like I was speaking a different language.

“You have to look it up to get it. My tween-self felt their kiss through the screen. That’s a secret though,” I added quickly. “I technically wasn’t allowed to be watching MTV at the time, but my older sisters were

obsessed.” I laughed thinking about those days when I’d sneak behind the couch to spy on what they were watching. They totally knew I was back there too because they always brought extra snacks over to the living room and they’d place them where I could easily snatch them.

“Alright, I gotta see what I’m competing with,” he grumbled while reaching for his phone, making me laugh. But as he was typing it into YouTube, he paused. His forehead creased. “Did you hear that?”

I reached for the clicker and muted the TV. I could definitely make out muffled yelling. “Is that coming from the hallway?”

Tyler frowned as he climbed off the bed and quickly padded to my door.

“You were making kids cry, Claire! This is exactly what I warned you about!” I heard a guy’s voice boom. I quickly hopped out of bed and glued myself to Tyler’s side in the doorway.

A guy and girl, around our age, were leaning toward each other, both red in the face, screaming at each other in the hall. I could tell the guy was a hockey player in two seconds because all hockey guys kind of walked and carried themselves in a similar way. I always wondered if hockey caused that or if it was from all of them hanging around each other so often that they all started mimicking each other. The girl standing opposite him had impressive muscles, making me think she was either a gymnast or figure skater. She was decked out in lululemon workout clothes, and her blonde hair was neatly pulled into a low bun. They both looked vaguely familiar. I figured the guy must’ve been a teammate of Tyler’s, but I couldn’t place where I knew her from.

“No, they were not crying!” the girl snapped back furiously.

“Yes, they were!” the guy flung his arms out.

“Well, then they’re soft and need to toughen up!” she yelled back.

“No, they don’t! They’re kids, Claire!” he yelled incredulously. “You need to take it easy! You’re way too intense. That was good for you as an athlete, but you can’t do that as a coach. Other people operate differently than you. You’re gonna mess them all up and make them wanna quit.”

Now I remembered. She and her skating partner were pictured on the front of a Wheaties box about a year ago. They went on to win a gold medal in the last Olympics.

“Dude,” Tyler warned his teammate with a hard glare and quick shake of the head.

Claire stole the pause in the argument to march forward and shove the other guy. Her face crumpled in tears, and he froze in shock, looking like if he reached out for her, she’d break, and he had no clue how to fix what happened between them.

Tyler placed a hand at the small of my back and grimaced. “I should probably...”

I nodded quickly and patted his stomach. “Yeah, go.”

When he leaned down to press a kiss into my hair, we oddly felt like a team, and I kinda hated to see him leave, but I knew his friend needed him. And deep down, I knew the type of guy who stayed with me when his friend was in need like this wouldn’t be the kind of guy I wanted anyway...

Tyler grabbed the hood of the guys’ sweatshirt and roughly shoved him into the elevator. The girl was left alone in the hallway. She covered her eyes and let out a frustrated screech before her shoulders slumped, making her look defeated. I knew the feeling.

“Wanna come in?” I spoke up hesitantly. “We could make mimosas?” I offered.

She wiped a hand under her eyes and looked at me warily. “I wouldn’t want to interrupt.”

I eyed the elevator, then her. She seemed like a girl who pulled no punches and would appreciate honesty. I scratched my head. “No offense, but you kinda already did.”

She laughed despite her teary eyes and walked toward me. “I’m sorry, we totally did.”

Claire appeared as a bubbly, kind girl, but underneath, she was a hot-headed athlete. We had many similarities, starting with growing up skating. I quit at eighteen, where she was just now retiring, but I could sympathize with the difficulty of pivoting your life after you finished competing. And it was kind of nice that I was able to pick her brain for details about Tyler.

“Oh, I’ve known Tyler for years. Like since...” she mentally tallied back the years. “Kindergarten, I think?”

“Really? What was he like?” I asked curiously.

“Honestly?” Her eyes slid to mine. “A very cute, spiky-haired terror. But that’s because when the boys messed with me, it got Duke riled up, and riling up Duke was their favorite pastime. Duke is a bit of a loose cannon, always has been, which is something I both love and hate about him.”

“Well at least you guys aren’t apathetic toward each other?” I offered. Apathetic was the defining term of what Garrett and I had.

“No, definitely not,” she sighed. “It’s fireworks, always. Just... sometimes that firework topples over and blows us up right along with it.” She shook her head.

“You and Tyler though, when did that happen?”

“Last night,” I said, gulping down the rest of my mimosa.

Her eyebrows popped up in surprise. “Well, that’s great. I’m honestly so happy for him. He’s such a sweet guy. He helped me and Duke get together a couple summers ago, he tried, at least. And he helped his brother and my sister patch things up. He seems to know when people belong together, and he tries to cut the crap and make it happen. He loves love.”

I smiled because I could totally see that about him.

23. Tyler

Duke paced back and forth in our living room like a caged animal while my roommates and I lounged on our sectional trying to watch Sportscenter on the TV behind him. “Ask Josie for help, please,” he urged me.

“No,” I scoffed. “Are you crazy? I just got a chance with her. I’m not gonna blow it just because you need a favor.”

He stopped and pushed the heel of his hands into his eyes. “It’s my marriage, dude.”

I rubbed my forehead, contemplating my options. Duke was just gonna continue asking me to reach out to Josie every two seconds, and if I did it now, I could at least phrase it in my own way instead of running the risk of him stealing my phone to text her. “Fine,” I resigned, “what do you want me to say?”

His body sagged in relief. “Thanks, man. I owe you. I really do.” He pointed to my phone. “Okay, ask her if Claire is just mad or *mad* mad. She’ll know what it means.”

I quickly texted her: *Duke wants to know if Claire is just mad or mad mad.*

My phone dinged almost immediately.

Josie: *She says mad mad. I’m team Claire by the way.*

I responded: *Oh I am too. Believe me. Like actually, please believe I think that too.*

A second later, she sent back a laughing face.

“Dude, Jetts, cut it with the googly-eyes. I need you to focus,” Duke snapped. He finally stopped pacing and turned to us with a grave look etched on his face. “I

have to go with the back up plan, boys.”

Garcia caught my eye. We were thinking the same thing. Duke didn't need a plan, he needed to be stopped.

“Maybe you should run it by Case first. He's our voice of reason,” I advised him.

“No,” he was shaking his head, pacing again. “He'll just say no.”

My eyes widened. “Then duh, maybe you shouldn't.”

“Nope. It's perfect.” He stood a bit straighter. “It's a shortcut to getting some face time with her and getting back in her good graces. It must be done.” He pulled out his phone.

I sucked in my top lip, contemplating whether or not I should let him further fuck up his marriage.

“I made a fake account,” he said.

All three of us on the couch groaned.

“Guys, this is good,” Duke urged.

I dropped my head between my knees and rubbed my temples. This was *not* good. This was very, very bad.

“Don't act like that. Listen to me first,” he pleaded. “I made a fake account posing as that high end salon in downtown that she loves. I told her she won a free blow out. Claire loves getting that done before date nights. And it's like Pavlov, ya know? She'll go to the salon, then she'll feel like going on a date with me.”

I rubbed my forehead. “I don't know if that's such a good idea, man.”

“It's perfect. I saw some guys do it on Tiktok and it really worked. I told her the time, and when she goes, I'll be waiting there so I can talk to her.”

“Bad idea,” Hassik said.

“Well, what else am I supposed to do?” he asked, the tips of his ears were reddening up with frustration. “I’m talking about my relationships here, guys. Desperate times call for desperate measures.”

My teammates eyed me warily, but it seemed Duke made up his mind, and as someone who’s known him since kindergarten, I knew it couldn’t be changed.

“Okay, fine. But when this blows up in your face, I’ll be here to say I told you so,” I warned.

“It wont,” he said, tapping away on his phone.

“Fine.” But an uneasy feeling settled in my stomach.

24. Josie

“Ooh I just won two free hair appointments for this afternoon,” Claire yelped.

“Really? From where?” I asked skeptically.

“Bella Boutique, you know it?”

“What?” I pulled her phone from her hands to look at the message. “That’s my sister’s place. I didn’t think she did giveaways.” I studied the Instagram message, and it looked like a complete scam.

Claire’s face hardened. “It couldn’t be...”

“Here, wait, let me call my sister,” I told her. I quickly dialed up Clara and she answered on the second ring.

“Josie! How’s the new place? Mom said there’s plenty of hunky-”

“Clara,” I cut her off, “we have an important question.”

“Shoot,” my sister’s voice was all business now.

I quickly explained the situation, then my sister checked with her social media manager.

After two minutes on the phone, I mouthed to Claire, “It’s a trap.”

Claire’s jaw set and she pushed off my couch to leave, but I caught her wrist and tugged her back down.

“Wait, let’s think about this...” I drawled. “Why don’t you play him back?”

Her face morphed into a look of determination. “I like the way you think, Josie.”

I arched an eyebrow. “Well, it was for two

appointments, and we're both sitting here, so I'm in on this now."

25. Tyler

I stood next to Duke in front of the salon, rubbing my hands together and blowing on them to keep warm. We'd been waiting about fifteen minutes out here in the freezing cold because Duke was convinced Claire usually showed up early to appointments.

I only went with him just in case things went super south and I needed to play peacemaker. The two of them had their share of fights through the years, but this one seemed worse than usual because Claire was on shaky footing. I'd never seen her break down and cry in front of me like she had this morning. She was usually the one who desperately tried to hide all tears— even when she broke her wrist in the weight room back in high school, I think her eyes only slightly misted because she didn't want to come across as a baby.

“Remember, you have to remain calm. She's going through a lot right now,” I warned Duke.

He nodded. His whole body hummed with nervous energy, and it was making me feel uneasy.

As soon as Claire turned onto our block, my heart beat faster... Because Josie flanked her side... She must've just been supporting Claire in the same way I was supporting Duke.

I slowly turned to Duke. He kept his eyes trained on the girls, but his tongue darted to the side as he licked his lips, all but confirming he was nervous.

Claire's jaw angled to the side as she walked toward us and Josie gazed back at me with a confused look etched on her face. My girl had a red tipped nose and her shoulders were scrunched up from the cold. The urge to pull her into a warm hug hit me like a ton of bricks, but I stayed in my place considering how

awkward that'd be to do in front of Duke and Claire, who weren't even talking right now.

Duke stepped forward and pointed an index finger at the ground. "Claire, I am sorry, but we just need to talk this out, right now."

Claire smoothed her blonde hair off her shoulder. "*We* have free appointments," she said.

I turned on Duke with a murderous glare. "*We?*" I shoved him. "You roped *my* girl into your stupid plan? What the fuck, man?"

"Yes, free appointments *to talk to us!*" Duke called over me.

I spun around to face the girls. "Josie, I didn't know he was going to include you," I said desperately. "I thought this was for Claire. I'm just here because—"

Duke shoved me back and stood a little taller, but his face faltered a bit. "I'm your husband, Claire. You have to talk to me," he demanded with crazed eyes.

She laughed out loud in his face, grabbed Josie's arm, and whisked her toward the salon door.

"But... but you don't actually have appointments," Duke said, looking dumbfounded.

Claire pursed her lips. "Looks like we're about to make them ourselves now. I'm thinking I may need some *big* changes," she said.

"C'mon, babe, you... You don't need..." Duke struggled for words.

I pushed him aside. "Josie, I'm sorry, you don't need to change anything. I wasn't a part of this. *Please* believe me," I said desperately.

But then they were inside, laughing and waving at us.

Duke looked like someone just kicked his puppy.

“Fuck. I think we just made it worse,” he mumbled.

That practically lit me on fire. “*We? We* made it worse?” I shouted at him.

26. Josie

I sat on the plush couch in the waiting area and accepted a little flute of champagne. Claire and I could see the boys arguing outside the window. They were pushing each other back and forth, then suddenly had their arms wrapped around each other and were stumbling back and forth.

“Should we stop them?” I asked hesitantly.

Claire giggled. “No, only if punches are thrown above the neck, that’s the rule we grew up with. Tyler looks like he’s about to beat his ass, which he deserves,” she said with a snort. “Duke played himself.”

I blinked for a second at her words. She really did grow up with all the boys because that was never a rule I was made aware of growing up.

Tyler finally pulled away from Duke and held a hand to his head like he was thinking. A second later, he placed his hands in his pockets and turned to the window looking deflated. He faced me and mouthed, “I am sorry. It wasn’t me.”

Now I felt a bit bad using such a convincing poker face with him. I shrugged and gave him a small smile to reassure him that I wasn’t mad. He had nothing to be sorry for. We were simply caught in the crosshairs of a Duke and Claire battle.

“He thought he was so smart.” Claire laughed haughtily while flipping through a glossy magazine. “He hates when I change my hair.”

“Huh?”

“I had blonde hair when I was a kid and he always loved it, but when he left me in the dust at sixteen, I dyed it pitch black just to spite him. He now

associates me changing my hair with being in the dog house.”

“I get that. My last ex was always begging me to go blonder. Said girls were only pretty if they were blonde.”

Claire’s mouth dropped open. “He said that? Sounds like he was a total douche. Actually, let me rephrase, he sounds like an old geezer skating judge. The last couple years, my coaches forced me to go for a natural look because that’s what the judges like.”

I could easily tell she was struggling to find her footing after retiring. She needed to start living for herself instead of for a sport. “Ya know, you’re kind of in the perfect place right now for going through a breakup. As soon as I broke up with Garrett, I drove right here. Making a change for myself made me feel better.” I shrugged.

She laughed. “Nah, me and Duke will be fine. I love the shit out of that dummy.”

“No, I mean, you’re going through a breakup with skating. Quitting or retiring from a sport is the same as breaking free of a toxic relationship. But think about it this way– it might be fun to start living without skating impacting all your choices,” I told her.

She dropped the magazine in her lap. “Yeah. I just don’t...”

“Huh?”

“I don’t even know what I like.” Her eyes glassed over.

I nodded but stayed silent. I knew from teaching how important it was to give people ‘wait time’ to gather their thoughts.

“Like do I even like working out? Or was that just for skating? Do I even like these clothes? Or did I buy

them all just because I could skate in them?”

“I get that completely. But maybe you just need to relax a bit. It seems like you’re putting a lot of pressure on yourself to figure it out *right now*, which is skating’s fault. Skating trained our brains to be that way.”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, skating made us feel a sense of urgency in life. We had to peak and make it as soon as possible so we wouldn’t run out of years to make it to the Olympics. I was called old and over the hill at like fifteen,” I rolled my eyes, “but with life, it isn’t a race. We have time. You need to give your brain and body a chance to slow down and figure it out. And as for Duke, he’s probably trying to help, but he doesn’t know how. With hockey, they were starting big moments in their careers at 15 while we were practically old news by then.”

“Wow,” she breathed out. “How did you sum that up so perfectly?”

I laughed. “I’ve thought about it a lot over the years, and I see kids in my classroom going through the same thing during their senior years,” I told her. “It affects every athlete at some point. Life changes, your body changes. The sport vs. athlete breakup is inevitable, whether you go through it at 15 or 40.”

Her lips twisted. “You’re right. I guess I am in the perfect place right now.” She smoothed her hand on the velvet salon couch. But enough about me. What about you? You gonna get an appointment too?”

“Eh,” I shrugged. “I’m still liking my brunette era,” I said as I caught my reflection in one of the many mirrors. Besides, Tyler’s voice from this morning telling me how much he hated change echoed in my head and I didn’t want to rock the boat just yet.

And change is what she did... An hour and a half later, Claire walked into the lobby with newly dyed pale pink hair cut into a cute lob.

When she went to pay, my sister told her it was on the house, but Claire insisted.

“This is on Duke. He’s the one who faked this whole thing, he needs to learn his lesson to never do that again. I still need to figure out what to say to him,” she said, anxiously tapping her foot.

“Wanna procrastinate a little more? Come back to my apartment?” I asked her. “Make the boys wonder what we’re talking about?”

She looked at me with a spark in her eye. “Ooh, I like the way you think, Josie. Yes.” As soon as her card was handed back, she grabbed my arm and whisked me away to tug me along.

On the sidewalk back to our apartment complex, Claire suddenly asked, “Wanna have a pre-game party and then go out? I’m just thinking... I don’t have to be up early for practice tomorrow and I wanna show off my new look. So why the fuck not?”

I rolled my lips together. I was hoping for another date with Tyler, but Claire needed some support. Besides, where Claire went, Duke was sure to follow, which meant I’d probably be running into Tyler anyway. “I mean, we totally could. I’m on break right now so no school for me, and I only have to monitor the rink tomorrow afternoon, and I could do that hungover... But I don’t have anything to wear. I only have like two cute outfits and I just used ‘em both up. I only have cardigans and teacher clothes left,” I said with a cringe.

“Oh that’s no problem. First we need to find out if my apartment is in the clear because I do not want to face him yet. Can you ask Tyler where Duke is?”

I quickly shot off a text to Tyler: *Where are you guys? We want to get clothes from Claire's place but she doesn't want to bump into Duke.*

He immediately texted back: *Are you mad at me? I'm sorry, that wasn't my idea.*

I punched out No with a laughing face, then added: *I think we were just caught in their crosshairs... but where are you guys?*

Tyler: *I just invited him up to my place... give it a couple minutes... can I see you?*

Me: *No! I have to stand in solidarity with Claire right now. Sorry!*

Fifteen minutes later, we were raiding Claire's walk-in closet.

She threw me in a corset type shirt with lace covering the stomach. "Wow. I never dress like this."

"All the more reason to." Her voice sounded muffled from her basically being lost in the rack of clothes.

I quickly tried it on, and it was clear that it was a bit too small for me up top. "Are you sure it isn't too low?" I asked her in a wary voice.

She popped her head out from the rack. "Oh my God, that was made for you! Absolutely not. Gah, I wish I had your boobs," she said, looking down at her own chest.

"I wish I had yours," I threw back.

"And be in the itty bitty titty committee with me? Nah, flaunt it, girl."

“But everything fits you. I swear they don’t make clothes for my size,” I complained.

“You need to own the fact that you’re spilling out.” She reached up on her tiptoes to grab a shirt from the top of the shelf. Multiple sweatshirts fell on her head as she pulled a shirt down.

I looked down self-consciously. “I’m spilling out?”

She laughed. “Tyler will lose his mind when he sees you in that.” And that... didn’t quite sound bad. “Here, put these jeans with it... Oh, and these boots.” She handed me black jeans and studded cowboy boots.

My eyebrows popped up. “You sure?”

“Definitely. Keep them if you want. Now,” she rubbed her hands together, “let’s invite the other girls over to your place too.”

She was already moving toward the bathroom with a stack of clothes to try on.

“Other girls?” I asked.

“Yeah, the other girlfriends on the team,” she threw over her shoulder. A minute later, she walked out of the bathroom in a sparkly black crop top, short leather skirt, and white boots. “Duke will *hate* that I’m wearing this for a girls’ night and not for him,” she smiled smugly.

A half hour later, we had the music blasting, wine flowing, and girls dressed to the nines streaming in my apartment door.

I stood in the kitchen with Claire, cutting up meat and cheese in an attempt at making a charcuterie board.

“I’ve never hosted anything before,” I whispered to Claire, feeling a giddy bubble of excitement in my chest. My usual nights consisted of holing myself up in my bedroom at my parents’ house reading romances.

Now, for once, it felt like I was finally being included in the real world, where whirl-wind romance could actually happen.

She smiled and tucked a pink strand of her hair behind her ear. “Honestly? Me neither, but I really like this.”

“Me too,” I said, clinking my wine glass to hers.

27. Tyler

“What the actual fuck, Duke?” Reggie complained, pausing the video game we were playing. About five of us were online playing against each other, but we basically used the headsets as walkie-talkie conference calls sometimes. “Now *my* girl is going to join Claire in solidarity. What’d you do?”

I slid my gaze to Duke, who’d been sitting on the opposite end of our living room sectional stewing in personal misery all afternoon, but those words perked him right up. “What do you mean? Claire’s back?” he said, standing up.

“She’s back, and now our girls are all leaving us,” Whitty chimed in. “Suzie just went downstairs too.”

Duke’s face scrunched up. “What? Downstairs where?”

“I thought they were going to your place?” Reggie asked.

Duke stuck his tongue out the side of his mouth, his thinking face— I was used to seeing it during face-offs for years. He shook his head. “No.”

“They’re at Josie’s.” I clenched my jaw, trying to contain my frustration. Because now I wasn’t allowed to go down and see her either because of Duke.

“Who the hell is Josie?” Reggie asked.

“Tyler’s girl,” Duke threw back.

“Elevator girl!?” Campbell asked.

“Yes,” I bit out harshly, trying to shut down any further questioning. “And her name is Josie.” My hard work finally landed me a chance with her and I only got *one* fucking morning. Duke seemed determined to blow it

for me before we even started.

“Well, we’re not invited,” TJ declared. “I started getting ready to go with Ellie and she stopped me.”

“Fix it with Claire, dude. You’re affecting all of us now,” Reggie said to Duke.

“Great,” Duke said sarcastically, then eyed me. “What do we do?”

“I know what we should do... Stop being so girl crazy and play the fucking game,” Campbell complained.

“Oooh, someone’s on the outs with Quinn,” Whitty teased. “And I heard she’s going to this little apartment party too.”

“Shut up,” Campbell breathed out, but then he added. “Are you serious?”

“Yeah, it’s right here on my snapchat. She’s definitely with the rest of the girls.”

“Why the fuck is my girl on your snapchat?” Campbell threw back tersely.

“Um, duh? She’s my friend,” Whitty retorted. “I hear all her gossip these days, and I heard she’s not *your* girl anymore.”

That got Campbell riled up. “You don’t know a damn—”

“Wait... I have an idea,” I cut in. “We can’t ambush them,” I shot a look of annoyance at Duke. “We need to join strategically. You guys who aren’t in the doghouse go first. Bring in food. She’s apartment 202. There’s no way they have good food, prolly just that charcootie shit, if anything. Bring the good greasy stuff, get pizza or something. Now here’s what’s really important: we need you guys to go in there and be super caring. Love up on your girls. Grab their asses, whisper in their ears, lean in doorways, and look at them like you’re undressing with your eyes. All the things girls

love. Make Claire miss Duke.”

Everyone was silent for a minute.

“Wait, girls like when we lean in doorways?” Campbell asked.

I sighed. Tonight was a lost cause.

“What are you getting in all this?” Reggie finally asked skeptically.

I shrugged even though he couldn’t see me. “Josie loves that romance stuff and I want her to want me.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” Whitty said, and then we could hear him bounding down the stairs.

A minute later we heard him say, “Heya Claire, you look different tonight. Do something with your hair?” He let out a relaxed chuckle.

Duke’s eyes bulged. “Different?” he mouthed at me.

“This is a girls’ night,” we all heard Claire yell through his headset.

“I already told you! Girls only, Whitty! You’re banished!” Suzie chimed in, and then a door slammed on him.

“You guys hear that?” Whitty grumbled.

“Yeah, Claire’s voice sounded tipsy already,” Duke said, throwing down the controller.

“Uh... guys... Char’s putting on her red bottom shoes. She’s not staying at no apartment party, boys. She’s goin’ out tonight,” Reggie whispered.

Fuck.

“Find out where she’s going,” I advised. “For safety.”

“Yeah, add for safety,” Duke said.

“Hey baby,” Reggie said in a deep flirty voice. “I gotta know where you’re going. Just in case you need me to come get you.”

“It’s a girls’ night, Reg. We’re going to the Blitz.”

Duke’s mouth dropped open and his eyes bulged out. “That’s *our* bar!” he mouthed.

I shook my head at him to calm down and shut it. We didn’t own the bar.

“Okay boys, we’re shifting,” I said, formulating a new plan. “I’ll text Adrienne that we need a booth and bottle service. The girls won’t be able to resist us.”

“Won’t they be mad if we crash?” Campbell asked warily.

“Nah. Let’s give them a bit of time by themselves so they can miss us. Then they’ll be happy,” I answered, hoping I was right.

When Reggie asked what I had in this for me, I didn’t want to fully explain my motives, but I knew I had work to do tonight. I needed to seal the deal with Josie and cement that she was mine and let everyone know at the same time. I had to kiss away all her remaining fears and prove to her that I was here to stay.

28. Josie

Hearing the way these girls talked about their boyfriends made me long for the comfort of partnership... And Tyler's grin popped to the forefront of my mind. Thinking of him this morning made a bubble of happiness rise in my chest. Because the thought of building a life with him like these girls had with their guys sounded nice. And maybe it was just that Tyler basically gave the romantic in me permission to come out, permission to dream, because I was suddenly thinking it'd be nice to have funny stories to tell, to have someone to go on weekend trips and adventures with, and to have someone to cuddle with at night... And I confidently wanted it to be him.

But now that I admitted to myself how much I wanted him, the nerves took over. I looked around The Blitz, remembering how nice it was that he totally had my back the other night... But what if I messed it all up tonight? What if-

"What's up girly?" Claire nudged me. "You look way too tense."

I sucked in my top lip, wondering if I should confide in her... How was she *not* tense? She just cut half her hair off and dyed it bubble gum pink with no fear over what her husband would think. I wanted that kind of security. I chugged the rest of my vodka sprite then blurted out, "I'm falling for him."

"Yesss!" Claire shouted out a bit too loudly, making the other girls look at me now. "Embrace it." She wrapped her arms around me. I couldn't help but laugh. She was already almost wasted. "Let love *win*. You should tell him."

"But what if--"

“No what if’s,” Charlize said sternly, shaking her head. She was dressed in a red suit jacket over a sleek black dress paired with Louboutin shoes. If her outfit didn’t give away that she was a lawyer, her words definitely did. “We don’t deal in hypotheticals. And you shouldn’t be nervous. You say you’re falling, and ya know what? A boy will let you fall right on your ass. But a man? A man will love catching you. So, is Tyler a boy or man?” She arched a sharp eyebrow.

“True,” Ellie piped in. “And a man won’t let a good thing fall through his fingers. When I tried to dump TJ because of my own fears, he was stubborn as hell about it.” She laughed. “He followed me all the way back to northern Michigan to talk it out with me.”

I tried to swallow down my fear as talk moved to the Crewmen’s next charity gala. But Suzie leaned in and whispered to me, “Don’t worry. I’ve seen the way he looks at you, he’s already a goner, and your look tonight will just push him over the edge,” she said with a laugh.

Whitney Houston’s ‘I Wanna Dance with Somebody’ started playing and Claire threw down the rest of her drink. “Let’s go ladies!” she yelled, making her way out to the dance floor.

“It’s her song!” Char called out exaggeratingly, rolling her eyes, but that didn’t stop her from running out to join Claire on the dance floor.

We were all dancing in the colorful lights and having a great time... until a line of insanely attractive muscular men came walking into the bar, making us pause. It seemed like every girl in the place was now staring at them, and I couldn’t blame them. The guys had a way of commanding attention in their strides. They gave off pure masculine energy, and they looked like leaders, like guys you could lean on, and that’s what made them attractive.

The rest of the guys went to the booth, but Tyler

broke away from the group and made a beeline to the dance floor.

I thought he was coming over to us, but instead, he went right up to the DJ and whispered in his ear.

The girls all looked around our little circle, confused.

Seconds later, Maroon 5's 'She Will Be Loved' started floating through the air, and Tyler still didn't walk over to me. Instead, his long stride carried him across the dance floor. He made a big show of sticking a piece of gum in his mouth.

He wasn't going to...

Oh. My. God.

He was.

He jumped a couple times and cracked his neck, a boyish grin playing on his face.

"Oh My God! He's Notebooking you!" Claire practically shrieked, so I guess I wasn't the only one who fantasized about that 2005 MTV award show kiss. "Go to him," she said, nudging me.

Tyler hooked a finger toward me, beckoning me forward.

I couldn't contain the cheesy ass smile on my face. I handed my drink over to one of the girls, made a point of stripping off my jacket and then hiked my tank top up a bit. My body hummed with a nervous energy, like I could feel the attraction to him straight down to my toes. This guy. Was he straight out of a dream? I couldn't even believe what was happening.

As he started stalking toward me, I matched his pace, and then ended up running the last few steps. I jumped into his arms, and he not only caught me, but leaned back and lifted me with his strong hold, making me feel exactly like Rachel McAdams.

When our lips crashed, it was earth shattering. And maybe it was the song, maybe it was the way I could feel his heart beating against mine, or maybe it was my tipsy brain, but it felt like the world tilted on its axis, tipping me out of control, out of power. Because with that kiss, he owned me, and I loved it.

“Get a room!” his boys shouted, and I could hear the girls all clapping and shouting out behind us.

He was kissing me in the middle of a crowded room. And I didn’t even care because the kiss was all consuming. He grabbed my hair and tugged, like he never wanted to let go. Like he could stand here holding and kissing me all night, and I’d never felt so cherished, so wanted in my entire life.

When we finally separated, his tongue darted out to lick his lips. “Damn girl,” he rasped as he continued holding me.

He walked us back over toward the girls before letting me slide down his body. His eyes drifted over me, taking me in. His hand cupped my butt and his fingers lingered there, possessively holding me. “So, did I do it right?” he whispered with a cute blush on his face.

“Woo,” Suzie fanned her face. “I guess that answers that, girls!” They all giggled, and I felt my own face heating up.

“I think I need to go find TJ,” Ellie giggled, excusing herself.

“And where the fuck is Reggie? I want my Notebook kiss,” Char complained, stomping her red-bottomed shoe before striding off to find her man.

Tyler leaned down to whisper in my ear. “That answers what?”

When my eyes shifted, but I didn’t answer, he pulled me into him and squeezed my waist. “Waiting baby,” he whispered in a husky voice.

I rolled my eyes, but couldn't stop a grin, because my heart was so damn happy. I turned in his arms to face him. "If you were a boy or man."

He laughed out loud and hugged me flush against him. "Oh, I'm all man, baby. You feel me right now?" His eyebrows wagged.

I swear a blush flamed my entire body, but I loved having that effect on him.

"How did that come up?" he asked.

"I may have admitted I was nervous about falling for you," I said sheepishly, rolling my eyes.

His face split into a shit-eating grin. "You're falling for me, eh?"

I swatted his shoulder. "Don't look all gloaty."

"Oh, I'm gonna gloat," he snickered.

"If you say I told you so, I swear I'll—"

He reached his hand into my hair and pulled so my face angled to his. "You'll what?" he teased, then he kissed me again and I melted into him.

He chuckled when he pulled back. "After that big change comment and Claire's influence, I totally thought I was gonna walk in here and see you with a buzz cut or somethin'."

I looped my arms around his neck and laughed. "Oh yeah? And what would you have said?"

He flattened his lips in thought then covered my hair with his hands. He assessed in mock-seriousness. "You could pull it off." His lips twisted like he was a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

"What?" I poked him.

He grinned. "I'd miss pulling your hair a little."

I rolled my eyes but laughed. "Just a little, eh?" I

patted his chest. “Not gonna lie though, I was nervous to do anything because you said you hated change. I didn’t want to do anything to make you not like me. My last ex was insistent that I always go blonder.”

He paused and sucked in his top lip, thinking for a minute. “I am not him,” he said in a low, gentle voice. “I’ll keep proving it to you every day, Josie.” He stroked my hair behind my ear. “And when I say I don’t like change, I mean...” He dipped his head to whisper in my ear, “I don’t want you to change your heart, your sassiness, your kindness. But you know what won’t ever change?”

I lifted my eyebrows.

“How I feel about you. You might still be falling right now, but just know that I’m all in, baby,” he said, before kissing my neck, practically making my knees buckle.

“Seriously? Again?” one of his teammates called out. “Get a room, Jettersen!”

“Yeah, quit it, you’re making us look bad, Jetts!” another guy yelled out.

His body shuddered with laughter, and I felt his smile against my lips. I never wanted this night to end.

We danced the whole night away together, and most of the boys joined the dance floor. Claire and Duke started grinding rather suggestively in the middle of everyone, so I assumed they were okay again. The only guy who didn’t join was a defenseman named Brody, who hung around the bar talking to Adrienne.

Every time I walked away with one of the girls to either go to the bathroom or grab a new drink, I could feel Tyler’s eyes on me, no matter who he was talking to

at the moment.

I'd peek over my shoulder and his eyes would flash and he'd mouth something ridiculous like, "I want you. Right now," making me feel all hot and giggly.

At some point in the night, Tyler grabbed my wrist and pulled me toward the dark hallway at the back of the bar. I never broke rules, I never rebelled or took any risks, but with him tugging me to follow, I felt like I'd go anywhere, do anything for this thrill in my chest to continue.

He backed me against the wall so we were out of sight, and suddenly his hands were all over, grabbing me, pulling me in. His hard body pushed against mine, and my dizzy brain was lost in him. His hand snaked up my shirt, and that's when worry bloomed up in my chest and I broke the kiss.

"Wait, Tyler, someone might find us. We should really-"

He dropped his head back and let out a groan, but I could tell he was smiling. "Don't you dare use that voice on me right now, Josephina." He touched his forehead to mine. "When we're like this..." He hiked my leg up in the crook of his arm and pushed closer. "I'm in charge, got it?" The commandment in his voice sent a shock down to my core. I wrapped my arms around his neck and pulled him closer.

His kiss traveled to my neck again, and a moan escaped. I was shocked it was me who made that sound.

"You like that, don't you baby?" he rasped out.

And damn, did I ever.

29. Tyler

Falling asleep with Josie tucked in my arms, it finally felt like all was right in the world. I was finally having that New Year luck I was promised by that damn fortune cookie.

I just had no way of knowing the other shoe was about to fucking drop with the final change in the morning.

I squeezed my eyes shut tight against the loud knocking on the door. Who the fuck would be knocking this early? All my teammates were out last night with me. My head pounded, the usual sign of the incoming hangover. I opened my eyes and was momentarily shocked at my surroundings. I'd forgotten I crashed at Josie's last night. Natural light shone in from the cracks in her window shades. She hadn't even changed out of her clothes from last night, I was stripped down to my boxers. And that damn knocking continued. Who would be coming to see *my* girl this early in the morning?

"One second," I yelled out.

Josie threw an arm over her eyes and muttered gibberish.

"I got it. Be back in a sec, babe," I whispered as I rolled off the bed and ran smack into her bedside table, making a tall stack of books fall loudly to the ground. I winced and looked back at her, but she was still in the same position, sleeping soundly. I hurriedly threw on a pair of sweatpants before padding to the door.

At first glance, I didn't see anyone in the hall, but then a little harrumph dragged my attention lower.

Standing there, less than four feet tall, was a

little girl dressed in a light pink puffer coat and pink sneakers. Her light brown hair was pulled back in a high ponytail.

She pursed her lips at the sight of me, like she was assessing me and was decidedly unimpressed.

I squinted down at her, trying to figure out where the hell I knew her from, because she looked so damn familiar.

“Is this you?” she demanded, holding an iPhone up to my face. The phone played a TikTok video of me singing ‘Go Your Own Way’ in half gear.

I eyed her behind the phone and angled my jaw to the side, trying to figure out why this little girl needed to know. I leaned out the door, looking for an adult.

She breathed a big sigh and her tiny nose flared. “Yupp, it’s you.”

“What?” I coughed into my hand, trying to clear my dry-as-fuck mouth. “What’s me?”

The little girl’s mouth flattened into a thin line, and she used a tiny index finger to point at me. “You’re my dad,” she announced plainly.

My heart hammered in my chest as I replayed her words. Was I being pranked right now? I stared at her face, trying to place where I’d seen her before. Was she one of my buddies’ kids and she was in on the joke? But her face remained completely stoic. No little kid could act that well... could they?

She pulled out little kid scissors and a plastic baggie from her pocket.

“Bend down, please,” she announced authoritatively.

I sat there blinking at her in a daze, but did as she told, my knees cracking as I made it down to her eye-level.

I couldn't take my eyes off her face and didn't even acknowledge when she reached around my head and used the little kid scissors. The sound of the blades grinding through my hair snapped me to attention. But it was too late. The little girl held a chunk of my hair in her little hand, and she stuffed it in the baggy. In a daze, I reached around and felt the missing chunk.

"What the ever-loving f-" I cut myself off at the last second. "Why'd you do that?"

Her tongue stuck out the side of her mouth as she carefully closed up the Ziplock bag. "DNA."

My eyes widened. "And you had to take a whole chunk?"

Her little shoulders shrugged. "Sorry, guess that's show biz, baby," she muttered to me, making a weird sense of *deja-vu* creep up my spine.

The little girl turned on her heel and marched away like her little appearance didn't just slash me down at the knees.

"Wait, wait, come back here," I demanded, following her out the door. My head pounded with every step, and I momentarily wondered if I was hallucinating.

I actually laughed aloud, but the little girl's serious face sobered me right up.

"Wait, you're actually serious?" I asked.

"Yes?" She side-eyed me like I was losing my damn mind.

A tidal wave of questions crashed into my brain. "Where's your mom? How old are you? How did you even get in here?"

She pursed her lips. "Look, *maybe* you're not my dad." She squinted up at me. "But I'm pretty sure you are because I've been looking and—"

I squeezed my eyes shut. "Wait, rewind. What's *your* name?"

She sucked in her lips and held them there for a second, like she was weighing whether or not to give me the information. Her shoulders lifted with a little breath. "Stephanie Tyler Haley," she announced, sticking her hand out for a handshake. "But I go by Stevie."

I stumbled back. My eyes widened at her tiny outstretched hand. Because suddenly I was staring at Fiona's bright blue eyes, Fiona's cute, upturned nose. But... she didn't have Fiona's natural blonde hair, she had the same light brown color *I* had as a kid, and she didn't have Fiona's pale skin, she had *my* olive complexion.

"Stevie..." I breathed out. "Stevie Nicks... Tyler... Oh my...." The words strangled in my throat. My heart pounded so hard I could hear my pulse thumping in my ears. Her middle name... She was named after... *me?*

Stevie cocked her head to the side. "Yeah," she drawled, "you're my dad. Sorry about your hair." She shrugged. "Probably don't even need this." It seemed she decided I was it for her, because her shoulders looked way more relaxed now. She snorted and rolled back on her heels. "Boy, am I glad the other ones didn't know about Stevie Nicks. Kinda losers to be honest." Her little face scrunched up. "What was my mom thinking? Seriously." She let her arms fall down at her sides. "Lost a full five dollar bet though. My mom's friend is helping me, and she said it was definitely you and that I shouldn't even bother the other t-"

"Wait," I shut my eyes tight, trying to think through my now splinting headache. "Which friend?"

"A-"

"-drienne," I finished, opening my eyes. My nose

flared with an angry breath. “Where is she?” I demanded.

The little girl’s mouth buttoned up and she ushered me to follow her into the elevator.

“No,” I pulled her jacket back. I didn’t want her getting on that elevator; it suddenly seemed like a death trap. “Stairs,” I nodded to the stairwell.

I watched her skip down the steps in front of me, like this was a completely normal interaction for her. I wanted to fire off a million questions, but I also didn’t want my anger to unfold in front of her. No, I had to focus on keeping it together, even though what I really wanted was to scream at her mother for answers... *Why hadn’t she told me? When did this happen? How could this have happened without me knowing?*

One question needed to be asked for confirmation though. “Stevie, how old are you? When’s your birthday?”

“Eight,” she threw over her shoulder. “Birthday is February 15th.”

Eight years ago... The spring I spent with Fiona. And nine months after May is... February... *Fuuuuck*. Okay, so I really was her dad. It had to be me. There was no one else, I was sure of it. She was my first that spring and we stayed exclusive ‘til school let out. That was our deal. No one else as long as we were together, and Fi was trustworthy. She never sugarcoated a thing in her life and she never would’ve broken our deal without telling me.

Stevie tried to push the main floor door open, but it wouldn’t budge. She used her whole body, but still couldn’t manage. She suddenly stopped struggling and eyed me like I was stupid. “A little help here, big guy?” she asked, waving a hand in front of the door.

Shit. I moved forward and easily shoved it open

above her head.

The first burst of cold air reminded me that I never even stopped to put a shirt or shoes on, but I followed Stevie outside to Adrienne's car anyway. She scampered to the backseat and quickly climbed in.

My teeth chattered as I tapped on Adrienne's shotgun window. Her face gave nothing away as she rolled her window down.

My eyes widened. "Adrienne, wh—"

"Nice to see you again this morning," she steamrolled right over me. "Seems like you may need water and some Advil after that wild night, my friend."

"What the f—" I cut myself off and ground my back teeth because I knew Stevie was listening. "What's going on?"

Adrienne sighed. "Come to The Blitz later when my shift starts. I'll fill you in."

I gave a swift nod. At least she wasn't blowing me off, but the rest of my day was shot because I knew I wouldn't be able to think straight until I had all the facts. "What time?"

"Eight sharp," she answered while throwing her car in drive.

My eyes drifted to Stevie in the backseat.

How the hell had I not known she existed?

She didn't need the DNA test. It was written in her face. She was a blend of me and Fi.

She was my daughter.

30. Josie

Tyler stormed into my room and paced angrily back and forth in front of my bed. I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes. I'd never seen him so off kilter before. He was usually very calm, unaffected, choosing to use restraint even when he was irritated. He limited his emotional outpouring to clenching his jaw. So this jittery, uneasy version of him was... unexpected.

"Tyler, are you okay? Calm down, you're starting to freak me out. C'mere." I fought off a yawn and patted the bed beside me.

He stopped and looked at me with wide, scared eyes. "I *am* freaking out!"

His tone woke me right up. "What?" I searched his face, trying to piece together what the hell was going on. "What's going on? Who was at the door?"

"Is this a joke?!" he roared, ignoring me. "I can't do this! I can't." He looked up to the ceiling and let out a manic laugh before shaking his head. "Fuck, Fi. You fucking did this and you didn't even tell me. You didn't even-"

"Tyler!" I called again, but my effort was in vain. His eyes remained crazy as he continued muttering "I can't fucking do this" over and over again to himself.

I crawled to the end of my bed and tugged his wrist to make him sit on my bed. I held his face between my palms. "Calm the *fuck* down, Tyler. Breathe," I ordered him.

At least he stopped repeating his negative mantra, but I'm not sure what he said next made me feel any better.

"I can't be a dad!" he burst out.

My body froze.

“What?” My palms slid from his scruffy face, and my throat burned. “What do you mean? Did you get someone pregnant? *Was that a girl?*”

He shook his head and squeezed his eyes shut tight. “I mean, yes. It *was* a girl. An *eight-year-old* girl.”

I studied his face, trying to read if this was some kind of joke. “And you’re... You’re sure?”

He bit his lip, and to my absolute shock, his eyes welled up with tears as he slowly nodded. “Oh my God.” His face crumpled. “I already fucked up.” He fell back on my bed and groaned. “I didn’t know about her! I swear it. All these years... She probably thought I didn’t want her. She must’ve thought...” His voice trailed off and he rubbed his eyes, clearly feeling all the internal calamity of the moment. And I’m not going to lie, a little selfish part of me was sad that the ground just fell through on what Tyler and I were starting together... Because we’d have to take a backseat. And if he refused, I’d force this into the backseat. Because creating a relationship with his daughter was way bigger. Bigger than me. Bigger than us. He needed to be number one for her.

I slowly sat next to him and rubbed his chest, feeling an invisible barrier between us being reconstructed.

When I spoke, I tried to use a soothing tone. “You don’t know anything, so stop thinking that way. Stop thinking of all the hypotheticals until you have the facts. The only thing that’s important is that you’re a dad now, and you should be focusing on stepping into that role. The rest of the questions... they don’t even matter, Tyler.”

His eyes flew open. He shook his head vehemently. “She won’t want me as a dad.”

My brow furrowed. “Why the hell not?”

His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.
"Because."

"Because?" I pushed.

"I'm still a kid!" he burst out.

A laugh bubbled out of me at that notion. "Tyler, you're a full-grown adult who plays in the NHL, you can totally be a dad."

His eyes darted around in panic, making him look like a racoon stuck in a dumpster fire.

"Maybe you should talk to my dad," I offered, trying to calm him. "He'd be happy to help, I'm sure of it. He's a pretty solid girl dad, and-"

His eyes widened. "What does a dad even do?"

"Relax," I coaxed. I smoothed a hand through his hair. "Start simple. A dad takes you to school, to sports, loves you. A dad-"

"School?!" He sounded like he got punched in the gut. "Oh my God. I can't be a dad, I can't even read!" he shouted out in desperation.

I stared at him for a beat.

His eyebrows drew together, making him look like a helpless kid in need of a hug. "I dropped out of school, I haven't even washed my sheets in a year, the only thing I cook is toast. *I'm* toast! I'm a disaster, Josie."

"Wait, go back, you can't read?"

The color drained from his face, and he shot up. "Fuck me. *Fuck. Me.*" He stumbled across my room and hightailed it to my door.

I quickly chased after him and tried to grab his wrist, but missed. "Wait, Tyler. Hold on a second!"

He was already in the doorway, but he lingered for a second. His whole body tensed. Refusing to look

back at me, he quietly said, “No, Josie. I can’t talk about this. I’ve been running from this my whole life, and-” He cut himself off. Instead of finishing, he slammed the door shut and retreated back to his place.

I sat there in his wake, frozen, staring at the door. I forced myself to think back to the day I met him. I had my suspicions. He *could* read. There was just something else going on in his head. The way his buddies teased him, the way he pushed to read, like he needed to prove himself. And when he did read, he went slowly, cautiously sounding out the words.

On first appearance, in his clean jersey and slacks, he looked larger-than-life, but when he sat on that reading stool, he seemed to shrink in on himself. I’d forgotten about our first interaction, and thinking of him swearing and practically trembling as he read aloud to that class... It now made me really want to give him a hug.

I was a teacher for God’s sake, I knew the signs, and he exhibited many of them. How had I let that moment slip from my mind?

Making my way into my kitchen, I quickly started up my coffee maker, because I knew I was about to hyperfocus on some research for the next few hours. Honestly, trying to help him solve this one situation was probably the only thing that made me feel better about our little love nest being blown to bits.

I couldn’t magically help him be a good dad or force my way into his apartment to make him communicate his fears. But I damn well knew how to help someone read.

31. Tyler

Anxiety rose up in my chest as soon as I spotted her behind the bar.

“What the hell is going on, Adrienne?” I demanded as I plopped on a barstool seat in front of her. The bar was empty besides two old-timer regulars, who were now staring at us.

Her heavy-make-up-coated eyes narrowed in on me, assessing me. After a beat, she pushed off the wall she was leaning against and slid two shot glasses on the bar toward me, then turned to pull a bottle of vodka from the top shelf.

I glanced at the shot glasses and an unpleasant feeling settled in my gut. “So I’m gonna need this? That’s what you’re saying?”

She rolled her lips together and nodded. Her usually straightened, long, black hair was piled on top of her head in a messy bun, and the bags under her eyes indicated that either she and Brody, her longtime boyfriend, were fighting, or this Stevie situation was weighing on her as much as it was on me.

She picked up a shot glass and clinked it against the one she left for me.

I shook my head as I tapped the little glass against the bar, then threw it back, swallowing down the burn.

Staring at her now hit me with a twisted sense of déjà-vu. Here I was, once again, staring at the friend who had all the answers, but didn’t really want to share any of them with me. But I wasn’t some helpless, heartbroken teenager anymore.

“Where is she? Where’s Fi?” I demanded.

She placed both hands on the bar and dropped her head down. "I think you should have that conversation with Stevie."

I let out an incredulous scoff and started getting up. "Should've expected that kind of cryptic shit from you. What am I even here for then?"

"Sit," she ordered, looking at me with determination in her fiery eyes. "You're here because of Stevie. Let's keep her at the center of this. I think it's pretty obvious that you're her dad."

"No shit, Sherlock," I blurted out. "Wish I would've known eight fucking years ago."

She rolled her dark eyes. "Calm down."

"Calm- Calm down?! Really?!" I practically shouted.

"Shh!" She eyed the regulars in the bar and cut me a warning look. "Didn't Fi give you a note or something? Back in high school?" she whispered tersely.

My eyes widened. "It sure as fuck never said she was pregnant!" I fell back on the barstool and rubbed a frustrated hand over my face and tried to think back. What *had* it said? I was only able to read it once before that asshole teacher ruined it. I remembered being confused with a line about me giving her more than I could ever know... Well, now it made complete fucking sense. I gave her a baby.

Fi was pregnant.

That's why she disappeared that summer.

A mental supercut of us swamped my mind. Her bright, mischievous eyes, the way she'd tug my wrist and run, sure that I'd follow her into any trouble, her bubbly laugh, her tears when the sadness swallowed her up. Her tears... her bruises...

Those memories doused my internal flames, and

I was left there sighing and shaking my head. She was afraid of men... She thought it'd be more peaceful without any men for a while... But my chest ached knowing that I could've helped if she would've let me.

"I can tell you're beating yourself up about this, and I don't want to overstep, but don't."

I swallowed hard and stared at her. "Can you just fucking tell me what you're thinking, Adrienne? You girls are smarter than me, okay? Piece it together for me, please," I practically begged.

Adrienne pursed her lips. "Okay." Her shoulders sagged. "Fiona... She found out that spring, but she kept it a secret. I didn't even know until much later. Until after you left town actually. I told her to track you down, to tell you, but she refused. She knew if you found out that you'd leave hockey behind and end up stuck in that town, and she didn't want you to resent her or the baby. She knew how important hockey was to you and she wanted you to make it. I know she had plans to tell you, but she kept putting it off because she was scared of what you'd think. And then she became worried and protective of Stevie. She asked me once, 'What if he's changed? What if he's not a good guy anymore?' You have to remember, we're talking about a girl who had a shitty past with men, so you can blame her all you want, but you of all people could probably understand her the best."

I reached for the vodka bottle and poured myself another shot. The truth was, I did understand Fiona's actions, but I still hated them. Those words gutted me. *What if he's not a good guy anymore?* Fuck. She never even gave me the chance to be a better man.

"So, I think you need to get ahead of this," Adrienne said, cutting into my thoughts.

I met her eyes. "What do you mean?"

She grimaced. “I mean... Fiona’s parents. Do you remember them at all?”

“Yeah. Her dad was a violent shithead, right?” I asked dryly.

“Yeah. It wasn’t a good situation. They were the main reason she ran away when she found out she was pregnant.”

“Where did she go?” While I desperately wanted to know so I could picture it all in my head, I was scared to know.

Adrienne patted my shoulder. “Remember what I told you back in high school? She did find a better place. She worked for Mrs. Marshall, remember her?”

I shut my eyes, searching my memory, trying to place that name.

“She owned the inn in Chesterfield,” Adrienne offered. “Fiona stayed there and worked for food and rent. It was a good situation, and Mrs. Marshall was like a grandmother to Stevie.”

I rubbed my forehead. How many other people knew about Stevie before I did?

Adrienne could tell where my head was at, because she gave a sympathetic smile. “Fi’s parents didn’t even know about Stevie until she was around three or four, and they only found out because they ran into each other in a grocery store. But I’m gonna tell you right now, they’re going to use this as an opportunity to fight for custody. They’re already mad that she’s with me and not them right now. I’ve been ignoring their calls like crazy.”

There was no way I’d let Stevie go to their house. No fucking way. Fi ran away for a reason, and now that I knew Stevie was my daughter, I was never letting her go. I knew what it was like to grow up thinking your parents didn’t care about you and never even really

wanted you. Casey always tried to give me enough love and assurance, but... it always felt like I was missing something. I was determined not to let Stevie feel that way.

I nodded. "Okay, so, what do I do?"

She bit her lip. "First off, I'd get a legit paternity test to prove you're the dad, even though it's pretty obvious. I'd get everything set up to take care of her. Have a solid place to live, enroll her in school. All that."

My mind started reeling with a million questions.

"You can do this, Tyler. You're a good one," she said with a small smile.

Those words snapped me back in time and my throat clogged with emotion. "Where's Stevie right now? Where's she been staying?"

"I have temporary custody. She's with my roommate, but I hate leaving her there when I work late shifts. It's only been two days."

My jaw clenched. Just two more days that I'd already lost. "When can I see her?"

"I'll drop her off tomorrow morning."

After I got back to my apartment, I really wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone, even though I knew I should find Josie and fill her in. And I knew it wasn't fair that I was the one to break down her barriers just to run away from her now. But the truth was, I didn't want to face her because I wasn't sure where we stood.

This morning shifted things drastically, and I was scared shitless to ask her what she thought about everything in fear that she'd want out. This wasn't what she signed up for. She signed up for a single guy with no worries other than hockey, not a single dad trying to find his footing. I couldn't give her my all anymore because I

needed time for myself and Stevie.

And... I was worried.

Each time I was in a room with Josie, everything else, *everyone* else, faded to the background. She was my center. She was the only person I cared about. And it felt stupid to even think this way, but I was honestly afraid that if I was with her, I'd let my daughter fade to the background too. I knew it was probably a ridiculous fear, but I had no experience with this.

What I did have experience with: Feeling unwanted by my own parents as a kid. There's no way I wanted Stevie to ever feel that way.

It was ironic really... I was the one pushing Josie to be a romantic, and reality just gave me a huge fucking cross-check to the back of the head.

The other reason I was hiding from her: I blurted out all my deepest secrets to her in a panicked rage this morning, and the embarrassment still stung. She probably realized I wasn't even in her league. A high school dropout dating a teacher with a masters degree? Not sure that really works.

But around 10pm, there was a light knocking on my door, and I knew it'd be her.

I shuffled across the room feeling the weight of dread looming over my head.

Opening my door, I was hit with her usual vanilla scent, and I bitterly thought it'd become a thing of nostalgia. I hesitantly met her eyes and grimaced, waiting for the blow.

But to my shock, she didn't even hesitate. She lifted on her tiptoes and pressed a kiss to my jaw, then pushed inside my apartment wearing her pj's with a backpack slung over her shoulder.

She plopped on our sectional couch, fixed

reading glasses on her face, making her look incredibly cute, then gathered her hair in a messy bun. I loved watching her make herself comfortable in my space.

When she realized I was still standing by the door, she gave me a stern teacher-look and patted the couch beside her. “C’mon, sit,” she ordered, beckoning me forward.

The corners of my lips curved into a reluctant smile.

As soon as I sat, her eyebrows drew together, making her look pensive. “First off, I want to help any way that I can, okay?”

My body went rigid with tension. “You don’t have to,” I said too quickly.

She fixed me with a *knock-it-off* look. “This is the same as when you said you wanted to look out for me. You didn’t have to, but you wanted to, right? I *want* to help you. And I know I’m a little out of the loop here, and that’s totally fine. You need time to figure things out and to bond with her, and I don’t want to force my presence in anyway. I’m expecting us to take a little break. Am I right in that assumption?”

I leaned over my knees and rubbed a hand over my jaw to hide the hurt on my face. I didn’t want a break. I wanted her. But I felt like I was drowning under the weight of everything and I didn’t want to drag her down with me. I just wished I could hit a pause button and fix everything. My head just wasn’t in the right place.

“I’m sorry,” I started, and her face fell. She’d been expecting me to go against that assumption. She was thinking I’d argue against a break, and now I could practically feel her deflating. *Fuck*. I hated disappointing her.

“Tyler,” she said kindly, “it’s okay. I’m not mad.” She rubbed my back, freely giving me the comfort I

craved and should've been giving her, and that just made me want to break down even more.

"There *is* one thing I feel I can help with right now though," she continued, her teacher-voice firmly back in place, helping her regain control.

My gaze slid to hers. She pursed her lips and motioned for me to sit up straight.

Arguing with authority was so ingrained in me that I wanted to stay slouched over my knees. "Yeah?" I asked, not moving an inch.

She reached a hand to my chest and forcibly pushed me to a sitting position. I stared down at her dainty hand touching my chest and a goofy grin slid onto my face. I moved to pull her into my lap, but she beat me away with her hands.

"No, no, no," she disciplined, wagging her finger at me. "Focus."

My lips twisted as I tried to hide my grin and I lifted my hands in innocence. "Okay, okay."

"I am going to help you with your reading," she announced with her chin held high in the air.

My gut twisted.

"I put this together for you." She held up a heavy, color-coded binder that probably took hours to put together and plopped it in my lap.

I stared down at it, scared to even touch it.

"Josie..." I said in a warning tone, scratching my cheek awkwardly.

"Look, if you don't want the help, then fine, but I put a few tests in there and you don't even have to tell me what the results are, but... has anyone ever tested you for dyslexia?"

I paused, staring at her mouth, mentally

replaying what she just said. “Dyslexia?”

Her eyebrows scrunched together. “Yeah, like the letters kind of jumble up on you when you’re trying to read?”

“That... that is what happens, but no.” My hands were sweating, and I had to rub them on my pants. “No one’s ever...” I looked at her sheepishly. “Because I never let anyone know.” I shook my head. “I’m so dumb, I should’ve-”

“No,” she snapped. “I don’t want to hear you insult your intelligence ever again. And no dwelling on the past. We move forward.” Her hand reached out and patted my shoulder. “Now, I’ll be honest, I don’t know all too much because I’m a high school teacher, and I think they place more focus on that in the earlier grades for early detection and all that, but I spent today researching and I reached out to our district’s reading specialist.”

I pulled at the collar of my t-shirt, because it suddenly felt like it was strangling me. “Josie, you didn’t have to—” I started, but she cut me off with that *knock-it-off* look again.

She took the binder and flipped through it for a second, then pointed down to an article. “There’s a theory that dyslexia means your brain actually thinks in 3D, which kind of makes sense for you. According to my dad, you’re super good at making up plays and thinking spatially.”

I paused at that, feeling surprised over Coach’s words. He was never one to throw around too many compliments, so that actually meant a lot.

“With all that said, it seems that a good way to casually improve and practice your reading is by listening to audiobooks and following along. I really wish I had other books on hand, but I only have romances, which I’m not sure you’d be all too interested in, *but*, I do

have hockey romances on hand,” she said excitedly. I couldn’t bring myself to say anything that would potentially burst her happy little bubble, so I went along with it. “I picked my favorite. I already purchased the audiobook, so all you have to do is download it. Here, give me your phone,” she ordered.

I was struck speechless as she fiddled with my phone. I leafed through the binder and realized she’d just given me a huge gift– a way to get help without having to admit to anyone else that I actually needed help. “Josie, thank you. Seriously. I don’t even know what to say.”

She nodded, handing me back my phone. “No problem. I’m excited. Honestly,” she said with a genuine smile. “We can even listen and read together if you want. I do love reading.”

I rubbed a hand over my forehead, feeling an incredible weight being lifted off my shoulders. I wasn’t sure if this would actually help at all, but her knowing and wanting to help me somehow made it easier.

“Now that that’s settled, you’re probably reeling from information overload. Have you eaten dinner?”

I shook my head. “No, haven’t eaten today.”

Her eyebrows popped up. “All day? You? Tyler Jetersen?” She poked me in the ribs, trying to lighten the mood.

“Yeah, don’t tell your dad,” I tried to joke, but then cringed, hoping that wouldn’t make her upset.

She snorted. “Let’s fix this before you starve to death. I’m going to order takeout from Pops, you want?”

Seeing her take charge, I couldn’t help but think, *how did I get so lucky?* She wasn’t leaving me in the dust, she truly wanted to help me. She was staying.

“Yeah, I’d like that. Maybe we can put that audiobook on too so you can show me how,” I hesitantly

added, mostly because I wanted to make her happy, and I wasn't sure how many other nights we'd get like this together.

"Let's do it," she returned with a sad smile, like she was somehow able to track my thoughts.

While ordering our food on the phone, she walked around the couch and pulled at the back of my hair with a questioning look on her face.

I just shook my head and felt myself actually laugh for one of the first times today.

An hour later, I was completely engrossed in the hockey romance audiobook while we broke out our dessert cannolis from Pops.

I hit pause on my phone. "Wait, this is like a real game. I can see it in my head," I told her, feeling shocked at the notion. I always heard people could see books in their mind just like they were watching a movie, but I'd never experienced it myself, and I always thought they were insane. Now I felt like I was finally being inducted into some kind of secret book-loving club.

"Yeah?" she asked excitedly.

"Yeah," I responded incredulously. "And this is actually a good play," I said, pointing to my phone. "I'm dead serious."

Josie's face broke into a smile. "I mean, I'm not surprised you think so. This author is hockey sister. Don't sleep on hockey sisters, they've been to *a lot* of games. They know their shit."

"Damn." I never thought of that before, but it made sense. Duke's sister's hockey IQ was practically higher than most scouts' at this point. "Let's keep going, yeah?" I was already reaching to hit play again.

She nodded happily and took a big bite of cannoli. “I’ve always wanted a romance book club, had no idea it’d be with my boyfriend,” she mumbled, then immediately blushed. “I mean, you know, like—”

I cut her off with a messy cannoli kiss, making her giggle, but my chest hurt. I would’ve been elated to hear her say that yesterday, but now it was my fucking fault it wasn’t true. I just felt overwhelmed as fuck and had no clue how to fix everything.

When we were about half-way through the book, Josie started nodding off. I retrieved a blanket from my bedroom and covered her, then carefully took off her reading glasses and stuffed them in their designated pocket in her backpack.

I hated that I’d have to miss her as soon as she walked out the door. I wanted to stay in the fictional world a little longer with Josie’s warm body snuggled safely on the couch beside me, so I grabbed the book and continued.

At some point in my audiobooking journey, I fell asleep as well, and I was only stirred awake when the door creaked open. Hassik and Garcia tiptoed in and tried to quietly make it back to their rooms without fully waking us.

I kept my arm slung around Josie’s waist and pulled her body closer against mine. I yanked the blankets higher and wished I could have this kind of peace every single night.

But the morning came way too soon.

I laid there fully awake watching the light stream

into the loft when my alarm sounded. Josie rubbed the sleep out of her eyes, and I pressed a kiss into her hair, wishing I could hit the snooze, but knowing that I couldn't. The day would start with or without us, and today, and every day after this, I couldn't afford to let it move without me.

"G'morning," she grumbled.

Maybe the morning would become good later, but nothing about the situation between us was good right then.

"Good morning," I said, practically choking on the words.

A wistful look overtook her face as she reached up and traced my jawline with her finger. "What time is she coming?"

My mouth suddenly went dry from nerves. "She's being dropped off in about a half hour."

She nodded and rolled off the couch, away from me, and I hated that I had to let her go.

I followed her to the door like it was a death march.

But when she pulled open the front door, she paused. "Hey," she said forcefully, pulling me from my thoughts. "I was just thinking... You were at eighty percent and I was at twenty until the other night. It's okay if we flip flop percentages for a while. We don't have to fully... break," her voice wobbled.

My throat felt like it was coated in ash. While I wanted that so, so badly, I couldn't ask that of her. And knowing she was waiting would just put more pressure on the situation. I'd be rushing things with Stevie. I pulled her against my chest and held the back of her neck as I pressed a kiss into her hair, and I loved that her body relaxed against mine.

“Josie,” I was fighting against getting choked up now, “I can’t ask you to wait for me.” I continued holding her in that position, because it was easier to say this into her hair instead of looking her in the eye. “I don’t know how long it’s going to take to get everything settled.” And it just about killed me to say what I was thinking next. I closed my eyes. “I don’t want to hold you back. I don’t want you waiting around for me.”

With that, she pulled away.

When I opened my eyes, she was blinking furiously, trying to hold back tears, and it was like a punch to the gut.

“Oh, well. Okay. We don’t have to...” She shook her head and a manic-looking fake-smile overtook her face, but her glassy eyes gave her away. “Ya know what? Let’s not talk about this right now. I’m here to help, I’m just down the stairs if you ever need anything. I have a bit more experience in being a little girl than you do, ya know?” She turned quickly so I couldn’t see her face and I knew I handled it completely wrong. I hated seeing her leave looking so hurt, and I hated that she was trying to hide her feelings from me.

“Josie...” I caught her wrist and tugged her back, “Wait, just one last-”

She didn’t even let me finish my sentence before launching into my arms and pressing into the tear-soaked kiss.

The only problem?

I thought watching her walk away would be the heartbreaking part.

I was wrong.

It was the difference in our kiss that hurt the most. It was the added desperation that told me it was a kiss goodbye.

32. Josie

His tongue slid into my mouth, and one hand reached up into my hair to hold me in place while the other ran down my butt, pulling me up and into him like he owned me. Caged in his arms, it felt like he never wanted to let me go, and I honestly never wanted to leave.

The hungry kiss would've probably lasted longer, would've probably turned into something more, but the elevator dinged behind us, alerting us we weren't alone anymore.

He kept his fiery eyes on me, but there was hesitation there in the little crease between his eyebrows. He didn't know what to say or do, and neither did I. My ego couldn't take him turning down another offer to wait for him.

So, without another word, I lifted to my tip toes and pressed another quick kiss to his scruffy jaw before turning away.

And all the words I should've said to him in the hallway found me that night.

He was the one who said, *And I'll be here waiting for you when you finally realize we're perfect for each other.*

And that was the truth: *We were* perfect for each other.

The two of us were just on the flip side of the coin now.

I'd be the one waiting now.

And if I had to be the romantic one for the both of us, so be it. He had no choice in the matter. He was the one who told me to screw realism, after all. Now he had to deal with the consequences, because I couldn't turn back. There's no way I'd be settling for mind-numbing conversation and passionless kisses. Not after experiencing his knee-weakening, hungry make-outs, and his solid hands wanting to always be touching me. It'd be one thing if he pushed me away because he didn't want me, but that didn't seem to be the case.

As I tossed and turned, I couldn't help but remember other things he'd said in the hallway before our first kiss... *The other shoe eventually drops on everything, Josie.*

Maybe shoes did always drop, but in this instance, it was a tiny, child-size shoe shaking things up a bit, and it's not like it was causing a huge life-threatening earthquake. But I knew with a weird quiet confidence that I'd stay with him through even a 9 on the Richter scale as well.

33. Tyler

I watched Stevie beside me on a barstool shoveling spoonfuls of Lucky Charms in her mouth while tracing the game on the back of the cereal box with her tiny finger. Chunks of her wispy light brown hair were now falling out of her practically sideways ponytail. I kinda hoped she knew how to fix that because there's no way I knew how to do it...

She cut off my thoughts by reaching her little fist in the cereal box and pulling out a handful of the cereal to dump in her bowl.

I grinned amusedly and took the box to pour myself some more as well. "You like Lucky Charms?"

Looking down at her bowl, it was pretty obvious she was leaving a lot of the bland cereal in the bowl and only going for bites loaded with marshmallows.

She pursed her little lips. "Not as much as Cinnamon Toast Crunch. That's the best. Ooh, and Captain Crunch," she added with wide eyes.

I smirked. "Noted. We'll have to pick some up."

"Cool. What are we gonna do today?" she asked, swinging her short legs back and forth under the kitchen island.

I blew out a sigh and surveyed the living room. Adrienne had dropped her off with only a singular duffle bag. She definitely needed more stuff if she was going to be here for an extended period of time. But how much time was the question...

I guess that didn't really matter. Now that I knew about her, I'd want her to stay with me as much as

possible. My lease with the guys wasn't up until March, and at that point, I'd try and get an apartment for just the two of us, but I guess this place would have to work until then. But would she go back with her mom to Minnesota soon? What would I do if that were the case? Would I be able to convince Fi to move out here to Detroit? My mind was like a constant loop of questions I had no answers to... *Unless...* Stevie had the answers.

Appearance wise, she was most definitely half of me and half of Fi... But she was raised by Fi, who was smart as a whip, so our little girl probably had way more answers than she was letting on.

"So where's your mom? How come she didn't come with you?"

She leaned her little chin on her hand and avoided my gaze. "She had to go away. I don't want to talk about it," she said glumly.

My face crinkled. *Go away?* What did that even mean? Anxiety spiked in my chest. "Is she in some kind of trouble?"

She huffed. "Well, not anymore."

Okay, so she went away, not in trouble anymore... "Did she go to rehab or something?" That made the most sense. If she went to rehab, her parents would definitely use it as a play to take custody.

But Stevie's round blue eyes stared at me angrily over her cereal bowl. "Do you not know what 'I don't want to talk about it' means?" she bit back.

I cocked an eyebrow at her. "Okay, attitude, much?"

When I first met her, I felt like she actually wanted to find me and talk to me. Now she was looking at me with a mixture of doubt and hopelessness, like she was stuck with the dumb kid in class or something and the two of us were doomed to fail. And I'm not gonna lie—

it kind of hurt my feelings. I needed to get my dad shit together quickly.

She rolled her eyes, making her look more like a teenage girl than an 8-year-old one. "Sorry," she mumbled.

I sat there scratching my cheek. It was obvious that talking about her mom was just making her upset, and I guess it didn't really matter where Fi was right at this second, because Stevie would be in my life forever. I had to prioritize establishing this relationship somehow. But what the hell did I know about a Father-Daughter relationship? Thinking about fatherhood made me feel like I was out to drift in the ocean with no lifeline. I didn't have the first clue about parenting stuff. I wasn't even raised by a father myself, I only ever had Casey-

Casey.

I pulled out my phone and quickly shot him a text saying that I'd be coming by for dinner. I didn't even give him an out. He canceled on me last week, so I figured I was owed this anyway. Besides, we could have McDonalds for dinner for all I cared, I just needed to talk to him about this.

A second later, my roommates came barreling in the door, making Stevie knock her cereal bowl over in her lap.

"You dummies!" she screeched. "You scared me!" Her face flushed and her jaw angled out to the side as she stared at the spilled milk in her lap.

I'm not sure if it was because she reminded me so much of Fiona in that moment, or if it was the way this little girl leveled my roommates down to "dummies" so easily, but I had to fist my hand and hold it in front of my mouth to muffle a laugh as I handed her the paper towel. In my defense, I put up a better front than Garcia, who was cracking up at her jump scare.

“Who’s your friend?” Hassik asked.

“Well guys...” I paused cleaning up the milk and raked a hand through my hair. “This is my daughter.”

Garcia blanched. Hassik dropped the coffee he’d been holding and it splattered all over the floor.

Both of them stood there in shock, their eyes shifting back and forth between me and Stevie.

“I know she’s not on the lease,” I grimaced, “but if it’s okay with you guys, I’d like to give her my room and I’ll take the couch. Just ‘til we can get our own place in March,” I assured them.

“All good,” Hassik responded immediately.

Garcia rubbed his forehead like this presented a major problem for him. “She gonna obey the rules of the loft?”

Completely forgetting about the milk now, Stevie’s ears perked up. “What are the rules?”

Garcia kicked off his shoes, then ran and slid on the hardwood to the corner of the room, where a big dry erase board leaned against the fireplace.

“One!” he announced, pointing to the rule. “Whoever loses video games or push ups must go out into the tundra to get the food. This includes you now, little missy!”

“Tyler’s gonna have to get all the food from now on,” Hassik whispered, and the two of them cackled together.

I shook my head dryly. “I’m gonna have to teach you some video game tips,” I whispered out the side of my mouth to Stevie. “Can you do push-ups?”

She nodded fiercely. “I beat all the boys in gym class.”

Those words made me smile. Looked like my girl

had a competitive streak, I could work with that. I reached out with a fist and she immediately knuckle punched me.

“Two! No one is allowed to mention—” Garcia cut himself off and mouthed, “Francesca.”

“Hassik’s ex gf. He still cries about her and it ruins his goalie mojo,” I whispered in Stevie’s ear, to which she giggled— actually giggled, like / was funny.

“Three, no one touches Garcia’s power pellets.” He gave her a stern look.

She squinted at him. “I thought you were Garcia?”

“He’s speaking about himself in the third person like a dufus,” I told her, to which she giggled again. “His power pellets are his candies in the pantry. He thinks they’re lucky to eat before games,” I explained.

“And lastly. He—”

“Or she,” Hassik added.

“—who explodes the toilet, must clean said toilet,” Garcia finished.

Her nose crinkled.

“Got it?” Garcia asked seriously.

“Got it,” she said with a firm nod.

“Sick. Game time, boys! Oh, and girl,” Garcia said, running to the couch.

“Nah, we actually have to go out and pick up some stuff,” I told them.

Stevie’s neck snapped toward me. “We’re going shopping?”

“Yeah, Target sound okay?”

“Oh my Gosh, I love target!” she gushed.

I laughed. I guess all of the female species loved it.

“Can we get some Starbucks there too?” she asked eagerly.

I cocked my head to the side. “You’re a basic girl, eh?”

Stevie rolled her eyes. “Mom says saying ‘basic’ like an insult is society’s way of putting down stuff girls actually like.” I couldn’t help but grin, because that sounded exactly like Fiona.

“Oh, sorry.”

Stevie pursed her lips and practically looked me up and down like she wasn’t impressed. “You should be.”

“Yeah, you should be!” my teammates chorused, grinning smugly. Assholes.

I sucked in my top lip. I needed to get back in her good graces. “So, Starbucks, what do you like there?” I needed to start tallying away some of her likes in my mind.

“They have the best cake pops and hot chocolates. Me and mom always get them before we walk around,” she said.

“Noted. Can’t break tradition. Us hockey players are big on tradition,” I told her seriously.

Her eyebrows drew together, like she was studying me. “So, you’ll get some too?” she asked hesitantly.

Garcia pointed a finger at me and cocked his head as if to say, *you know the answer*. When Duke was away for the NHL’s All-Star Weekend last year, Claire hung out with us. That night, she reamed us out for not getting ice cream with her. She went on a whole tirade about how people don’t like indulging alone, and then she made us all hold ice creams.

I shrugged casually. "Sure, why not?"

Her face lit up with a smile as she jumped down from the stool and ran to get her sneakers and coat.

Sipping on my iced coffee while Stevie chowed down on the last of her cake pop, it looked like our Target trip was starting off as a success. I grabbed one of the large red carts and she wordlessly grabbed onto it with her little hand like it was the most natural thing in the world.

"What do we need first?" she asked, licking her frosting covered lips.

"Uh... School stuff?" I asked her.

Her face crumpled in worry. "You're asking *me* what we need?"

I paused, hating that I could actually feel her confidence in me slipping again. "Let's just grab all the regular stuff that you use at school before we buy other stuff, yeah?"

She looked at me warily but gave a little nod, then jumped up on the back of the cart so I could push her. I smirked and obliged.

But as soon as we turned into the school aisle, my heart practically stopped. Standing there, looking like a beacon of help in the middle of all the gel pens and pads of sticky notes, was a short girl with dark hair tumbling down her back. *My short girl.*

It'd feel so natural to walk up behind her and pull her into me. And my chest tightened knowing that I couldn't do that. I couldn't touch her. Because I pushed her away despite her offering to wait for me.

She was clearly oblivious to me and Stevie standing at the top of the aisle. She had her glasses on today and an old hoodie that looked way too big for her.

The caveman inside me wondered whose fucking hoodie it was, and I had to swallow down the urge to peel it off her and give her mine instead.

I cleared my throat loudly and she startled, dropping the sticky notes she was holding.

“Oh, hi!” Her eyes darted from me to Stevie, who was still standing on the front of the cart with her arms looped around the sides. The corner of Josie’s lips quirked up and she eyed me shyly, tentatively, and my mind screamed at me that I was a fucking idiot. I hated the distance between us, and that I was the one who put it there.

“This is my friend, Josie,” I told Stevie, trying to break the ice. “She’s a teacher at the school you’re gonna go to.”

“Oh cool! Are you gonna be my teacher?” she asked.

Josie smiled. “No, I’m actually a ninth grade teacher, but sometimes I sub in the lower elementary grades, so maybe I’ll be your substitute teacher sometime.”

“No shit.” How had I not known that? I’d dated her for... I guess only a couple days. But I’d assumed she was a second grade teacher from our first meeting.

Both girls were now looking at me like I needed to wash my mouth out with soap.

I rubbed a hand over my jaw to cover a smile. “Sorry. Tough habit to break,” I said sheepishly.

“Wanna help us pick stuff out?” Stevie asked with hopefulness in her voice. I guess she’d decided shopping with only me was a lost cause, which was probably true.

Josie bit her lip and her cheeks pinked up as she waited for me to answer.

I hated how stilted and unsure everything was between us now. The night we said our goodbyes to each other, I regretted it as soon as she walked away. Everything had been so murky and unclear that night, and I still didn't have any solutions... And why the fuck had I pushed her away in the first place? I had no fucking clue what I was doing, and Stevie could tell. Josie was a teacher and a girl. She was way more equipped to handle this kind of situation than I gave her credit for.

I mouthed, "please" at her.

Her face broke into a warm smile aimed at Stevie. "Sure."

I followed the two of them as they rapidly chatted about school together. In all of two minutes, Josie had more information spilling out of Stevie than I had all morning, and walking through the clothing aisle, Stevie had even grabbed Josie's hand. How was it so natural for her to connect with Stevie where I felt like I was tiptoeing with her.

Every time Stevie or Josie cooed about something being cute, I grabbed it and threw it in the cart.

After a few minutes of doing this, Stevie eyed the cart warily. "You sure we can afford all of this?" she asked doubtfully.

"Yes," I answered firmly. Before Case made it to the NHL, we were just scrapping by with his paycheck from working at the rink. Both of us had a healthy dose of anxiety every time we went to buy groceries, afraid we'd have to run and put stuff back. I think being able to go shopping with no worries in mind was our "we made it" moment.

"Actually?" she asked skeptically.

I shrugged. "Yeah, go crazy."

She paused for a beat, then a deep belly laugh bubbled out of her. “Wow. I’m sure glad you’re my dad!”

Pride bloomed in my chest, but Josie arched an amused eyebrow at me. I guess I was spoiling her, but I had a lot of time and birthdays to make up for, so I felt it could slide this once.

After ravaging through the school and clothes sections, Josie led us to the hair aisle.

“How about we do some headbands and scrunchies, yeah? Those are easier styles,” she said.

Stevie crossed her arms over her chest and her chin quivered a bit.

Shit. My feet practically froze to the white floor. I did not do well with kid tears. I never knew how to handle my nephews when they cried because they usually pushed me away and high-tailed it to their mom.

Josie immediately knelt down to comfort her and Stevie whispered into her ear. Josie hugged her against her shoulders and shot me an empathetic glance.

I swallowed hard, not knowing what the hell to say or do and feeling incredibly grateful that Josie was here with us.

Josie whispered into Stevie’s ear and suddenly, she was sniffing up her tears and standing straighter.

“So, it’s decided,” Josie said, “I’ll be teaching the dufus over there,” she hooked a thumb in my direction and smiled wryly, “how to braid hair, sound good? And I live just downstairs...” she trailed off and looked to me again for permission.

I gave her a desperate nod.

“And I live just downstairs,” she repeated more confidently, “so you could always come knock on my door and I will happily do your hair. Deal?”

Stevie's little shoulders relaxed. "Deal."

We were about to head to the checkout when I made one last turn down the sports aisle.

The girls chatted about the school's lunch and recess schedule by the cart while I disappeared to pick out Crewmen jerseys— one child size one and women's— both with my number and last name stitched to the back. This was yet another thing that the hockey romance book I was reading had exactly right. Guys went fucking feral for girls wearing our jerseys, and this was the perfect excuse to gift Josie one.

"For my girls," I said, lumbering back holding them up with a grin.

"Wow, you must be a great hockey player," Stevie said, gleefully grabbing the kid jersey.

Josie's eyes flashed in a mischievous way as she bent down and whispered in her ear. Stevie covered her little mouth and giggled, and the way her blue eyes danced reminded me so damn much of Fiona's back in high school.

"You better be telling her I'm the best," I puffed out my chest a bit.

Stevie smacked a hand in front of her mouth to muffle another giggle. Josie looked down at her and put a warning finger to her lips.

Stevie rolled her lips between her teeth and eyed the two of us in indecision, then she whispered up to me, "She says you're a bender."

"What?!" I burst out, narrowing my eyes at them.

The two girls started cackling.

"Your words, not mine, Mr. Hot Shot," Josie taunted.

Stevie reached out to squeeze my hand in her

tiny one. “But it’s okay, because you’re *our* bender,” she implored... and my heart melted, but I knew I had to keep them laughing.

“Oh, you guys think that’s funny?” I challenged them.

Josie bit her bottom lip and poked my chest.

“Yes.”

I looked her up and down, but she didn’t shrink away, she was waiting to see what I’d do about it. In one quick motion, I grabbed Josie, slid my hands up her large sweatshirt and tickle-attacked her sides, loving the excuse to touch her.

“Take it back,” I warned, continuing to tickle her until she was basically wheezing between laughs. But Stevie wasn’t about to lose this battle and she’d clearly chosen her alliance. She stomped on my foot, hard, pretty much knocking my breath out, and I briefly let up my hold on Josie.

“Ow!” I complained.

“Run, Josie! Run!” she yelled over her shoulder.

Josie quickly caught up to her. They both paused at the end of the aisle, holding their stomachs and giggling hysterically at me.

I made a move to chase them with the cart and they both ran away.

I couldn’t help but chuckle. The two of them together might be dangerous. They were both quicker and wittier than me, but it seemed they were happy together, and that’s all I cared about.

34. Josie

Talking to Stevie felt surreal. She had the same shy grin, the same dimple that popped out when she smiled, and the same golden complexion as Tyler.

And when Tyler walked toward us holding up jerseys, saying they were for his girls, as in me included... Well, my heart flopped around hopelessly in my chest.

I told myself I didn't need answers and I didn't need to push him on questions of what we were at the moment. I could go with the flow and just be here to help them.

And when Josie excitedly asked me, "Wanna help us set up my new room?" I nodded without even looking at Tyler for permission.

Things felt natural with the two of them. That is, until we loaded the car.

While opening the trunk, he bent to whisper in my ear in his husky voice, "Thank you so much, Josie. I really appreciate your friendship right now."

The word "friendship" was like a shot of reality being forced down my throat.

I straightened up and fixed a fake smile on my face. "No problem, buddy," I replied, giving him a playful punch to the shoulder.

He dropped his head down and licked his lips. When he looked back at me, his jaw popped, and I knew my shot landed right where I aimed.

"The fuckin' irony," he ground out. His remorseful eyes met mine. "I hate that word now too."

And I was grateful he was pissed. That meant he

missed me too.

“See you back at the apartment,” I told him, then practically skipped off to my car, feeling back on cloud nine with his gaze on me.

It felt weird to be walking into his room for the first time while Stevie and I were overhauling it. I wished I'd been invited into this space before, when we were connected. Because it felt unfair that I felt his absence in my room when this space had remained free of me.

His room was clearly a bachelor pad— dark blue walls with a few hockey sticks, posters, and flags hung up in disarray, as well as a huge flatscreen TV mounted to the wall silently playing SportsCenter. The space was relatively clean besides a basket of dirty clothes in the corner that was overflowing onto the futon couch as well.

Stevie and I spent the next half hour spreading out random pieces of pink accents throughout the bedroom. We laid a new pink comforter on top of his navy one, replaced his bedside lamp with a frilly sparkly one, and we covered his Miracle on Ice poster with a Taylor Swift one.

While picking up the random tags we'd torn off, Stevie shouted out, “Omgoodness! My mom made that!”

My neck snapped to a framed picture next to the window that I'd missed... It was a drawing of a couple sitting on top of a car watching a beautifully faded sunset.

“Yeah, she did.” Tyler's eyebrow furrowed as he studied the painting.

Stevie's mom...

It wasn't until that moment that I realized just how clueless I was about this situation. I wanted to ask

questions about her, but I knew it wasn't my place and this wasn't the right scenario, so I stayed quiet. But now, thoughts of me being *the other woman* and breaking up a potential family bombarded my brain.

I never viewed Stevie arriving as a complication to our relationship. If teaching taught me one thing, it's that motherly instincts were not restricted to biological children. The ability to love a child like my own was definitely there inside me, so stepping into a caretaker role— if that's what was wanted— didn't scare me at all.

But...

If for even a second Tyler wanted to be with Stevie's mom, I had to back off.

35. Tyler

When I shifted my truck into park in Casey's snow-covered driveway, I sat for a second, looking at their snowy porch. About five inches of snow had come down throughout the day today, and the snowfall wasn't letting up any time soon. The kids, and Josie, surely would've had a snow day today if it weren't still break time. But it was super unlike Casey to leave his sidewalk and driveway un-shoveled. He was usually meticulous with his yard.

"Guess it's now or never, eh?" I made eye contact with Stevie through the rearview mirror.

Stevie unbuckled from the backseat and leaned over the center console. Her face scrunched up as she studied the house. "This is your brother's house?"

"Yupp."

"It's huge." Her little voice was laced in awe.

She had a point, it was a monstrous, beautiful, modern farmhouse. They started building here in Brighton, about forty-five minutes from Detroit, right after they found out Addie was pregnant with the twins. They both had the same mental picture of what their life would look like— and that included living on a huge piece of property so they could build a rink in their backyard. Last year, they converted the old barn on their property into a warming area so everyone could lace up their skates without freezing their fingers off. Their whole set-up was amazing.

Stevie pushed her hair behind her ears, which I was starting to notice was a nervous tick of hers, just like it was Fiona's.

"It is huge," I confirmed. "But you shoulda seen

where we grew up.”

“Why? Was it bigger?” she asked with wide-eyes.

I let out a chuckle as I shook my head. “Absolutely not. It was practically falling apart. But Casey worked hard, and he helped me too. He got that,” I pointed to the house, “by being one of the best hockey players that ever played.”

Her lips twisted as she thought over that information. “Mommy said you were one of the best,” she said simply without looking at me.

That made my heart pang with longing. Because sure, I was mad as hell at Fiona for not telling me about Stevie, but she was still one of the best friends I ever had in this world. I honestly couldn’t wait to talk with Fi and give her a hug one of these days.

“So... They’re my aunt and uncle?” she asked hesitantly, pulling me from my thoughts.

That question made me pause. Fiona was an only child, and she didn’t have a good relationship with her parents. This must’ve been more weird for Stevie than me, and now I was second-guessing bringing her here so soon. “Yeah. Is that okay to meet them right now? They also have twin little boys. They’re younger than you, but they’re fun to play with,” I offered.

Her eyebrows popped up. “I have cousins?”

“Yeah, is that... okay?” I asked, trying to gauge if she thought that was a good or bad thing.

She nodded quickly. “That’s okay. Do they play soccer?”

I regarded her little profile for a second. Why hadn’t I asked her about sports yet? “Do *you* play soccer?”

“Yes. I love soccer,” she gushed.

I grinned. Okay. I could work with that. I played sewey before every game with the guys— a game where we tossed a soccer ball around a circle and tried to keep it from hitting the ground to warm up our muscles. I was definitely comfortable around a soccer ball. “Ya know, the guys and I play with the soccer ball quite a bit before games. We’ll break it out tonight.”

“And play in the house?” she asked skeptically.

“Yeah, why not?” I shrugged.

She shrugged back, trying to look nonchalant, but she had to bite her lip to stop a small smile, and I finally felt like I had a little “in” with her.

She trailed on my heels up the sidewalk and practically hid behind me as I unlocked their front door and let myself in.

“Hey Case!” I called out as I kicked off my snowy boots on their large welcome mat, then waited for Stevie to do the same.

“In the kitchen,” he mumbled back.

Their foyer was a huge open room with dark hardwood floor that led back to a long, farmhouse-looking kitchen and dining room.

Their house was awfully quiet. The boys usually barreled into me as soon as I walked in.

Stevie had become surprisingly shy all of a sudden, just looking around their house at all the photos displayed, taking everything in, which was the total opposite of how she reacted with my teammates this morning, calling them out and yelling that they were dummies. But it made sense she was more nervous meeting family. I was used to being the shy one as a kid, so I didn’t want to push her. Plus, it oddly felt like we were a team now, us against whoever she met. I didn’t

want her to be scared, but I fucking loved that she sought comfort in me and used me as her shield.

I scratched my cheek as I stared at my older brother leaning over the stove. Addie hated cooking and burned everything she ever attempted to make, but Casey was practically a gourmet chef, they made a great pair like that.

My brother's short hair was sticking up messily and his beard was unkempt. From the bags under his eyes, it looked like he hadn't slept in days, and I suddenly wondered what the fuck was going on. But I had to get my news out first before I dug for what was wrong with him.

"So... Kind of have a surprise for you," I started, not really knowing how to phrase it.

He briefly looked over at me then did a double take. He leaned a little to see Stevie, who was still huddled behind me, then locked eyes with me.

"Case, I'd like you to meet my daughter," Casey blanched, "named Stevie Haley," I continued. Recognition dawned on his face at the last name.

I nodded, wordlessly telling him he was right.

He blinked a few times in silence, then slowly bent down, his knees cracking, to be eye level with her. He leaned a bit to the side to see her behind me but didn't force her to make a move.

"Hi," his deep voice rumbled gently, and his face softened. "I'm Uncle Casey. Sorry I didn't know about you until now, Sweetheart, but it's nice to meet you."

Damn, how was my brother so much calmer than I was about this? How come I didn't say something like that instead of stuttering and demanding answers?

Stevie's lips twisted as she leaned out from behind me. "Hi."

Case smiled. "Wow, you look a lot like your Mom."

"Really?" she asked earnestly, stepping out from my shadow a bit more and pushing her hair behind her ears.

"Oh yeah. I can clearly see the resemblance. I never met her, but I saw pictures tacked on Loverboy here's wall," he said with a smirk. "She's an artist, right?"

"Yeah. Tyler even has a picture in his room."

"I know the one. With the car and the sunset, right?"

"Yeah." She nodded. "Mom's got one just like it. She said it was a picture of her and my dad."

My chest squeezed at that. I was glad she made one for herself, just like she said she would. That meant she still carried a token of me through the years as well... Well, beyond Stevie. Even though we never had much of a romantic relationship, I did truly love her.

Right then, the boys came storming into the kitchen.

Beau puffed his chest out and pointed an index finger at his dad. "Mommy says *you* have to come get her right now or she's gonna walk out all by herself."

It was my turn to cut a questioning look at Casey. He met my gaze warily, then looked back at his children.

"She says she can hear Uncle Tyler and she says hurry it up Slowpoke," Ty added.

"Yeah, Slowpoke," Beau gave a hearty laugh.

"Guys, this is your cousin, Stevie," Casey told them. "Why don't you show her the mini-sticks room." He nodded toward their playroom.

"She likes playing soccer," I offered.

The two of them accepted her immediately. They flanked her sides, each grabbing a hand, and pulled her toward the playroom. Her face split into a huge smile as they fired off questions about her favorite animal, color, and food.

“So what’s going on?” I demanded as soon as they were out of earshot.

Casey turned the stove down and threw the dish rag over his shoulder. “I could ask you the same thing. Here I was thinking I did a good job raising you. Had no clue you were a daddy.”

I laughed dryly— because I had no clue either. “You *did* do a good job.”

He grunted, looking unimpressed.

“But while we’re getting everything out in the open...” I pulled at the back of my neck and winced, “I did drop out of high school as well.”

“Fuck.” He dropped his head back. “Was I really that clueless?”

“No, I was just really that sneaky,” I chuckled. “Sorry.”

He shook his head. “Well, now you get a hand at the whole parenting shit. It’s not easy,” he warned.

I put my hands in my pockets and rocked back on my heels. “That’s actually what I came here to talk to you about. I need help, man. I don’t know the first clue about all this.”

“I don’t think anyone knows. You just have to know your own kid. In my case, it was you, and I thought I knew you well, but damn.” His face scrunched up. “When did that happen? You were having sex in high school?”

I smirked. “Don’t ask questions you already know the answer to.” He said that to me all the time

when we were young.

He snorted. “True. The answer was just standing right in front of me.” He made a move to leave the kitchen, but I blocked him.

“What’s going on with Adds?”

He rubbed a hand over his forehead. His face was etched with anxiety. “We canceled dinner on you last week because we had a scare. She’s on bedrest for a couple weeks here, but I’m thinking it’s going to be the rest of pregnancy.”

“Everything okay?”

His eyes squinted. “Yeah, it’s been really rough on her lately. I’m banned from asking her how she’s doing because she’s sick of me asking every two seconds. I’m just fucking worried.” He ran a hand through his messy hair. “I’ll be back in a second. Addie’s gonna love your news,” he added, finally cracking a small grin.

A couple minutes later, Casey was holding Addie’s hand as they gingerly walked toward the kitchen table where I was sitting. My poor brother was looking at his wife like she was made of porcelain and was scared she’d break at any second.

I stood to give her a hug. “How ya feeling, Adds?” I asked, specifically because I knew Casey would want to know as well.

“Eh,” she sighed. “Just sick of being off my feet for so long, but I think the bedrest is working. I’ve been able to keep things down now. I think we’re out of the woods. I have another appointment next week.”

“It’s not all bad though. It’s giving her some solid time to work on her writing,” Casey said encouragingly. Addie worked as a sports journalist before the twins were born.

“Yeah.” She rubbed her wrists and his eyes immediately zeroed in on them. “I keep getting excited and typing too fast,” she said with a light laugh.

“What are ya working on?” I asked.

“It’s top secret apparently,” Casey said, lifting his eyebrows. “I’m not even allowed to know.”

Her laughter twinkled through the air as she rolled her eyes. “I’ll tell you eventually, okay? Right now I need uninfluenced mind space for the project.”

Casey leaned down and kissed the top of her head. It was the same way I kissed Josie, and I immediately missed her.

I was so fucking confused lately, feeling like I needed to expel thoughts of Josie from my brain until I focused on Stevie first... but I knew that wasn’t fair to her.

“I guess congratulations are in order,” Addie said, changing the topic with a bright smile.

My eyebrows raised. “Guess so.”

“I’m just excited to have another girl around here,” she said. “But what’s the story? You didn’t know? Please tell me you didn’t know and you weren’t just avoiding this or not telling us for the last eight years.”

“C’mon Adds, give me more credit than that,” I scoffed. “I had no idea.”

Her eyes filled with understanding, and she squeezed my arm. “How are you doing with this?”

I’d been in survival mode, so I hadn’t really paused to reflect. I knew I should’ve been feeling intense resentment toward Fiona for not telling me, but at the same time, I was kind of at ease with it now. The way things worked out— I had a cool as shit daughter and I had the means to take care of her because of hockey. I missed a lot of the hard work because Fiona shouldered

all of it— her birth, late nights trying to sleep train her, teaching her to walk and talk... I was sad I missed it, but at the same time, I couldn't dwell on past circumstances that I had no control over.

“Okay, I guess,” I said with a shrug.

Adds rolled her eyes. “Jettersen boys, men of few words at its finest.”

Case laughed. “How'd you find out?”

I quickly filled them in on everything, basically repeating most of what Adrienne told me at the bar.

Casey listened without judgment and remained silent for a minute. When he finally spoke, I was shocked at his words. “I mean, I understand Fiona being afraid. It's better than what our mom did.”

I truly thought he'd be the most ticked at Fi and I'd be having to defend her, and I was absolutely floored that he spoke of our mom in a not-so-positive light for once. “What do you mean?”

He rolled his large shoulder. “Love shrouded mom's decision making and she wanted to invite a bad man into our house, which put me in the shitty position to give her an ultimatum: him or us. But Fiona kept you and then her kid at the center of her decisions. Yeah, she messed up by not telling you, but her heart was in the right place. Tell me you wouldn't have quit hockey if you knew she was pregnant?”

I remained silent. I definitely would've been by her side had I known.

“And then she put Stevie first. What if you became like our dad? It's shitty, but I understand where her head was at, especially given her family background. Not making excuses for her, just saying I understand her thinking.”

“Yeah, I guess,” I lamented. “It's still not fair

though.”

“No, it wasn’t. Life’s not fair, ya gotta move on,” he said with a shrug.

During dinner, Addie announced the boys needed to load up on vegetables.

Stevie and I made eye-contact over the table, and it was like a silent agreement that we would not be indulging in the Brussel sprouts. The grossed out look on her face almost made me crack up, and it honestly gave us away.

“Tyler,” Addie said in a stern voice, holding the bowl of veggies out to me.

I cringed at being called out. Beau was pushing his starfish hands through his hair, watching me, so I was on the spot. “No...uh... thanks?”

Casey dropped his fork with a clatter. “You did not just tell my pregnant wife no,” he said firmly, but a smile was tugging at his gruff face. Asshole.

I made the mistake of glancing at Addie. Her face was all bright and hopeful, and I was a sucker for that look. It was the same look Josie had when she handed me that reading binder.

“Fine,” I groaned out, and scooped a heaping portion of the green shit onto my plate.

Stevie was giggling across the table, so I shoved a healthy portion onto her plate.

“Hey!” she called out in an accusing tone.

Beau laid a little hand on her shoulder. “They’re just so you get big and tall,” he said in a gentle voice.

“Yeah, Stevie, big and tall,” Ty added, placing his hand on her other shoulder.

It took all it had in me not to laugh at how the two of them were totally guilt tripping her.

Stevie's little shoulders dropped with resignation as she ate the first brussel sprout, to which Casey, and then his boys, both gave her a round of applause.

The tension I felt when we first walked in today was completely gone, and I was thankful for that.

An hour later, I was leaving their house with a full stomach.

"Love you guys, take care, okay?" Addie called from the couch.

"Yes, love you too," I called back, and Casey and the boys walked us to the door.

"Bring Josie with ya next time. I want to meet her," Casey said, clapping me on the back.

I tensed.

"Oh boy. What's that face?" he bit out. "You didn't fuck it up with her already, did you?"

"We're... kinda taking a break because of... things," I said carefully.

His thick eyebrows knit together. "That's stupid. She probably wants to help you."

"Yeah, but should I let her? This is my responsibility," I whispered.

Casey stepped closer to me. "You're not burdening her by asking for help, man. When I ask Addie for help, I think it makes her day."

I swallowed down my nerves. "Yeah?"

"Yes. People like to feel needed. Don't be afraid of asking for help with anything, ever. I realize now that I probably should've told you that a really long time ago.

Sorry you were the guinea pig for how I parent.”

I pulled him into a back slap bro hug. “Love you, brother.”

“Love you too.”

While walking out into the snow, Casey called, “Go get your girl!”

The twins behind him sang out. “Yeah! Go get your girl, Uncle Tyler!”

I rolled my eyes, but Stevie giggled beside me. “Are they talking about Josie from Target? Do you have a crush on her?” she whispered up to me with shiny eyes.

I tried to control my grin. “Maybe.”

“Tyler and Josie kissing in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G!” she sang out.

At least she could spell better than me, I thought amusedly. “Oh c’mon,” I groaned.

But she continued singing and laughing as she skipped to my truck’s door.

On the drive back, I thought over what Casey had said about asking for help. I was going to ask them to watch Stevie during my game this Saturday, but Casey was already stretched thin watching the boys and worrying for his wife. I’d ask them if I had to... but first, I’d ask the person who already offered to help...

Later that night, Stevie was eating a late-night bowl of cereal with the boys, so I snuck away to talk to Josie.

My chest tightened as I knocked on her door. Calling or texting would’ve probably been more efficient, but deep down, I knew I was using this as an excuse to

see her.

She opened her door and gave a tentative smile.

I licked my lips and blurted out, “Can you watch Stevie on Saturday? Maybe bring her to the game? Only if you want. Totally don’t have to,” I said, coughing into my hand. “Do you,” I hesitantly met her eyes, “want to?” I could feel my face burning up. While I needed someone to watch Stevie, I also wanted more than anything for her to be in the stands for me, wearing my jersey.

But as I stood there, waiting for her answer for what felt like an eternity, an old insecurity came seeping in. The one that developed from watching everyone else easily receive love, but feeling like no one would ever love me. Because I was too hard to love. Because everyone always left me in the dust. Because loving me was bad luck or something. And now I feared she was going to flat out turn me down.

“Oh uh...” Her eyes shifted and I immediately felt bad for springing this on her.

“Never mind, sorry, stupid idea. I know I fucked up everything between us, I just—”

“Woah, slow down there,” she said with a light laugh. “I needed a minute to mentally run through my schedule.”

I froze, waiting for her to continue.

She pursed her lips and looked up at me curiously. “It’s so funny seeing you nervous.”

Wait... She wasn't turning me down?

“You think this is funny? My palms are sweaty as shit, Miss Josie,” I deadpanned, but relief and elation were now mixing in my chest. “It doesn’t matter if you’re five or fifty, it’s hard to ask someone to a game.” And it was always awesome having someone in the stands just for you, but I kept that part quiet.

“Aw, poor little *buddy*,” she teased, patting my cheek and trying hard not to laugh. That *fucking* word. It grated against my nerves. The little challenging look in her eyes told me she knew it too. I decided to ignore it for now.

“Now you’re laughing at me, Josephina?” I asked in mock-exasperation. “Way to boost a guy’s confidence.”

“I’m sorry, it’s just funny seeing you knocked off your game. Remember when you marched down here being all Mr. I-know-what-you-want-Jettensen?” she said, imitating me with a little grin playing on her face.

I laughed and grabbed her waist, backing her against her door. “See, that’s where you’re wrong. You’ve always knocked me off my game.”

Her eyes danced from my hand back up to my face. “Thought we were on a break.” She reached up and held my jaw. Her eyes narrowed. “Buddy,” she said again.

“Careful,” I growled, grabbing her little wrist away and pinning it above her. I leaned down to whisper, “You’re not my buddy.”

She held my gaze. “What am I then?”

I was enjoying being this close to her way too much. “Hmm... We’re on a break, but we’re not broken.”

Her eyebrow kicked up. “A break implies being broken, Tyler. The definition is—”

“Oh no, not the teacher-voice,” I teased with a grin. I dipped closer to whisper, “Thought I told you I’m in charge when we’re like this? Why don’t we call it a pause instead?”

She slipped her wrist from my grasp and wrapped her hands around my neck. “A pause, huh?”

“Yupp. Can we hit play for a second?” I asked.

She bit her lip and nodded.

I swiftly moved my hat around backwards and was leaning down to kiss her, but then a loud, "Ty-lur!" echoed down the stairwell.

Bittersweetness seeped into those shiny hazel eyes of hers. She lightly patted my chest. "Pause. See you later."

I held my breath for a second. "Yeah." I couldn't quite pull myself away. In a daring move, I gave her a little booty squeeze, because I couldn't not touch her. "See you later."

It damn near killed me turning away without kissing her goodnight.

"Oh! And I can watch Stevie!" she said brightly. "It'll be fun. I'm excited. Maybe we can sit with Claire."

I breathed out a sigh of relief and smiled my thanks.

36. Josie

That Saturday, Stevie and I sat in the packed stadium near the rest of the players' families and girlfriends and munched on popcorn while we waited for the game to start. I felt a little self-conscious wearing the jersey Tyler gave me just because it hadn't crossed my mind until right then what my dad would think about it. But I quickly waved that thought away. My dad probably wouldn't even notice me sitting here, and even if he did, he'd only see the front of my jersey, not the #17 stitched to the back.

Claire came bounding down the steps wearing an oversized jersey and leggings, double-fisting cocktails. "Hey! So happy you guys made it!" she said with a bright smile. Her pink hair peeked out from under a wool beanie.

I scooped down a seat to make room for her. "Same, it's been too long since I sat down here in bowl seats for a game."

"I always forget your dad is the coach," she said with a laugh. She leaned over me to see Stevie then. "And you must be the famous Stevie? You keeping those loft boys in line?"

Stevie puffed up her chest. "Yupp. I yelled at Garcia to clean his room this morning," she said with a nod.

"Thatta girl." Claire gave her a high-five.

The guys came filing onto the ice for warm-ups and the crowd present went wild. The other players' kids rushed to the glass to get a closer look. Stevie eyed me hesitantly as if asking for permission to join the other kids.

“Why don’t you go down there. Tyler’s probably looking for ya,” I told her with a smile.

She bit her bottom lip to conceal a little grin before scampering down. She was still a bit hesitant about everything, but hopefully that hesitancy would fade if Tyler gave her the consistent unwavering love that I knew he was capable of giving her.

“So, how are you doing with all this? It’s quite the change. You and Tyler still going hot and heavy?” Claire asked as soon as Stevie was out of earshot.

I blew out a sigh. “I’m totally good with it, but Tyler wanted a pause.”

Her eyebrows scrunched together in concern.

“I get it. He wants to establish his relationship with her, and that’s priority, but then he still does things that are relationship-y, and it kind of messes with my head and makes me all hopeful.” I shrugged. “I just have this feeling that he’s the one for me, so I guess I just need to be patient.”

She twisted her lips in thought. “I wouldn’t stress at all then. Love connections, soulmates, whatever you wanna call them, they don’t expire, ya know? Just look at me and Duke. I think I knew I was supposed to be with him when we were like seven years old, but sometimes that’s hard because you both have to grow and change and make your way back to each other.”

I nodded. I just already had an amazing little taste of what it’d be like together, and I really hoped it wouldn’t take that long for us to make it official again...

Right off the bat, I could tell it was going to be a rough game. The Crewmen couldn’t get anything done because Carolina’s defense was just too good— they

couldn't even break into the offensive zone at all.

Late in the first period, Tyler took a beating in the corner and blood gushed from his nose.

Stevie jumped in her seat at the shock of the hit, then looked at me cautiously, like she was judging my face to see whether or not she should be nervous, so I had to keep it together and act like it wasn't a big deal. But watching him gag because of the blood as he skated back to the bench made me a little worried.

37. Tyler

We were getting killed out here. I briefly glanced over at our family section and ground my molars. My daughter's first home game and it was going to be a complete and utter failure.

Dropping my head down, I stared at my skates and tried to catch my breath.

"Their D is nasty," Duke said beside me, squirting some water in his helmet. "Got any ideas?"

I watched the next shift in silence, but my eyes kept drifting to Josie and Stevie, both wearing my jersey.

"Jettensen! Is there a reason you're staring all googly-eyed at my daughter?" Coach shouted at me.

Fuck. I snapped my head forward.

My teammates were thankfully smart enough to keep their mouths shut. But I couldn't completely wipe the grin from my face, because the perfect idea just came to mind.

My next shift out, I rounded Griff and Duke over to me before the puck drop. "Okay guys, I have a plan."

"Thank fuck," Duke breathed out.

"Okay, so Griff, when you take the faceoff, don't even fight it, let their center win and put it behind him where he wants it." Griff's face twitched, he hated losing face-offs, so I knew this play was a big ask. "Then scoot around him, get to the puck, pass it right over to Duke cutting through the center for a shot."

Griff paused for a split-second, thinking it over. His serious eyes cut to mine. He nodded. "Worth a shot."

Duke tapped both our helmets. "Let's go, boys!"

We lined up for the face-off, and as soon as the puck dropped, their center moved to snap it back, and Griff was already maneuvering around him for the puck. He quickly did his best to wiff it over to Duke who was perfectly lined up for a quick one-timer. A second later, their unprepared goalie looked stunned as the goal light went off.

My guys pummeled into me for a hug instead of Duke, the actual scorer.

“Holy shit. It worked! Did you just come up with that? You’re a hockey genius, dude,” Duke shouted.

“No, it wasn’t me,” I laughed. “It was Kennedy Sky.”

Griff’s eyebrows knit together. “Wait, like, the romance author? My wife reads those.” His eye bugged out. “You had me lose a face-off because of some writer chick?!”

“Yes!” I laughed, tapping his helmet.

“Dude, you can read?!” Duke cackled.

“Yes!” I shouted excitedly.

We were all smiling maniacally as we skated back to the bench to knuckle punch the rest of the boys.

After our shift, Griff pulled Coach aside and whispered in his ear.

A second later, Coach came lumbering to me with a clipboard and dry-erase marker in hand. He snapped his gum. “Got any other ideas, Loverboy?”

“Actually?” I asked, feeling my adrenaline pumping. “Yeah, I do.”

38. Josie

I wasn't going to have a voice left tomorrow. After the first goal, the momentum of the game shifted, and although it was still a close one, the Crewmen were able to pull off a win.

"We're supposed to go to the family room after, but since it's Stevie's first game, wanna hit the press conference?" Claire whispered, shooting me a conspiratorial look.

"Are we allowed?"

Claire shrugged. "Not sure, but I always sneak in the back anyways."

"We're sneaking somewhere?" Stevie's eyes lit up and she licked her lips at the prospect.

"Umm," I tried to tamp down a chuckle, but when she went all mission mode, she reminded me so much of Tyler.

"Come on, you're not a teacher right now, let's break some rules," Claire said.

Stevie rubbed her hands together. "Yeah, let's break some rules."

A mixture of uneasiness and excitement swirled in my chest. "So long as we don't get in trouble," I said hesitantly.

Claire rolled her eyes, then grabbed our hands and pulled us forward. She dragged us into an elevator and through a few cement hallways until we got to a huge, packed room where I felt completely out of place. Everyone else was in business attire while we were still in our jerseys.

After about fifteen minutes, Griff, Duke, and

Tyler walked up onto the stage and sat behind a long black table with mics. I couldn't get over how official Tyler looked sitting up there. And freshly showered, he looked insanely attractive. I kind of hoped he wouldn't see us because I was afraid he'd be mad, but that very minute, Duke nudged him and pointed directly at us.

Tyler's face lit up with a smile and he shot us winks.

"Did you see that? He saw us!" Stevie bounced excitedly.

When the press conference started, Griff and the Coach handled most of the questions, but then a reporter asked, "How'd you come up with that play for the first goal, Griff?"

Griff tried to keep a straight face, but Duke next to him started laughing, and then they were both losing it. Tyler's face flamed red. He gave Griff a negative head shake.

"Well," Griff rubbed a hand over his bearded jaw to keep it together. "I think you should ask Jetts."

Tyler sucked in his bottom lip and shook his head. He blew out a resigned sigh. "Fine, I didn't make it up." When he looked up at the room of reporters, a grin played on his lips. "I got it from a hockey romance novel. They've got some really accurate plays in there."

The room erupted. Cameras flashed, more reporter's hands shot up, questions were shouted at him, but Griff clapped Tyler on the back and talked over them. "Tyler here, he's for the ladies."

I couldn't help but laugh along with everyone else in the room.

Duke leaned back on his chair to balance it on the edges like a child. "I didn't even know he could read. Who woulda thought he'd be reading chick stuff?"

Tyler looked flabbergasted. “Hey, more men should read romance novels. It was like straight up reading directions for hockey and matters of the heart, okay?” He said it firmly, but the tips of his ears were turning red.

I had to cover my mouth to muffle a giggle. I could only imagine what the headlines were going to read tomorrow.

“Can I read a hockey romance novel?” Stevie whispered up to me.

“Not the kind I read,” Claire snickered quietly.

“Umm, maybe in a couple years, yeah? I’ll find you a good hockey action book though, yeah?”

She nodded enthusiastically.

“Where’d you get the romance novel?” a reporter asked Tyler then.

Right at that second, Tyler caught my eye and grinned, shooting a shock of attraction straight to my core.

39. Josie

I didn't hear from Stevie or Tyler again until Monday night.

I paused while applying a face mask, because I thought I heard voices echoing in the hallway. Slipping on my old ratty slippers, I quickly shuffled to the door feeling weirdly thankful for my apartment's thin walls for once. Leaning against my door, I smiled at the sound of little girl giggles mixed with Tyler's husky chuckle.

"This is how you do it," she said in a bossy whisper. "I promise," she implored.

"Really? You sure?" Tyler whispered back.

"Yes, drop it already!"

A second later, Tyler asked, "Okay, ready?"

"Yes," she giggled.

There was a quick knock on my door, then the sounds of running away and laughter filled the hallway, and I couldn't help but laugh along with them. Their fun together was contagious.

After a minute, I cracked open the door and my heart squeezed. On my welcome mat was a tray of messy homemade cupcakes along with a little note. In Tyler's handwriting, it said: "Do you like me? Check yes or no." And in little kid handwriting underneath, it read: "Do you want to hang out with me tomorrow night? Check yes or no."

I knew this was his way of asking me to watch her so he could pick out some Christmas presents for her, but tears immediately welled up in my eyes because of how cute and thoughtful it was... And over how they wanted me.

“So, where is he going?” Stevie asked, mashing cookie dough with her little hands on my counter covered with cooking wax paper. Christmas Eve was tomorrow, and I knew Tyler would probably forget about the cookies for Santa, so we took matters into our own hands, just in case.

“I told you, I’m not allowed to tell,” I said, giving her a little hip check.

Her face lit up with a secret excited smile. “He’s getting me a Christmas present, isn’t he?” she whispered with a giggle.

“Ugh! I can’t ruin the surprise!” I said, throwing my arms up.

She giggled harder. She was about to inquire more, but she was cut off by a knock on the door.

“I invited Claire if that’s okay with you? Remember her from the game?” I asked as I strode over to answer it.

I threw the door open to let her in, then went back to the cookie mix. We were in desperate need of more dough because of the amount of chocolate chips Stevie kept adding to the mix.

“Hiya guys,” Claire said, tossing her backpack and sleeping bag on the ground. We were having an old-fashioned slumber party tonight to give Tyler enough time to shop and get all the presents wrapped up. The boys were also instructed to erect a Christmas tree tonight so Stevie could help decorate it with them tomorrow.

Stevie paused what she was doing and eyed Claire curiously. “Are you sad?”

I froze for a beat, surprised by how perceptive Stevie was, because Claire did look kind of down.

“Is Duke still in the doghouse or all good on that front?” I asked, leaning back to look at her. She had on a matching yoga set and her pale pink hair was pulled into a low pony, but her eyes looked tired, like she hadn’t been sleeping.

“Eh... We’re fine. It’s just me, ya know?” She grimaced. “I still haven’t found my stride,” she said as she made her way into the kitchen. “Whatcha making?”

“Cookies!” Stevie announced proudly.

Claire reached between us and swiped some dough on her finger to lick. “Mmmm, excellent work, team.”

Stevie’s head snapped my way. “I thought you said I couldn’t lick the dough!”

I hooked a thumb toward Claire. “She can get salmonella all she wants, but if you got it from this, I think Tyler would kill me.”

“Plus, why risk ruining your Christmas with stomach problems, girlie?” Claire added.

“What about you?”

“I can be sick, I don’t even get to go home for Christmas this year,” Claire grumbled.

I turned to her. “No? I thought you guys were headed to Minnesota tomorrow?”

“Not anymore,” she sighed. “Addie’s on bedrest, so we decided to stay in town with them. I think Duke’s upset about it because he was looking forward to going home too. We usually spend Christmas Eve at my dad’s and then everyone goes to his parents for Christmas, and now I feel bad about making him miss that too. And I can’t be upset about it because it’s for my sister, ya know? But I am upset. I miss my dad.”

Stevie patted her on the arm. “Just tell yourself a different story to make it all okay,” she said with a kind

smile.

I paused for a second, replaying her words. Where did she get that from? Was there something she was upset about and she was making up stories instead of dealing with her feelings? I made a mental note to clue Tyler in about that comment.

“It’s good to hash out your feelings though,” I started, “and—” I was cut off by another knock on the door. “Did you invite someone else?”

They both shook their heads. I wiped my hands on some paper towel and went for the door. The second I opened it, Duke burst in, red in the face and out of breath.

“Claire, I—” He paused and leaned his hands on his knees to catch his breath.

Claire rushed to him and smacked his back. “Breathe!”

He licked his lips and nodded.

I directed him to sit, but he shook his head and looked back at Claire. “I have an early Christmas present for you, babe. Woo.” He wiped sweat off his forehead. “I rushed here. Have to tell you early. Starts tomorrow.”

“What?” Claire asked him, eyeing me confusedly. I shrugged. “You’re not making any sense, Duke.”

“I know you said you wanted to figure things out yourself, but I wanted to help. I’ve been thinking about what you’re really good at and... You have water?” he asked me.

I quickly went to my fridge to fish out a water bottle for him.

“Thanks,” he said.

Claire tapped her foot, impatiently waiting for

him to finish what he was saying.

“Anyway, and with this, you can yell at people all you want, baby. Hell, you can make people *cry* if you want. Because *we’re* the people!” he said excitedly.

Her forehead scrunched in confusion. “What?”

“I got you a shot as a workout trainer for the Crewmen. Starting tomorrow. They want *intensity*, babe. And you’re a beast at working out. I think maybe you’d really like this more than if I got you jewelry or anything like that.”

Claire went perfectly still. “You got me... a job?”

Duke’s face dropped. “Oh shit. Was it a bad idea?” He looked to me in question, then back to Claire. “I’ll go get you jewelry if you want, I swear I will, babe. I’m trying to show you that I hear you and that I know you.”

Claire launched herself at him, throwing her arms around his neck. He hugged her back, lifting her from her feet. She squeezed her eyes shut, and I could tell she really needed that. She needed reassurance that he saw beyond just the figure skating version of her.

I immediately wanted to do something like that for Tyler. We weren’t officially dating, but maybe I could still give something to both him and Stevie.

“Oh, and the best part,” Duke said, putting her back on her feet.

“There’s more?” she asked, wiping a stray tear from her eye.

He gently tugged the back of her neck toward him and pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Babe, are you crying? Quitting skating’s making you soft,” he teased.

She elbowed him in the stomach.

“No, I like it,” he laughed. “You can be as soft as

you want with me, baby. You know that.”

“Ugh!” She fanned her face to stop more tears from coming forward. “What’s the next surprise? I don’t like crying. Let’s go.”

Duke smiled as he reached back for my door to throw it open. An older guy in his sixties with salt and pepper hair shuffled in.

“How’s my Claire Bear doin?” he asked with a grin.

Claire looked between the two men, shocked. “How? I thought—”

“Got him on a flight this morning,” Duke said, looking real proud of himself.

Claire launched herself at Duke again.

“I don’t get a hug?” Her dad scoffed, shaking his head, but a grin played on his face. It was obvious he wasn’t actually upset. He liked seeing his daughter happy.

40. Tyler

Case and I usually drove back to Minnesota for Christmas. We typically went to Claire and Addie's dad's house for Christmas Eve and then the Callahan house for Christmas dinner. The Callahans were known for inviting "lost boys," aka billet kids, over to their house for Christmas, and now it was a tradition for all of us to show back up there every year for dinner.

But with Addie on bedrest, things were looking a little different this year. Case was the first to say they wouldn't be making the trip back to our hometown. And after that, Claire said she didn't want to leave town just in case her sister needed her. And Duke wouldn't leave his wife during Christmastime, so now we were all here.

Hassik, originally from Sweden, and Garcia, from Florida, couldn't make the trek home and then back again in time for our next game, so they were sticking around as well. It actually worked out well because I needed their help. They found a last-minute Christmas tree last night— not quite sure how, but I didn't want to question it.

This morning, I woke up before everyone else to make sure everything looked perfect. It was mine and Stevie's first Christmas together, and I wanted it to be a day she'd never forget. I sipped my coffee while making sure the gifts were all lined up.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spotted the sugar cookies Stevie laid out for Santa. I completely forgot about those. I quickly swiped one up and froze when I heard rumbling behind her door, alerting me that she was up.

I took a large bite and quickly downed it with some coffee.

A second later, Stevie bounded out of the room, barefoot and in her pink pajamas. She came to a complete stop in front of the tree.

“Oh my Gosh.” Her eyes danced over the presents, the stockings, the half-eaten cookie on the fireplace, and I felt my chest swell with pride over giving her a fun Christmas morning– the kind of Christmas morning Casey always tried to give me when I was a kid. As a teen, I looked back and felt kinda bad that he went to all the trouble to try and make things fun for me, but now I realized it must’ve been nice for him too. Getting the chance to provide was also a gift.

“Santa found me,” she said, her eyes tearing up. I quickly got to my feet to pull her into a hug. I hadn’t even known she’d been worried about that. It just showed she needed more time to fully let me into her little world.

“Of course he found you. You’re a great little girl,” I told her, patting her messy hair.

She wiped her eyes and tentatively walked toward the presents. It shocked me when, instead of tearing into her own presents, she shyly said, “Should we wake up the boys? I got them something.”

My eyebrows popped up in surprise. “You did?” When did she have the time to go out and pick something up?

“Yes, I got you something too,” she said with a tiny smile. “But I wanna give them at the same time so no one gives it away!” She was running to their rooms then.

“Rise and shine, boys!” She knocked loudly on their doors. “It’s Christmas time!” she practically shrieked with happiness in her voice.

I couldn’t help but laugh as my teammates came strolling out of their rooms, wiping the sleep from their

eyes.

Garcia, who's hair was sticking up at odd angles, gave me a look that said it was way too early.

"Don't be a grump. It's 9am, could be way worse, bud," I said, clapping him on the back.

Stevie ran behind the tree and grabbed up three shirt boxes wrapped in red wrapping paper. "Josie helped me," she said in a little voice, "but they're from me, okay?"

The three of us made eye contact and went for it at the same time.

Inside the box was a very bright, very busy, plaid button-down dress shirt.

"Aren't they pretty!" she shrieked. "You can wear them under your suits for your next game! You'll be matching! Then everyone will know your best friends!"

Hassik was already trying his shirt on.

Garcia was cringing hard as he took in the clashing colors.

Stevie's face fell as she watched Garcia. "You don't like it?"

"I'm not wearing this," Garcia announced.

She stomped her foot. "Yes, you are, Thomas Roberto Garcia."

"Yes, you are!" Hassik repeated.

"Yeah, you are!" I chorused.

Sensing it was a losing battle, Garcia relented. "Fine." He ripped off his t-shirt and tried the new button-down on. He flung his arms out. "Happy?"

Stevie clapped her hands together like a proud mom, and I couldn't help but laugh. "Yay! They're perfect!" she hollered. "You guys will wear them for your

next game, right?" she asked eagerly.

"Yes, definitely. I can't wait," I said, holding it up. It was *very* bright, but I'd do anything to keep her smiling.

Hassik smoothed his hands down it. "Comfy. Thank you."

Stevie ran up and gave him a hug. He took a second to return it, but when he did, it's like his heart melted.

After we finished presents, the four of us sat around the kitchen island eating pancakes, and that's when there was a knock at the door.

"I'll get it!" Stevie was already running to the door, so I quickly pulled up behind her.

In the doorway, Josie was standing there in a cute corduroy overall dress and boots, holding out a delicately wrapped present. "For both of you," she said, a little blush coloring her cheeks.

Stevie tore into the wrapping paper and held it up to me. "A boombox?!" she asked.

"It's a karaoke machine," Josie whispered.

"Oh my gosh, there's microphones. We can sing together?!" Stevie asked.

Josie's face lit up with a grin as she nodded, then she hesitantly made eye contact with me. "I made sure it had all the Fleetwood Mac songs, but I think you should learn some Taylor Swift too."

"Oh, is that right?" I asked, tickling her side.

She laughed into my chest. "You might as well know the Queen."

"The princess," I said firmly, giving her side

another squeeze. “Stevie’s the Queen.”

She bit her lip and looked up at me. “Did I do alright?” she asked shyly.

The way she was seeking reassurance made me want to haul her up and carry her to my room and not let her leave until she knew how I felt about her.

But my feet were cemented to the floor.

Not yet, I repeated to myself, clenching my jaw. I needed patience. One life step at a time.

“This is great. Thank you.” I pulled her into a hug, which surprised her, but a second later, she was leaning into me, fully relaxed. “Our gift for you is a little... different,” I said, stroking her hair. “It won’t be ready until 2pm today. Can we come get you at that time?”

Her mouth popped open in surprise.

“You thought I wasn’t gonna get you anything?” I teased.

“I just... I thought...” She stopped herself from talking and gave a shy smile.

Stevie was grinning hard.

“Just teasing. So, what do ya say? Can we get you then?”

She swallowed. “Sure... I’ll be at my parents though...”

“Perfect. We’ll swing around and getcha. Just make sure you bring your skates,” I said with a wink.

After picking up Josie, I drove us to the rink, and then the three of us were sneaking into the stadium’s side door. We could totally enter through the front, but Stevie liked making everything a mission— so did I, to be honest.

“I take it we’re going skating? Why not just tell me?” Josie whispered as we sat on the bench lacing up our skates.

“Shh, no questions, you’ll ruin the surprise.”

Stevie shot me a thumbs up that it was a good response, and I internally chuckled.

As soon as I finished lacing up mine and then Stevie’s skates, we were all walking on the skate-safe rubber floor to the stadium’s entrance.

“Wait,” Josie pulled back on my arm, “are we even allowed to be here?”

“Shhh,” I told her, fighting an amused grin.

“If you get kicked off the team for this, it is so not my fault,” she continued.

I gave her hand a squeeze. “Relax, little buddy.”

She shot me a dark look, making me laugh.

As soon as we entered the rink, the lights were all shut off except a tiny backup light way across the ice, giving the rink an eerie glow.

“How do we turn the lights on? What do we do?” Josie asked, retreating back into me.

“We skate,” I told her, guiding her to the door.

Stevie already hopped on the ice and was holding onto the boards, waiting for us.

Josie whirled on me. “Are you crazy? It’s so dark.” Her eyes widened in panic.

I pulled out my phone and hit a couple buttons. In a second, Mariah Carey’s voice boomed through the rink and little string lights strung up around the boards started twinkling. I bribed the front office to leave everything as is from the team’s swanky donor banquet last week. I slid my phone’s flashlight on. “It’s an ice

show! You said you liked skating in the spotlight!”

Her hands shot to her mouth. Then her body shuddered with giggles. But then... was she sniffing?

I froze. “Josie... are you... Are you crying?” I asked, pulling her hands from her face.

“Yes!” Her eyes were teary and the rims of her eyelids were all red. She lightly wacked my chest. “You made me all—” she sniffled again, “emotional. This is so sweet.”

My body shuddered with a chuckle. “Aww, c’mere.” I pulled her into my chest and rubbed her back. “Let’s not waste your ice show time though, c’mon.”

She didn’t have to be told twice. She ran out onto the ice and I followed behind her, holding my flashlight.

We spent the next half hour just messing around on the ice. Per Stevie’s request, the two of us raced— I won, even though her skating was much prettier, and then we taught Stevie a few things.

While Josie taught Stevie a simple two-foot spin, I hopped up on the boards and started videoing, and I was struck with an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for the two of them. How many years had I spent wishing for this kind of Christmas day? For a family to share it with? Christmas felt so *uneventful* before them, like it was just another day. But today, I was seeing it through their eyes, and it made everything feel brand new.

A minute later, Josie was skating over to the boards. “I can’t believe you remembered I said that. This is like a dream.”

I pointed to my head. “Steal trap, baby. I remember everything you say.”

She blushed as she looked out onto the ice. “Well, thank you. This makes me feel so... special.”

“You are special, Josie.” I paused. At that moment, I knew I needed to get us back on track and to make sure she knew how important she was to me. To us. I wanted every Christmas to be like this. “Josie, I think I jumped the gun with saying we should go on a—”

“Guys! Look!” Stevie hollered, cutting me off. She was holding extra sticks and pucks from the zam doorway. “Let’s play!”

“Ooh! Yes!” Josie yelled out, then she looked back at me with wide eyes. “Wait, what were you going to—”

“C’mon!” Stevie shouted.

Josie gave a shy grin, then pushed out from the boards and skated away, and I sat there feeling like a chump for wimping out.

I slowly glided to the zam door where Josie was teaching Stevie how to hold the stick and puck handle. I shouldn’t have been surprised, I watched that viral clip of her absolutely smashing eggs with slapshots in that dickbags apartment.

“Damn girl, you got hands?”

“Pshhh of course. You know what they say, don’t you?” Josie responded.

My eyebrows pinched together. “No?”

“Figure skaters can pick up hockey, but hockey players can’t pick up figure skating. So we’re actually the superior athletes in the rink,” she said, popping her hip out.

“Ooooh!” Stevie chorused.

“No, no, no. I can figure skate,” I deadpanned, dropping my stick.

She bit back a laugh. “Let’s see it then, big boy.”

“Yeah, let’s see it then!” Stevie challenged.

“Okay, Stevie’s the judge,” I said. “Show me something to do.”

She did a quick little jump that looked simple enough.

“Okay, I can do that,” I whispered. I pushed out on my left foot, jumped and swung my body around to land on my right. I think it was a pretty solid jump, but my balance was off after landing and I wound up on my ass.

Both girls started cackling at my expense.

“Okay, okay, maybe you’re right,” I conceded, grinning at the two of them.

“That’s the first time a hockey player has ever admitted that!” Josie burst out.

“Thought I already showed you I was different from other hockey players,” I said, getting to my feet and brushing the snow off my butt.

Her nose scrunched up and she looked at Stevie. “Oh, that’s right, he’s just a bender.”

I sucked in my bottom lip to keep from laughing and shook my head. I should’ve never blabbed that out to her. “That’s it!” I said, but she knew I was going for her, so she took off skating.

I caught up to her in a second and grabbed her hips, pulling her into me.

“You’re gonna pay for that,” I whispered in her ear, and her body shivered against me, making me harder by the second.

“Oh yeah?” she cocked a challenging eyebrow.

“Yes. But we’re going to have to wait here for a second because...”

“Because?”

I swallowed hard and pulled her flush against

me.

She started cackling and turned in my arms.
“That feels like a personal problem,” she said, but she
threw her arms around my neck anyway.

I just shook my head and carried her with me as
I skated.

41. Josie

I was kind of secretly hoping I'd have a New Year's kiss with Tyler, but the Crewmen unfortunately had a road trip scheduled for the weekend. So instead, me and Stevie were spending New Year's together, and I was going to use it as an excuse to fit in a bunch of girly fun before school started back up on Monday.

We had a spa day at the apartment, where we did face masks and our nails with Claire, and we went to a new tween girl movie in theaters that she'd been begging to go see lately— I figured Tyler would be grateful that we took on that specific experience.

But for the New Year's Eve Crewmen game, Tyler texted me that his brother was having people over his house for a watch party and that Stevie and I could go if we felt comfortable enough.

I was a bit hesitant about going because it felt weird to meet his brother without knowing exactly what we were to each other besides friends, but when I brought the idea up to Stevie, she was extremely excited to play with her cousins again, so I bit the bullet and drove over there. It helped knowing that some of the other girlfriends that I met were also invited. But again— it was a bit weird now considering Tyler and I weren't exactly dating anymore.

Thankfully, his brother put me at ease as soon as he swung the door open for us. "Hullo Stevie, and Josie?" he asked me. He had the same square jaw and strong facial structure as Tyler, but his hair and eyes were lighter, and his build was a lot larger.

I nodded.

"Happy to see ya here. I've heard a lot about you," he said with a warm smile. My face must've

faltered because he added, "All good things of course."

Twin little boys wearing pointy New Year's hats barreled into the doorway to greet us then.

"Guys, this is Miss Josie," he told his boys.

One boy licked his lips, the other pointed at my face and announced, "Uncle Ty's crush!"

"Did he get you? Dad said to go get his girl," the other twin blurted out.

I could feel my face blushing as I laughed at how cute they were.

Casey rolled his eyes. "Why don't you guys go play soccer? Stevie, please show them up."

Stevie snickered and took off after her cousins.

"It's true," Casey said then. "We did tell him to go get you, my kids take everything very literally. The last time he was over here, he was having a hard time with everything. It is a strange situation. Did Tyler track down Stevie's mom yet?"

"I don't think so," I said carefully. I avoided asking about it because it felt too personal. "He hasn't talked about her at all."

He nodded. "I never met her... Fiona," he clarified, leading me into the den where the rest of the people were gathered in front of a huge flat screen tv. "I just know she was good at art and she had my brother wrapped around her little finger for a while, but I don't think they ever truly dated. I think they were friends with benefits. Oh, and she pierced his ear," he added with a chuckle.

"So *that's* how that happened," I said.

"Yeah." He laughed.

"How'd he get the lip scar?" That was another secret Tyler kept under wraps.

“Did he tell you he got hit by a puck? He tells everyone that,” he said, clearly amused. “What really happened was he tried to shotgun a Coca-cola when he was...” He snapped his fingers trying to recall. “Hey Adds,” he called out to his wife. “When did Tyler try to shotgun that Coca-cola?”

A beautiful pregnant woman with long dark hair let out a laugh. “Wow, that was a while ago. He was fifteen, I think?”

Casey’s eyebrows raised. “And then he got his lip...

Unfortunately, Casey’s words were drowned out by the sports broadcaster on their huge flatscreen. Because he said the one name that instantly sent shivers up my spine.

“The Columbus rookie, Garrett Sanderson, is a Detroit native, so I’m sure he’ll want to show up against his hometown team,” the broadcaster announced.

My stomach dropped.

I hadn’t even realized the game would be against him. I smiled and nodded as Casey and his wife kept talking, but I suddenly felt nauseous. Garrett was a master manipulator. What if he said something to Tyler? Would Tyler fall for it? I fell under his fucking spells for *years*. He could ruin things for me. For us. And that knowledge had me shaking like a leaf.

Casey’s eyes narrowed on me. “You good?”

I let out a strangled “MmHm.”

His wife, Addie, patted his stomach. “Why don’t you go get us something to drink, please.”

Casey nodded and dropped a kiss on her head, and as soon as he was out of earshot, Addie whispered, “Okay, are you actually good?”

I let out a panicked chuckle. “Not really.” And

then I proceeded to spill everything to her.

Tyler

This fucking Garrett guy.

I knew I'd be facing him tonight, but I didn't realize he'd be dumb enough to goad me all game.

He'd been trying to instigate a fight through the entire first period, and I was holding it together well... But halfway through the second period, I was starting to lose my cool.

"You can have her," he chirped me as I skated to the face-off. He was a center, I was a wing. "She ruined herself with that fucking ugly hair anyway."

I stood up and shoved him back. "Shut the fuck up," I snarled in his face, but he just laughed.

"Oooh, touched a nerve, eh?" he taunted.

Griff grabbed the back of my jersey to pull me away and the ref immediately blew the whistle and started yelling at us.

Griff shoved me back to my face-off spot and held my eye. Then he gave *me* the calm down sign that he usually gave Duke when Duke lost his head. But this wasn't the same thing. Couldn't he see that this guy was asking for a fight? If anyone said so much as one slightly questionable word about his wife, he went off too. Hell, he went to *actual jail* because a dude insulted his wife back in the day.

I shook my head out and went into position. But I couldn't get Garrett's words out of my head. He just made it so incredibly obvious that he still kept tabs on her. On *my* girl. Well, she wasn't exactly my girl. But she

fucking was. Fuck. I needed to get my head in the game.

I tried to reign in my anger and use it to score a goal, I really did, but when I saw Garrett catch a pass, I unleashed.

I charged him low, making him tip over back onto the ice. The ref immediately blew the whistle to halt the game and I knew I'd be getting a penalty. But as I glided to the box, I felt a shove from behind. My face cracked into a grin. I knew it was Garrett. Perfect. In one swoop, I turned and smashed him in the face, making his nose immediately gush gross blood.

The refs' whistle went crazy again.

I skated myself to the box because I knew I couldn't keep down my queasiness.

As soon as I plopped down on the bench, I barfed between my skates.

Coach leaned over the glass. I thought I was gonna get chewed out, but he was cackling. "I'm not even mad," he said, shaking his head.

My entire penalty, I tried to get my head back. I needed to focus on my stats, not on what some rookie was saying... *Even if he was saying shit about Josie...* Because he was just trying to get to me. He had no claim to her. But *fuck*. Neither did I. Why the fuck had I gone on that pause with her again? I gulped. Thinking about that just made me more pissed.

When I was finally released from the box, I *almost* got a sick breakaway, but that twerp Garrett caught up to me and deflected my shot so it went way up and hit the net protecting the crowd.

Gliding to the next face-off, Garrett was laughing. "How's it feel?"

"Didn't you learn your lesson, Sanderson?" I ground out.

His grin deepened. “How’s it feel knowing that I screwed your pretty little girlfriend? That I’ve been there, between her legs, feeling her up, touching every part of her, hearing her moan *my* name. ‘Oh God, Garrett, yes, Garrett’,” he said in a breathy, high-pitched voice, imitating Josie.

My fists curled harder around my stick, and my vision went red. I was out for blood this shift. It wasn’t even the fact that he was goading me about having sex with Josie— don’t get me wrong, that did make me mad. But his whole act just reminded me of how shitty he treated her. Her teary face when she recounted how badly his betrayal hurt her was now stuck in my brain.

I was ready for this next shift. I was ready to throw down with Garrett, but the ref blew the whistle and skated to Hassik in net, who was motioning for help. The net had somehow popped out of place and he was having trouble fixing it.

I tried to block out the crowd and just take in the base hum of the rink around me. My entire body was twitching for revenge, but I forced myself to think. My eyes shifted as I mentally played out how I could take a stand without getting another penalty.

I motioned for Griff to chat for a second. Duke came over as well.

“I have a plan,” I told them.

“Fuck yes,” Duke immediately responded.

Griff shifted his weight and regarded me hesitantly. It was always harder to win him over. He was the best playmaker on the team, and the C on his chest proved it. “What kind of plan?” he asked, deciding to humor me.

I puffed up my chest. “Fuck up the face-off. Switch with me.” If a center cheated and moved for the puck before the ref actually dropped it, the center was

kicked off the face-off and a winger had to step in to take it. "Please. Lemme take it. Just this once."

Griff adjusted his helmet and squinted his serious blue eyes, probably trying to think of a way to turn me down.

"C'mon man," I tapped my stick lightly against the back of his legs. "Have I ever steered you wrong?"

"Ha!" he barked out.

I shook my head. "Recently. Have I steered you wrong *recently*? Remember my lil romance book trick play? C'mon. Please?"

His eyes lingered on the jumbotron above us for a brief second. We were tied 1-1. "Fine," he relented. "Don't make me regret this, Jetts."

"Well, *I* won't regret it," I mumbled under my breath as I went back into position.

As soon as the refs had everything under control, everyone was back in their places again, waiting for the puck drop.

Griff took his usual stance, legs wide, hands spread far apart on his stick. *C'mon buddy. Do it. Do it. Do it*, I mentally urged. Sure enough, a split-second later, he twitched forward and the ref immediately scootched back. The ref motioned for Griff to switch. *Fuck yes*.

I zoomed in close to Garrett's face. Garrett's eyes shifted between me and Griff. There was no one to protect him from me now. I smiled maniacally.

"What's wrong, Sanderson?" I asked in a low voice. "Didn't think you'd have to face-off against me, eh?"

He snorted, but his eyes were guarded.

As soon as the puck dropped, I went low to snap the puck behind me, but mainly to toss Garrett on his

ass. I towered over him and laughed before jumping into the play.

Griff and Duke were skating up ice with the puck. My legs burned as I skated to catch up. Griff was gonna take a fake-shot and drop the puck back for me, I knew it. He'd be expecting me up there.

And seconds later, he did drop it back, and I was right there on the blue line to catch it and take a shot.

But right as I was about to fire off a wrist-shot, I was pummeled from behind. The crowd let out a collective "ohhh!" which I fucking hated. The refs motioned for a penalty, but Duke had the puck now and Hassik was hustling to the bench to keep the play going.

Garrett made eye contact with me and grinned.

"Jettensen!" Coach yelled for me to get off the ice, but I ignored him— a move that I knew could be career-suicide. For once in my life, I didn't give a shit about any of this. Because I had my eyes laser focused on Garrett.

And as he skated in the corner, I rushed him. And this time, I actually jumped into the check at full-speed.

Our bodies collided for longer than they should've, and the glass shattered around us. Garrett fell almost completely into the stands.

I righted myself, brushed some glass off my shoulder, and full-on cackled at the sight of him struggling to push himself back onto the ice.

My guys on the ice were now embroiled in a brawl against the Columbus players. I was about to jump in to help TJ when the ref grabbed my jersey and started skating me to the door.

My first game misconduct in the NHL... and I wasn't even mad about it. I just hoped Josie wouldn't be

either.

As I stepped off the ice, I blew a kiss to the camera and hoped she knew it was for her.

42. Josie

I could not believe what just happened.

I sat there gulping like a fish out of water as SportsCenter replayed Tyler smashing my ex through the glass.

A minute later, my phone dinged with an incoming text.

***Tyler:** That kiss was for you, Miss Josie. Happy New Year. Hope you're enjoying the game over there.*

What had gotten into him?

"Tyler's never done that before." Casey stood back and rubbed his jaw, trying to muffle a chuckle. "He's not exactly the enforcer type. That was my role."

Addie caught my eye and an amused smile slid onto her face. "I have a feeling that guy said something he didn't particularly like."

"He smashed him!" one of the twins called out.

"Hulk smash!" the other twin added, then jumped on his brother to wrestle him to the ground.

"Think he's okay?" Stevie whispered to me as she tucked her hair behind her ears.

"I'm sure he's all good. You can text him." I patted her shoulder.

She bit her lip and nodded, and I think Tyler's heart would soar knowing that Stevie cared so much for him. I know mine did.

SportsCenter replayed the hit and zeroed in on Garrett's face this time, and I couldn't help it, a laugh popped out of me... and I loved Tyler a little bit more for giving me that.

But as the game continued without Tyler in the rotation, my body hummed with anxiety. My dad hated stupid penalties, and that was definitely stupid. I warned Tyler a while back not to do anything like this when he ominously said, *I'll take care of it*. I just hoped he didn't mess up his career over this...

"You mad?" Tyler asked hesitantly on the phone that night.

I could practically see him pouting his lip out with that tone, trying to get out of trouble. He'd been calling every night of the roadtrip to talk to Stevie— and me— and I started looking forward to the calls.

I was glad he wasn't with us in person right then though, because I couldn't stop a smirk. "You shouldn't have lost your head."

He sighed. "Exactly what your dad said."

"I'm not *entirely* mad though," I said quietly, trying to tamp down a chuckle.

"Woah, freaky. Now that's *exactly* what your dad said." He laughed.

I shook my head. "You boys."

"Don't *you boys* me," he warned. "It had to be done."

"Yeah, yeah," I breathed out. I paused for a second, unsure if I wanted to ask what was on the tip of my tongue. It's not that I would be hurt by Garrett's words or anything, I really didn't give a shit about what he thought anymore. But I cared about what Tyler heard. I needed to know how embarrassed I should be. I cleared my throat and asked, "What'd he say to you?"

"Uh..." He faltered, and then, "Don't you worry your pretty little mind," he sang in a horrible high-pitched voice.

That broke the tension I'd been feeling in my chest. "Oh, you're a Taylor Swift fan now?"

"Maybe," he drawled. "Listening to her reminds me of a special someone," he said, and I could practically hear his grin. "How's Stevie doin'?" he asked, changing the subject all together. And I let him. His casual way of redirecting punched me with relief. If he cared what Garrett said, he would've asked me about it.

I looked at her sleeping on the couch beside me and smoothed her fine hair. "She's good. I think she had a little drama of her own today."

"Oh?"

"Well, you know Griff's boy, Johnny? He has a *huge* crush on her, but she clearly doesn't have eyes for him at all, even though he was like panting after her all afternoon."

"No? Damn it. Griff's a good man, he's gonna raise him right. That'd be an easy arrangement."

"Arrangement?!" I whisper-shouted.

He laughed. "I know. But it's true. A man can dream."

"Well, she's not feeling him at all," I chuckled. "She's crushing huge on...Canyon Scott."

Silence filled his end of the call. And then, "Canyon? Canyon *Scott*? Son of Jules and Grey Scott? The *teenager* Canyon Scott?"

I laughed. "Yupp, looks like your daughter has a thing for older men."

"Shit," he bit out.

"I mean, not bad taste. His dad is quite the looker," I said charismatically. "All those tattoos. Hot damn."

"No, no, no," he said firmly.

“What?” I laughed.

“You know I can’t get tats, Josie. I can’t do needles,” he complained. “And you can’t be crushing on other guys. I feel like you’re not grasping the plot here,” he joked, reminding me of his words in the hospital when he was trying to win me over.

I bit my lip and smiled. “Oh? There’s more to this story?”

“Much more. I promise,” he said in a husky voice.

I smiled, wishing I could kiss him, wishing I could pry into what that meant, but for now, it had to be good enough. The man just pushed my ex through glass for crying out loud.

“Goodnight Josie,” he said warmly.

“G’night Tyler.”

43. Josie

The first Monday back at school, while messing with my classroom key trying to get my stupid door open, I unfortunately dropped my coffee and splattered it all over the newly washed floor. I knew right then, staring at the sad puddle that was supposed to be my source of motivation, that it was going to be a rough day... and I wasn't wrong.

About halfway through my morning, I started feeling nauseous, which was always the first sign. I should've remembered, but with everything going on to get ready for my first day back, I forgot I was also supposed to start my period.

The bell for my next class was already ringing, and I was supposed to be observed by an admin this hour, so I was really worried about being caught on my phone, but I quickly shot off a text to my teacher friend, Trish, because I knew it was her prep period. I punched out a jumbled text asking her if she had any extra tampons, tylenol, and if the break room had any coffee because I was dying.

Thankfully, my hour went alright, and I was able to keep it together through my observation. My kids were shockingly amazing whenever an admin team member was present in my classroom because they apparently really didn't want me to get fired— they actually said this to me back in the fall.

At the start of the next hour, I still hadn't heard from Trisha, which was slightly weird, but I figured I'd be able to make it to lunch without any major problems, so I shrugged it off.

But while running through attendance for my fourth hour, there was a knock at the door.

“Talk to the person seated next to you. Ask them how their break was,” I told my class while I shuffled to the door.

As soon as I cracked it open, my heart practically stopped.

Because standing there, holding a little brown paper bag, the kind he used to pack Stevie’s lunch in, was Tyler.

“Uh... hello?” I scanned the hallway wondering why the hell he was here.

He stepped forward kinda awkwardly and peeked into my classroom over my head. He was so close that my personal air was filled with the scent of his masculine cologne. My classroom was suddenly silent, and I could practically feel all my kids’ eyes glued to my back.

He pushed the bag forward to me. “Brought the stuff.” His eyebrows raised when he said ‘stuff.’

“Stuff?” I snatched the bag and peeked in to see an assortment of pads, tampons, chocolate, and a bottle of tylenol. Then he brought forward a hot coffee he was holding behind his back, looking mighty proud of himself.

I searched his face. “How did you...? I texted Trish...”

His face split into a goofy grin. “No, you texted me.”

My face burned as I mentally tried to recall what I’d typed.

Stevie suddenly appeared by his legs and started wedging her way into my classroom. “Heya guys, what’s goin on?”

Tyler’s mouth dropped open. “How... how are you here?”

Stevie shrugged. “I snuck out of gym class because I saw you walking into the school.” She licked her lips and balled her fists. “I thought somethin’ was goin’ down.”

Tyler and I made eye contact and I struggled hard to keep a straight face. He told me all about how he used to skip class, and now karma was biting him in the ass.

“You can’t skip class, Stevie,” he said, rubbing a hand over his jaw to hide an amused smile. “I’ll walk the jailbird back to class.” He placed a hand at the small of my back and leaned in close to whisper down to me, “But I’m glad you texted me, I’ll pretend it wasn’t by mistake. Hope you feel better.” He gave me a sympathetic smile, then leaned into my classroom. “Behave for Miss Josie, ya hear?”

I swatted his chest, but he just shot me a wink before turning away and grabbing Stevie’s hand.

When I turned back to my class, the kids went absolutely nuts.

“Miss Josie?! He called her Miss Josie, boys!”

“Did you guys see that?! He’s a simp for Ms. Pete!”

“Are you dating Tyler ‘the Jett’ Jettensen?!”

“He was totally flirting with her!”

“OhmyGod, Tyler Jettensen is going to marry Ms. Petey!”

“Did you see how hot he was? OhmyGod, he’s so hot!”

“I haven’t been this excited since Taylor and Travis!”

“Guys!” I cut in, trying really hard not to laugh. “Stop!”

They all stopped and stared at me for a millisecond.

And then, “You better not get married after a single day and have six people killed like Romeo and Juliet!” one of the boys shouted.

I rubbed a hand over my face, not sure if I should be mad or amused, but then one of the calmer girls in my class, Rachel, was sitting in the front seat, straining to hold her hand as high as she could.

“Rachel?”

“You didn’t say thank you!” she whisper-shouted.

I ran to the door and yanked it back open to see Tyler and Josie about to round the corner of the long hall. “Thank you!”

He raised his hand in a salute and flashed me his signature lopsided grin, and I think I fell even more in love with him.

The rest of my day passed by pretty uneventfully, but I couldn’t get Tyler’s kindness out of my head.

And I couldn’t get over the stark difference between him and my ex-fiancé.

Anytime I felt bad, Garrett treated me like a major inconvenience. He never once acted empathetic. And there’s no way Garrett would have ever brought me what I needed. In fact, I think he’d refuse to even buy tampons for me. Tyler purchased an assortment. I wanted so badly to kiss him at that moment, but we hadn’t kissed since the night we went on our little pause...

That afternoon, I drove Stevie home from school — we worked it out that I'd bring her home the days they had afternoon practice. But when I asked her how her day went, all I got was a little shrug, and she seemed kind of down.

I swung by the Starbucks drive-through to treat ourselves because I figured she might need a familiar little pick-me-up in the form of a cake-pop.

When we entered the loft, Garcia was home from practice early, icing a pulled groin.

Stevie plopped on the couch next to him and stole the clicker and his bowl of popcorn.

“How was school?” he asked her.

She shoved a handful of popcorn into her mouth. “Alright.”

“Just alright?” Garcia frowned.

She gave a little shrug and kept her eyes on the TV.

Garcia swiped back his popcorn. “No snacks ‘til you tell me how it went, woman.”

Stevie crossed her arms and huffed out a sigh. “Fine.” My eyebrows raised and I stayed quiet, hoping to hear what she'd say. “This stupid boy named Ryan from Miss Katie's class said that Stevie is a boy's name, and he said I'm not allowed to play soccer at recess because only boys get to play soccer. Then he pushed me and I got dirt on my new jeans.”

“He did what?” Garcia asked in a thunderous voice.

She just sighed again.

Tyler and Hassik walked in the apartment then.

“We got beef with a kid named Ryan,” Garcia announced.

“No.” I shook my head. “You can’t have beef with a child,” I said in a warning tone.

“Fine. We got beef with Ryan’s dad,” Garcia announced with a quirk of his eyebrow.

“What?” Tyler’s face cracked in confusion.

“Ryan in Miss Katie’s class is dead to us,” Garcia reiterated, crossing his arms.

“Yeah!” Stevie shouted, giving a mean mug to match Garcia’s.

I stepped in then. “Woah, wait a second. Maybe we should just try communicating with our words?”

“Oh, he used words!” Garcia said. “Little twerp said Stevie is a boy’s name and he won’t let her play soccer at recess, and he pushed her in the dirt. He had no clue who he was messing with,” he said, jutting an index finger to the floor.

“Yeah, he had no clue,” Stevie said, mimicking his motions.

Tyler puts his hands on his hips and ran his tongue over his teeth. “Okay yeah, we got beef.” He grabbed his keys again and started putting his shoes back on

“What? Where are you going?” I asked, alarmed now.

“Duh, we’re going to get a soccer ball that *Ryan* can’t play with. Let’s go, guys,” Tyler said to the rest of the crew.

“Yay!” Stevie yelled out, pumping a little fist in the air.

I turned on my heel. “Wait, Tyler, I’m not sure that’s the best way to handle this!”

But he was already walking out the door.

The next morning, I ran through my first three classes feeling extremely scatterbrained. At one point, one of my kids, Evan, held my shoulder and stared at me when I was answering a question for him.

My eyes narrowed to his in panic. “What?”

“You good, Ms. Petey?” he asked slowly.

“Yes? Why?”

His eyebrows popped up as he sighed. “Hate to tell ya this, but you’re helping me with number three, I’m on number six.”

“Oh,” I scratched my head as I stared at his paper. He was right. “Sorry, I’m a little off today.” All I could think about was little Ryan and the said beef with him. I just really didn’t want Tyler and Stevie getting into trouble.

“Uh, yeah, you can say that again,” he said with a chuckle.

I rolled my eyes. “You didn’t have to agree,” I grumbled, then I continued helping him with the correct question.

When the lunch bell finally rang, I bolted from my seat and exited my room before my kids, which was a first for me. I usually waited patiently until everyone was on their merry way.

But today, I dodged kids in the hall as I power-walked to the lower elementary grade’s wing of the school. I didn’t break my pace until I pushed open their recess doors.

Turns out, I didn’t have anything to worry about—I didn’t think...

Garcia, Tyler, and Hassik were standing out on the soccer field in front of all the kids and Stevie’s

teacher. The three of them were juggling a pink soccer ball on their knees, passing it between them, playing sewey.

“Y’all wanna play?!” Garcia announced, to which all the kids cheered.

“We’re only playing with you guys so long as *everyone* is allowed to play,” Tyler announced, crossing his muscular strong arms over his chest.

Almost all the kids cheered again.

Hassik wandered over to the little crew of boys that looked sullen. That was good. His delivery would be more gentle than Tyler’s.

Tyler caught my eye then. I could see his lopsided grin all the way from where I stood. He waved his arm to usher me over, but I just shook my head and waved him off with a smile. As much as I wanted to join them, my precious lunch time minutes would be over in what felt like five minutes.

Tyler picked Stevie up from school, so as soon as I returned home, I ran up the steps to the loft to get the details on how recess ended.

I could hear music blasting from their floor as soon as I entered the stairwell.

When I knocked on their door, Stevie answered with a bright, “Hey! Soccer was a success! Everyone can play now! Even Ryan! Dance party! Woo!” She ran back to the living room where the boys were busting goofy moves to Miley Cyrus’s “Party in the USA”, and I couldn’t help but laugh.

As soon as Tyler saw me, his eyes flashed. He slid on the hardwood floor over to me and grabbed my hand to pull me into their little dance party.

“So, Miss Josie,” he whispered in my ear,

making me shiver.

“Yes?” I asked, trying to look unaffected.

“Did you think I was going to bully a second grader today?” he asked, an amused smile on his face.

“I don’t know what I thought.”

“Oh jeez.” He let his head fall back. “I’m not stupid, you do know that, right?” he said with a quirk of his lip.

“What?” I stopped dancing and looked at him strangely. His face was turning red, like he was embarrassed he just said that aloud. “Where’d you get that idea?” I reached up and grabbed his chin. “I have never once thought you were stupid, you hear me? I’ll say it as many times as you need me to. What you *are* is protective, and *that* sometimes gets you in trouble. Tell me, who just got ejected out of their last game?” I asked, still holding his chin.

“Oooh!” his teammates chorused.

He rocked back on his heels, and he struggled not to grin. “Got it, Miss Josie.” Then he grabbed my hand and spun me around again.

44. Tyler

That night, it was storming pretty badly outside, to the point that thunder woke me up. I turned over and tried to sleep again, but then was slammed with a thought.

Josie...

I tiptoed over to my room and shook Stevie's shoulder. She grumbled and tried to turn back over, but I said, "We have a little mission, do you accept the challenge, yes or no?"

Her eyes flashed open. She popped up. "I accept."

"That's my girl," I said with a grin.

"What's the mission?" she whispered, rubbing the sleep out of her eyes.

"We're rescuing Josie, c'mon."

I used my phone flashlight to make it more of a 'mission' and we tiptoed through the apartment and down the stairwell.

Josie answered her door after the first knock looking pretty timid in her pj's, robe, and slippers. She was clearly wide awake.

I cleared my throat. "I promised you—"

She threw her arms around my neck and squeezed. I paused for a second, shocked that she cared so much that I showed up. It wasn't that big a deal... but I guess it was to her. Stevie jumped into the hug a second later too, and I sat there feeling like the hero of the story, and I loved it.

"Grab your pillow. You're coming back with us," I

whispered into her hair.

She was gone for a minute, grabbing her pillow and a small tupperware container, and then we were off, sneaking back up the stairwell.

As I watched the two girls in front of me, I couldn't help but wonder how the hell I'd made it through life so far without these two by my side making me feel like this... Like I was important; like I had a purpose, and that was to keep them safe and happy.

"Woohoo! Slumber party!" Josie shouted out.

"Shh!" I warned. "This is a *secret* mission, remember?" I just really didn't want her to wake up the whole complex.

But when we opened the loft door, Hassik and Garcia were already awake, walking out of their rooms.

"You guys hear that thunder?" Garcia asked, running a hand over his crazy hair.

"Loud," Hassik added, rubbing his eyes.

"You know what slumber parties need?" Josie piped up.

Stevie whirled around. "What?"

"S'mores," Josie said with a smile, opening the tupperware container she brought with her.

I cracked a grin and leaned to press a kiss into her hair. She looked up and beamed with the most heartwarming smile.

I still needed to find a way to define our relationship, but for right now, it felt like an unspoken truth that we were together.

Stevie hopped up on our counter and started making microwave smores with Josie. But as soon as the first one was done, Garcia shouted, "Mine!"

Stevie's eyebrows drew down. "No, it's mine."

"Why not mine?" Hassik pipped in.

"No, it's Stevie's" I argued.

I'm not sure who was the first to pull who into a headlock, but that's when we started wrestling like usual.

"Stop that!" Josie complained.

But I wasn't about to be the first to tap out, and they were thinking the same.

"Alright, now I'm upset!" Josie yelled, stomping her foot.

"Now she's upset!" we all chorused.

"Fine! It's mine!" Josie said, and then she bit into the s'more, making all of us groan.

A half hour later, we were all scattered around the living room watching "10 Things I Hate About You," to drown out the noise from the storm. At the start of the movie, Josie had been trying to teach me how to French braid Stevie's hair, but Stevie had fallen asleep to me brushing her hair out, and Josie started nodding off against my shoulder shortly after that.

By the time Kat was reciting her poem in the movie, Stevie was laying on my left arm, and Josie was snuggled into my right side. Garcia and Hassik were snoring away on the floor. We were like a happy little family, and I felt an overwhelming desire for it to stay this way forever. I was struck with the realization that I loved this life. I was a naive bastard to think life was so great before, but I never imagined how much greater my life would be with Josie and Stevie added to the mix. Things were perfect.

But that line of thinking should've made me

pause. I should've realized the universe wouldn't let me keep things this way. It never did. Everything was *too* perfect again... So that meant another shoe was about to drop.

45. Josie

It's almost like the world decided that if it was going to rain, it was gonna pour on everyone, because it seemed like everyone was having a rough day.

Apparently Stevie was going through it too because while I was teaching, she snuck into my classroom and wandered to an open seat.

When I finished the lecture portion of my lesson, I gave my kids work time on their essays, then made my way to Stevie and bent down by the desk.

"Stevie, you okay?" I asked gently.

Her little jaw set, and she crossed her arms over her chest. "My teacher is mean. Can I stay here?"

She needed to learn she couldn't just cut class, but at least she snuck into a different classroom versus going outside or hiding out in a bathroom. I'd have to tell Tyler so he could handle that lecture— I was a teacher here, and her friends, not her parent.

"How about you stay the rest of the hour in here? You can come up to my desk, yeah?"

She nodded and slowly followed me to the front of the room.

I quickly sent an email to her teacher letting her know she was with me. She looked busy at my desk with my gel pens, so I wandered around my room to help kids with their papers. Toward the end of the hour, I peeked over her shoulder to see what she was working on.

"That's beautiful," I told her.

She took in a shuddered breath. "Actually?" she asked, avoiding eye-contact.

“Actually,” I confirmed.

“My mom taught me some stuff,” she mumbled, keeping her eyes on the paper.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah... Like this,” she said, pointing to the way she criss-crossed pen strokes.

“My mom’s an artist too,” I told her.

She looked at me with wide eyes. “Really?”

I nodded. “She’s always getting paint all over and blasting music while she makes a whole mess,” I laughed. “But her paintings are really pretty.”

“My mom’s paintings are really pretty too.” She eyed her drawing again. “I want to make some just like hers.”

When the bell rang, I held her hand as we walked down to the lower elementary school hallway, and we talked about what we wanted for dinner instead of anything school related.

When we came to a stop outside her classroom door, I could feel her tensing up.

“You know, you can tell Tyler if you’re having a problem in class. He’ll help you, no matter what. He won’t be mad. He had his own problems in school. You should ask him about it, I’m sure he’d like to talk about it with you,” I told her.

Her eyes turned a little glassy and she wiped the back of her hands against them. “Yeah,” she said weakly.

“Is there a reason you said your teacher is mean?” I asked gently.

Her shoulders sagged and she let out a little cry. “It’s not my fault.”

I immediately bent down to her level and held

her hands.

“She doesn’t like so many questions, so people get scared of asking them, so then people ask *me* to ask them because they know I’m not scared of anything. At recess I get a whole list of things to ask her. Sometimes I can’t even remember them. So then I ask as many as I can and she thinks I’m stupid.”

“Ohmygoodness,” I said with a sigh.

“Am I in trouble?” Her face was streaked with tears she’d been holding in for apparently quite some time, and it broke my heart.

“No, definitely not.” I pulled her little frame into a hug and stroked the back of her hair. She melded into me, and I struggled to keep it together. “Stevie, that’s a great sign that people feel comfortable enough to ask for help,” I said, rubbing her back. “That shows you’re a good friend. I think maybe I’ll just fill your teacher in on what’s happening, is that okay with you?”

She nodded against my shoulder and mumbled, “Can you tell her they’re not my questions?”

“Yes, I will tell her.” I held her little shoulders. “And when someone is mean to you, it says a lot more about them than it does about you, okay? I think your teacher is having a problem with her own patience. You did nothing wrong. You can keep doing what you’re doing, but only if you want to, okay?”

Stevie wiped her face again and sniffled up her tears. “I want to help my friends, I just don’t want her to be mad at me.”

I nodded and straightened myself up. “I will make sure she’s not mad at you, okay? And ya know what? I’m very proud of you, honey,” I told her, kind of shocking myself at how natural it felt to call her that.

She balled her hands in fists and nodded, like she was building up courage to walk back into her

classroom.

“Have a good rest of your day. And remember what I said about people being mean, okay?”

She blew out a sigh. “Yup. It says more about them.”

I nodded.

I realized later that I probably should’ve reminded my high schoolers about how to handle big emotions.

46. Tyler

After a hard practice, we were scheduled for an off-ice workout as well, but this time, with Claire leading it.

I checked my phone as soon as I got off the ice, as per usual, and that's when I noticed the email from Stevie's school.

The email was addressed to parents notifying them of an altercation at the school. My heart practically beat out of my chest as I carefully tried to read the email. The school wanted parents to discuss the incident with their students ya-da-ya-da... But then my eyes landed on one of the scariest sentences I ever read. A teacher was hurt in the incident. My mouth went dry.

I re-read it, trying to focus my mind, trying to make sure I wasn't jumbling things up.

My chest practically seized and it felt like my airway was cut off.

I shoved Duke next to me.

"Hey!" he protested, but I cut him off.

"Does that say a teacher was hurt?" I shoved the phone up to his eyes.

His eyes shifted to mine. He didn't have to say anything to confirm. I could read his face perfectly.

I frantically undressed, feeling my hands shaking the entire time. I bolted out of the locker room, not even bothering to put my shit away. One of my buddies would take care of it.

"Jetersen, where do you think you're going?" Coach shouted as I tore out of there.

I didn't break my pace. "Duke!" I shouted back.
"Talk to Duke!"

I'd get fined for missing practice, but I didn't give a shit. I hoped Duke relayed the information correctly to him because he had a right to know that a teacher at his daughter's school was hurt. If it were potentially Stevie, I sure as shit would want to know. I just hoped to God that the teacher who was hurt wasn't Josie. The problem? It was unexplainable, but I had a gut-wrenching feeling that it was.

I ran through the snow and was back at our apartment in record time. I shivered as I pounded on her door, really hoping no one would be home.

When I heard motion behind the door, my stomach dropped.

"Josie, open up! It's me!"

I heard the door handle move and as soon as the door gave way my hands went up to my head.

My eyes drifted over the beginning of a black eye and a split lip, and it was like taking a punch to the gut.

"Fuck, Josie," I breathed out.

My entire body was trembling with anger, but I was scared to pull her into a hug, to hurt her.

47. Josie

“It’s fine, it’s okay. I’m okay,” I tried to reassure him as I pulled him into a hug, but his body was trembling. I put my hands on his scruffy cheeks to try and force him to look in my eyes, to center him. “Hey, it’s okay. I’m okay,” I said slowly.

I knew the email that went out to all the parents from the admin team was a little overkill. I tried to argue that it wasn’t needed, but they insisted.

Tyler finally hugged me back, holding the back of my head gently. “No, it’s not,” he ground out. He held my face and inspected the black eye with so much care that my heart wobbled in my chest. “Is the kid who did this expelled? Please tell me he’s gone,” he spat out angrily.

I paused. “Well, no—”

His jaw popped. His nose flared with an angry breath. He tore from my grip and paced the apartment like a caged lion as he scrolled on his phone.

“What are you—”

“I’m calling the school.”

I sighed. “No, Tyler, stop.”

“No?” He looked at me with wide eyes. “Josie, the kid pummeled you. Your eye is practically swollen shut. Your lip...” He swallowed hard and shook his head. “I’m going down to the school right now. I need to talk to them. That kid needs to be expelled.”

I stood my ground in front of the door. “Tyler, you know more than anyone that guys get tunnel vision when they fight. I talked with him, and-”

His face cracked and he looked at me like I’d lost my mind. “What? You talked to him?”

I blinked back at him. Why was he shouting? Why was he acting so irrationally? “Tyler, calm down,” I tried in a placating tone. “He’s a kid. Yes, I talked to him. It broke him that he hit me. It was a total accident. I shouldn’t have tried to break up the fight the way I did. But he feels so bad about it that I don’t think he’ll ever fight again.”

“Did you yell at him? I think I need to-”

“No, Tyler.” I shook my head at him, hoping he’d understand. I touched his chest, trying to calm him. “I gave him a hug.”

He blinked at me a few times. And then his shoulders fell. His eyebrows drew together and he tried to form words, but nothing came out. He backed away a few steps, then his face cracked, and his eyes glassed over.

I immediately pulled him into a hug and held him as he shook. Something was going on in that head of his that I didn’t quite understand, but I knew he needed the comfort.

“I guess I’m a sucker for people who have the world on their shoulders and just need a hug,” I mumbled into him, hoping he knew I included him in that category at the moment.

When he finally wiped his eyes, he looked down at me again. “I hate seeing you like this, babe.”

“It’s okay.” I patted his chest.

We stayed standing there, just holding each other for a minute, his scruffy chin resting on my head.

“Ya know, I’m kinda surprised...” I drawled, breaking the silence.

“About what?”

“You’re not running to barf at the sight of my split lip,” I said, my shoulders shaking with a light chuckle.

I thought he'd laugh, but his face remained stoic. "You can't be joking right now, Josie. I'm still so pissed about this."

"I'm sorry, it's okay though, really, I'm okay," I reassured him.

"No, it's not. Your mine to protect. You and Stevie."

I looked up at his warm, brown eyes. "I'm yours?"

His body went rigid as he searched my eyes. "Is that okay?"

"Yes," I said, and for the first time today, I started crying too.

He gently wiped my tears away. "Why are you crying, baby? Does it hurt?"

"No, well, yes, it does," I snorted. "But I'm just... I'm happy," I said, smiling at him through my tears. "So we're not on a pause right now?"

"Fuck that. We're never pausing again," he said gruffly, pulling me into a hug. "I am still incredibly angry that you're hurt, but I'm happy to be here for you." He tipped my chin up and kissed my forehead.

I breathed in this moment, but then my phone started ringing. "Shit. That's my parents. I really don't want to be apart from you tonight, but they want me to stay over there to monitor me just in case I have a concussion." His jaw popped again at the mention of concussion. "Would you... would you want to come over for dinner? You and Stevie?"

48. Tyler

When I said yes to dinner, I thought my biggest hurdle would be seeing her dad. I had no clue what the night had in store for me.

I stood on their front porch holding Stevie's hand, and gripping flowers for Josie's mother in my other hand.

Stevie arched a skeptical eyebrow at me. "You good, big guy?"

"Yeah, why?" I breathed out.

"You're squeezing my hand," she said, making a face and wiggling her fingers.

I loosened my grip. "Sorry, I'm a little nervous."

The door swung open. My knees went weak. I squeezed my eyes shut for a second, wondering if my brain was playing tricks on me.

"Mrs. P?" I rasped.

We stood there staring at each other, and it was like a time warp back to Northfield High School. The last time I saw her, I was feeling like a piece of shit for trying to break one of her art display cases.

Mrs. P broke into a warm smile. "Tyler Jetterson, it's been so long. How are you?"

"I..."

"Hi! My name's Stevie Haley," Stevie said beside me, holding her hand out for a handshake.

She took Stevie's hand and graciously ushered us in.

Inside their huge foyer, Mrs. P knelt down to Stevie's level and her eyes went a little misty. "You said

your last name was Haley, didn't you?"

Josie came down the stairs then, and my eyes bounced between her and her mother. *That's* why Josie looked so familiar to me. Not that damn viral video, not her dad. It was because she was Northfield's art teacher's daughter. How had I not known that? I rubbed a hand over my forehead, feeling confused as fuck.

Mrs. P took Stevie's cheeks in her hands. "Ohmygoodness. It is so wonderful to see you, honey. It was such a shame to hear what happened to Fiona. Such a beautiful soul, gone way too soon. Her art was just so beautiful."

My neck snapped to Mrs. P. *What did she just say? What the fuck did she just...*

I fisted my hands by my sides, trying to physically grasp on to something. "Gone? No." I shook my head. "She's in rehab."

My eyes fell to Stevie. Her chin quivered and then she took off running further into the house. Josie's hand flitted to her mouth and her eyes widened before taking off after her.

I stumbled back, feeling like the floor was just ripped out from under me. I looked over at Mrs. P. "What do you mean?"

I forced myself to think back. Stevie said she had to go away. She was grumpy, so I left it at that. *Rehab... Had my own mind placed her there? Was that just a story I told myself to move on? Was going away just the story Stevie told herself?*

Mrs. P's face morphed into confusion. "Honey." She reached her frail hand out and patted my shoulder. Her face held sympathy. "She was in a car accident a few weeks ago. She passed."

No. No, no, no. I shook my head, but no words came out. My stomach lurched. My vision swam. I felt

my way back to the door, back to the porch steps.

Fiona.

How could this have happened?

How could she have been taken from the earth and I had no clue?

Every insecurity of my teenage self came thundering back, closing in on me, suffocating me, reminding me of how horrible I felt the last time I saw Mrs. P. Reminding me that everyone I loved eventually left me.

“I need... a minute,” I mumbled practically incoherently, then stumbled back outside into the cold.

Inside the privacy of my truck, I slammed my hand against my wheel and yelled out.

Why? Why hadn't I dug for more information? Why had I buried my head in the sand for *weeks*?

I collapsed in my car. For Fiona. For Stevie. For me.

49. Josie

“Mom, how did he know you? What’s going on?” I asked desperately, still holding Stevie to my side. She’d buried her head against my stomach and was crying into my sweater.

“He was a student at Northfield High when I taught there,” my mom whispered.

I rubbed a hand over my forehead trying to piece everything together. My mom taught at a local public school the years my dad was an assistant coach for Minnesota’s NHL team. I went to a private school in the city down the street from where we lived.

“And Fiona.” I swallowed down the rest of my sentence and mouthed. “She died?”

She bit her lip and nodded solemnly.

For a split-second, I wondered how Tyler hadn’t known... Then again, he moved away from home and didn’t keep in contact with anyone besides Duke and Claire. And Tyler had no social media either. So when he asked Stevie about rehab and she agreed, why would he question it?

My heart hurt for Stevie. And for Tyler. And for Fiona, who I never even met. But knowing her daughter, there’s no way she wanted to leave her so soon.

“I truly thought he knew. I’m so sorry,” my mom said, her forehead creasing in worry.

I hugged Stevie tighter, but I really wanted to go after Tyler as well. “Can you...” I motioned to the door.

She wrung her hands together nervously. “I’ll have your father talk to him.”

My dad dropped his butter knife at the table.

He'd already started eating and was completely oblivious to the devastation happening around him. "Me?" he growled, pointing to himself confusedly.

"Yes, *you*, Herb," my mom snapped.

I nodded to the door, giving him a stern face that said *get your ass out there*.

He grumbled and bunched his tablecloth in a ball before tossing it on the table and shuffling out of the room.

50. Tyler

The knock on my window made me jump.

I looked to the side to see Coach standing there with his usual gruff face seemingly wanting to enter my car. That would not be happening. There's no way I wanted Coach to see me like this.

I quickly wiped at my face before rolling my window down slightly. I forced myself to keep an even, deep voice. "Coach, can you uh... can you tell Stevie to come out? We have to go."

He waited for me to make eye-contact, when I did, I wanted to squirm away from his intimidating stare. "Nope. You're not goin' anywhere. Not fit to drive right now anyways, son. Open the door."

He could tell I was weighing my options, trying to get out of listening to him, because then he practically growled, "Unless you want next practice to be living hell for you *and* your teammates, you'll open this fucking door, Jettersen."

That was probably the one threat that could force me to listen to him and he knew it. I reluctantly unlocked my truck. He swung the door open and plopped in my passenger seat, then turned the heat up and rubbed his hands together.

The silence between us was unnerving. I covered my eyes and decided to just get this over with. If I explained myself, then maybe he'd deliver the message to Josie, and I wouldn't have to break her heart.

"If I get attached, something bad always happens. I'm better off not ever getting involved with anyone. Ever. The other shoe looming over my head always drops and it explodes. I can't be responsible for

exploding anyone else. Josie..." My throat burned. "She deserves a better man. I can't... I can't be the one for her. Because I don't want to hurt her. I shouldn't have..." My voice was shaky and I hated it, but I needed to get this out. "I tried, okay? But I can't save anyone."

"Calm down, son. You're not even making sense right now. Not sure you even know what you're saying."

"I *do* know! I fully know, Coach." I regretted raising my voice at him before I even finished my sentence. I was fucking this all up.

He set his jaw and practically glared at me. "Let me set the fucking record straight for you. I swore I'd never say this, so I'm only gonna say it once, and you better fucking listen." He sighed. "Why do you think I set her up in that specific apartment after she broke up with that selfish prick? Think about it— who else is single there? Hassik, Garcia, and you. And you think I trusted Hassik and Garcia, two guys I just met this year? No, dufus. You. I trust you."

His words left me blinking at him. I shook my head. He was making this up to make me feel better, that had to be it. "No, you... You threatened me not to—"

He sucked in his upper lip and shrugged. "Y'all always do what I tell you not to. Plus, I wanted to see how much you wanted it. Kind of entertaining for me."

I sat there shaking my head, feeling more confused than ever.

"Now you listen to me. Those girls in there? They're *your* girls. They need *you*. My daughters, they're my girls too, but I'm not stupid enough to think I'll be around forever. That's why you," he pushed a finger into my chest, "need to pull yourself together."

"I can't... I can't—"

"Yes, you can," he snapped. "Would you leave any of your teammates hanging if they needed you?"

He knew I wouldn't, but this wasn't that simple. "No, but I left Fiona, and—"

"No, you didn't leave her. You two were not together. She had her life, you had yours. It's horrible what happened to her, but that doesn't reflect on you at all. It doesn't reflect on her either. She was in an accident, son. I'm not sure how your thick-headed brain jumped to a conclusion that roped you up with blame." He shook his head. "Grief is a tough thing."

My throat burned. He was trying to let me off the hook, but I still wasn't sure I deserved it.

"Listen, I know what kind of man you are, what kind of teammate you are, even if you don't. You think I don't know that you pushed your brother to be a better player? A better guy? You think I don't know who pushed Duke to fix things with his wife? You're probably still shocked I knew about you and my daughter. I knew you'd be walkin' in my door tonight."

I gulped. "How?"

He shrugged. "I had my suspicions for a while, but then you're suddenly reading hockey romance novels? And then I knew for sure after you slugged Sanderson. You're not a fighter, son. I know everything that's talked about in my rink. And I *trust you* with my daughter. My wife and I have known you for years. Who do you think gave your brother updates back when you were in high school? You owe my wife for stolen art supplies by the way."

I tipped my head up to my truck's ceiling because my eyes burned. How the hell had I been so clueless?

"I know you're an excellent teammate. And those girls in there? They're your most precious teammates. They're your teammates for life. Got it?"

I covered my eyes because I was determined

not to let Coach see me cry.

“Let’s go. I’m hungry,” he gruffed.

I really wanted another minute alone in my car, but Coach wasn’t leaving until I followed him.

As soon as I was near him on the sidewalk, he pulled me into an awkward hug, then pulled me into a headlock quicker than Casey ever could.

“Jeez, you’re fast for an old man,” I huffed out.

He chuckled and pulled tighter. “Just don’t forget, I can make your life a living hell if you hurt my daughter.”

“I respect that, sir,” I answered truthfully. I understood the threat more now because of Stevie.

“Good.”

Inside, I found Josie and Stevie in the cozy foyer petting an old dog, and I was immensely thankful for Josie, for her holding it together for Stevie when I couldn’t. At that moment, I knew I was going to ask her to marry me one day. She truly was my teammate for life, I could feel it down to my bones.

When I walked over with my hands in my pockets, Josie gave me a sad smile and eased away. “I’ll be in the kitchen,” she said, standing and pushing a quick kiss to my jaw. I briefly held her lower back and wanted so badly to pull her into a hug, but I knew that could wait.

As soon as it was just me and Stevie, I sat down beside her and the dog.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I asked her gently.

Her shoulders hiked up. “I didn’t want it to be real.” Her voice wobbled and she quickly wiped at her eyes.

“But it is real, baby.” I blinked furiously to stop my eyes from leaking again. “And now that I know, I can help you with it.”

She nodded furiously with her eyes closed, and I pulled her tiny self into me for a hug. She broke down, sobs wracking her little body. My little girl had been through so much, and she was so brave and so tough and so sad, and I had no clue. But I vowed to be clued in from now on.

“Your mom will always be a part of us, okay? I haven’t seen her in years, but she touched my heart, and I have always carried her with me, you know that?”

Her teary blue eyes stared up at me and her chin quivered. “You do?”

I brushed her hair back. “Did your mom ever play the ‘Edge of Seventeen’ for you? It was one of her favorite songs back in the day.”

Her eyes widened and she nodded.

“That’s why I chose to be number 17 in hockey. I chose it back when I was with your mom, and I’ve kept it ever since because it reminds me of her and where I came from. It’s my good luck charm. I actually had to beg the Crewmen to give me 17 because someone else already had it. A little money may have exchanged hands,” I joked, but it was true. I’d pay any amount to be able to keep wearing the number.

Stevie launched at me into a hug. And my eyes might’ve leaked a little more.

Within the next half hour, the Petersen’s door seemed to ring every five minutes, and a new sister of Josie’s would show up on the porch with her family in tow.

I knew Coach was a girl dad, but I didn’t realize

he had four daughters.

Josie's little nieces and nephews all called her "Aunt Joey," which was absolutely adorable. And while she played with them, she gave each kid her undivided attention until they finished speaking— even when they said "um," and "uh" every two seconds and took forever to get stories out— and I realized that's how she was so good with Stevie and how she was such a great teacher, she had the patience of a saint.

Dinner after that was peaceful, and because there were so many people, it was nice to just blend in. It was also nice that her dad seemed to grill one of the other guys— her sister Katie's husband— a lot more than me. And it was even more nice that I got to sit next to Josie and she held my hand under the table through the entire dinner.

Before leaving for the night, Stevie asked Mrs. P, "Do you think you can teach me to paint? Just like my mom?"

Mrs. P responded with tears in her eyes, "Most definitely. You can come over anytime, Sweetheart." She stood then. "Actually, I'll show her the studio right now if that's okay? Give you two a minute alone," she said with a wink in Josie's direction.

Josie rolled her eyes lightly. "I swear I didn't plan that."

I stepped toward her and pulled her into a hug. "I know you didn't, but I wouldn't have minded if you did." I paused. "Sorry about... Thanks for... You know..." My throat felt lodged with emotion.

She grabbed the lapels of my peacoat and looked up at me and nodded. "I know."

Relief punched into me at that, and I was so fucking grateful for her. I kissed her head and she melted into me, and I couldn't hold back anymore. I had to say

it. I was bursting to say it.

“Josie,” I whispered.

She stayed relaxed against me. “Hmm?”

“I love you.”

Her eyes snapped to mine.

“I love you,” I repeated. “Is that... Is that okay?” I searched her eyes.

She wrapped her arms around me and buried her head in the crook of my neck. “I love you too, so damn much, Tyler.”

My eyes watered for what felt like the millionth time today, but this time, it was because of happiness. I blinked and stretched my face to friggin’ stop it.

When she pulled back from the hug, I held her cheeks and kissed her, and then I was wrapping my arms around her and dipping her body, still kissing her like I never wanted to let go.

“Yay!” Stevie’s happy voice rang out.

Josie giggled against my lips, and I couldn’t stop my own smile.

51. Josie

Tyler told me he loved me last night, and I naively thought that's how our story would end. I thought we made it to our happily ever after.

I just wish we knew then that big earthquakes were coming our way.

I had taken the rest of the week off work, but at the end of the school day on Tuesday, I ran up to the school to drop off more detailed sub plans. I thanked God I went when I did, because what I saw in the parking lot made me break out in a run.

"What are you doing?" I practically shrieked as I bolted through the snow to reach them.

"Josie! Help me!" Stevie screamed in desperation. She was sandwiched between a weathered looking woman in her sixties with botched bleach hair and a balding man with a beer belly. They both had a firm grip on Stevie's arms and were practically dragging her to a beat-up, old minivan.

"Stop being so dramatic," the woman snarled at Stevie. I immediately knew the woman must've been related. She had the same blue eyes as Stevie, but on her, they looked ice cold.

I immediately dialed Tyler and hoped he'd pick up right away. My body was shaking with a panicked rage I'd never felt before. "You cannot take a child from school," I shouted. "This is illegal."

"She's our grandchild," the woman snapped at me. "We have rights to her."

I felt like I'd been knocked back by those words.

Where the hell was Tyler? The terrified look on Stevie's face was making me edge on hysteria. There were still five minutes until the final bell rang for the lower elementary school students. Tyler had to be getting here soon. I just needed to stall until he got here and solved this.

"You had no rights to Fiona as soon as she turned eighteen, what makes you think you'd have rights to her baby?"

"Fiona was an ungrateful little bitch," the woman sneered. Stevie cried out against her cruel words. "We deserve a do-over."

"Show me that you have rights. Show me DNA proof. Show me *something* that permits you to take her," I demanded.

The woman's voice dripped with disdain as she said, "We'll show you a court order, honey."

Tyler's large truck swung around the bend. He immediately threw the door open and ran, leaving his truck in the middle of the parking lot with the keys still in ignition.

But before Tyler could even reach us, the old man threw a folder at his face. "You've been served, dipshit," he grumbled.

Tyler threw the folder to the ground and his face turned a deep shade of red. "Get your hands off my daughter, right now," he growled in a menacing tone.

But the woman actually laughed evilly in his face. "Oh, that's cute. I can see what my slut of a daughter saw in you." Then she addressed me. "Honey, why don't you show me what *he* has that says he can take her. He's not even on the birth certificate. *We could* charge him with kidnapping. But don't worry, we won't." Her wrinkled face broke into a crazed smile. "He's our little cash cow for the next ten years."

Tyler's face scrunched in confusion as they just continued forward and started forcing Stevie into the van.

Stevie started flailing her arms and legs, kicking against the two of them. But when the grandfather grabbed her waist and lifted her off the ground to shove her roughly in the car, I threw myself at Tyler to stop him from doing something he'd regret.

His entire body was trembling violently as he looked down at me furiously like I was a traitor.

"Calm down," I begged. "Violence will *ruin* your chances of custody. The school has cameras. This will all be on tape."

When I knew he was no longer in danger of throwing punches, I reached for the folder on the ground and quickly tore it open to read the contents inside.

Stevie was screaming hysterically from the car now. "Daddy! Don't let them take me!"

I'd never heard her call him by that title before. From the desperate look on Tyler's face, he was thinking the same thing. Her screams were torturous to him.

"I promise I won't skip class anymore!" she screamed. "I promise I'll be good! Please! Daddy!" The hysteria in her voice was like a knife to the heart for me, so I couldn't even imagine the mental turmoil Tyler was experiencing.

Tyler rushed forward to face her through the dusty back seat windows. "It's okay, baby. Stay strong. I'll get you back. I'll get you back, I promise."

Clearly unafraid of running him over, the minivan lurched forward. Tyler followed the van, shouting promises to her until he couldn't anymore.

At the edge of the school's parking lot, he crunched forward and held his head between his knees,

clearly breaking down.

I rushed forward and pulled him into a hug. “We’ll figure it out,” I whispered into his chest. “Let’s go talk to the social worker.”

52. Josie

“These things just take time to get straightened out.” Karen, the social worker, sighed as she scanned over the paperwork from the folder. “It does cause an issue that he’s not on the birth certificate. When Fiona passed, the proper channel would’ve put Stevie in the care of Rhonda and Earl Haley, her grandparents, but you said the friend of Fiona’s swooped in and delivered her to you? Why?”

“She knew I was the father,” Tyler argued. “I’m the proper guardian.” He pointed to his chest. “I am her dad. I have a DNA test.” He started swiping on his phone for the proof and then held a picture out to the social worker.

“Okay.” Her brow wrinkled. “Don’t shoot the messenger, but it still doesn’t look good that the mother left you off the birth certificate. It makes it look like she didn’t want you involved. Do you have anything written that she’d want Stevie to be in your care over her parents?”

Tyler’s chest rose and fell quickly, a sign that he was losing patience. “She can’t stay with them. They’re dangerous.”

Karen narrowed her eyes at Tyler. “Do you have any proof that she could be in danger right now? If you have proof, it’d make things go much quicker.”

Tyler’s jaw ticked. “No. No, I don’t have any proof.”

She sighed again and directed her attention back to the papers. “Well, I’d advise that you lawyer up before this court date. I’m sorry, that’s pretty much the only advice I have... It looks like...”

“What?”

Her brow furrowed. “It looks like they’re seeking back child support as well as support moving forward. But the back support doesn’t really make sense in this case...”

“Oh my God,” I shook my head. “She called you a cash cow, Tyler.” I looked back at Karen. “You think this could be a money grab?”

She shrugged. “There’s no real way of knowing... but this is an... odd case, given the circumstances,” she said carefully. “I’ve never had a case with grandparents popping up out of the woodwork like this before. She’s never had a relationship with them? Ever?”

“Not that I know of,” Tyler said. “I’ll get her back, right?” he asked desperately.

Karen paused and clasped her hands together on top of her desk. She eyed me as if silently pleading that I help Tyler get ahold of himself. “A lawyer would know much more about this. But from what I’ve seen in the past, the grandparents are probably going to try to prove that you’d be an unfit guardian. If they successfully do that, then they’ll get custody despite DNA proof, and they’ll probably get child support as well. Off the record though... if they called you a cash cow,” she arched a skeptical eyebrow, “I doubt Stevie would see any of that child support.”

Tyler froze. He ran his tongue over his teeth and nodded. I could practically feel the anger reverberating off him. Without another word, he marched out of the office.

I threw a “thank you” over my shoulder before running to catch him.

Things happened quickly after that, and I

suspected money changed hands to make things work faster. On Thursday morning, Tyler went to the courthouse with his lawyer and the judge put a temporary situation in place that didn't quite favor him—he and I both knew it, but we left it unspoken. Tyler had to finance Rhonda and Earl's hotel room until custody was decided, and he only had Stevie on the weekends.

In Stevie's absence, the loft transformed into a sad, quiet place, with Hassik and Garcia afraid of saying anything that would make Tyler upset. There were no more brawls or video games or dance parties, and Tyler didn't dare touch any of Stevie's things. He barely stepped foot in his old room in fear of disrupting her space. He'd become a ghost of who he used to be. It's like Stevie had stolen his light and taken it with her, and the only time he was his true self again was when Stevie was permitted to be in his care during the weekends.

Through the next two work weeks, Hassik, Garcia, my dad, and I were all called to the courthouse to give statements as character witnesses to help Tyler. He thanked me profusely the day I returned home from giving my statement, but other than that, he was practically silent throughout the week. He skipped hockey practices and games, telling my dad to put him on some kind of leave. I thought my dad would argue back, but the next day, news hit sports blogs that Tyler would be out for a month with an undisclosed injury.

And I understood why he did it...

For once in my adult life, my personal life mattered way more to me than my professional one. Before, I used to spend my time outside of school planning for the school day... Now, I did the best I could at school, but as soon as the bell rang, my focus went to Tyler.

I knocked on their loft door every day when I returned home from school with food in hand to force

him to eat. But even then, he barely touched the food I brought to him.

I spent most of my afternoons in his loft helping him look over past custody cases. At one point he threw a folder he'd been holding across the room in frustration, and I knew he had a harder time reading when his mind was tired. When that happened, I tried to convince him to rest, but he'd call his lawyer instead and demand to talk through the case.

The final night before the final custody hearing, he banged on my door well past midnight. His shoulders slumped and he looked so defeated... which was so different from the Tyler I knew. Gone was his quick grin and larger-than-life stance. He'd definitely lost weight from not eating or working out, and he just seemed so... *lost*. Like he'd forgotten how to smile.

"I'm sorry I've been so..." He sucked in his top lip and shook his head. His lower eyelids were red, like he'd been crying.

"No, you have nothing to apologize for," I said. I tugged on his wrist to pull him into my place. "Let's go to bed. You need rest."

He hugged me loosely from behind in bed and silence settled around us, but I knew he was still wide awake.

"Think it'll be okay?" he asked in a forced, strangled voice which told me he was close to breaking down.

I patted his arm around my waist. "Yes, I do."

He was quiet for a beat. "And if it's not?"

"Then you'll keep fighting, right?"

"Yeah. I won't stop."

“No, you won’t,” I said with conviction. “And that’s how I know it’ll be okay. Stevie knows too. I can tell. She has confidence in you.”

He nodded against me and pulled me closer to him. The only reason I knew he was crying was because a tear dripped on me, but I didn’t call attention to it. I knew he’d prefer it that way.

A few minutes later he whispered, “You still up?”

I nodded and turned in his arms. I traced his scruffy jaw with my finger. I missed his lightness, but through these past few weeks, I’d fallen even more in love with him. His determination to fight for the ones he loved made him even more attractive.

His throat bobbed with a hard swallow, and he stared at the ceiling. “I just keep turning everything over in my mind. I just still feel like I’m missing something. Fiona wanted Stevie to be with me, right?” His voice sounded so hurt, so unsure of himself, and it broke my heart.

I held his chin and stared at him in the dark. “Yes, Tyler. I’m sure she’d want her to be with you.”

He rolled further on his back and rested his arm over his forehead. “I just wish I had proof, ya know? I didn’t even know she existed until a few weeks ago. It doesn’t look good.”

“When did her grandparents find out about her?”

He shrugged. “I guess they found out when she was young. Maybe three, four? Fi ran into them in the grocery store.”

I mulled that over for a minute. I couldn’t imagine my parents not knowing I had a child. How would I even hide the pregnancy? And Fiona was even younger than me when she had Stevie.

“So they had no clue Fiona was pregnant? How

was that possible? Wasn't she still in high school?"

Tyler sighed. "Yeah. Supposed to be her senior year. Guess Stevie has two drop-out parents."

I shook my head. "No, I'm not saying anything about that. I just mean... did she run away?"

He cut his eyes to mine like it was obvious. "Well, yeah."

I sat straight up in the bed. "She ran away," I whispered.

Tyler held my waist. "Yeah... What about it?"

I turned to him. "*That's* how you prove Fiona didn't want Stevie to be with them."

His eyebrows drew down. "But isn't that hearsay or whatever it's called?"

I shook my head. "Not if there was a police report. Not if there was an Amber Alert."

His eyes widened, then he scrambled out of my bed and ran for my laptop. "Babe, I think you might be a genius."

53. Josie

The morning of the custody hearing, I sat in the second row next to Casey and his twin boys, who were dressed in little suits for the occasion. Tyler's teammates couldn't make it because they were on the way to the airport for an away game when we left the loft.

"Addie's so upset she couldn't make it," Casey whispered to me ruefully. His hair was neatly combed back today, and he'd shaved his beard, making him look younger and more like Tyler.

"It's okay, she needs to stay healthy. This is too stressful." I could practically feel the nerves coursing through my body. I took a quick sip of water to steady myself, but my hand was practically shaking.

Casey pulled at his tie. "Yeah, it is," he agreed.

Tyler stood at the front of the room next to his lawyer in his "lucky suit"— he claimed his team always won when he wore it, and he needed a win today. Tyler and I drove separately because he wanted to arrive super early— like three hours early. I'm not sure if he slept at all last night, and he couldn't sit still all morning, so if arriving early made him feel better, who was I to say anything about it?

The other side of the courtroom remained empty, and I knew it was a naive hope, but I hoped anyway that Rhonda and Earl would just skip town and not even show up today.

"That's John," Casey said, nodding to Tyler's lawyer. "Played hockey with him back in the day."

I should've known John was a hockey player; he carried himself with the same ease and confidence the rest of the guys did.

“He’ll get it straightened out, I’m sure of it,” Casey added with determination, but the way his throat bobbed with a hard swallow told me he was nervous as well.

With two minutes left until the designated hearing time, Rhonda and Earl walked in. Rhonda, dressed in jeans and a tight T-shirt like going to court was the same as stopping by the grocery store every day, practically snarled at the sight of me. Earl wouldn’t make eye contact with anyone. Looking at Earl, the only word that came to mind was gray. He was just a gray man, devoid of any and all emotion and hope.

“Piece of work, that one,” Casey whispered, nodding his head toward Rhonda. “Lot of nerve to come after her granddaughter when her daughter wanted nothing to do with her.”

I scoffed in agreement. That was most definitely true. And what Rhonda said in the parking lot popped back in my mind— *Fiona was an ungrateful little bitch. We’re owed a do-over.* No. She really wasn’t owed anything.

At 11am, the judge, who had pin-straight graying blonde hair and hawk-like eyes, finally looked up to view the courtroom over her black-rimmed reading glasses. Right when she was about to bang her gavel to commence the trial, the doors at the back of the room opened up again...

And that’s when a long line of sharp-looking men dressed in pricey, eclectic suits came striding into the courtroom. Garcia shot me a wink and Hassik did a little salute my way. My dad shuffled in at the end and tipped his hat to me, and the sight made me tear up.

The judge must’ve been a Crewmen fan

because she said, “Aren’t you all supposed to be on a plane to South Carolina right now?”

“Some things are more important than hockey, your honor,” my dad answered. “Family first,” he said, giving Tyler a firm nod.

Tyler nodded back, but his face faltered and he clenched his jaw, like he was trying to cover up the fact that he was breaking down a bit. I knew my dad’s words had a double meaning, and I hoped Tyler knew as well. My dad always wanted his men to know they should value their family over anything or anyone else, and he wanted to lead by example, but my dad also considered his team his family. And one thing my dad would always do is show up for his family when they needed him.

The Crewmen all quietly took their seats, practically filling up Tyler’s side of the courtroom, and I think I was more proud of my dad in that moment than during any Stanley Cup Championship game.

It was just unfortunate that we had no clue we were about to listen to Tyler get absolutely shredded with lies.

The Haleys’ lawyer spent what felt like the next hour trying to prove that Tyler was an unfit guardian because he was violent.

“Take a look at his girlfriend’s face last month.” The smug lawyer said at one point while punching a few buttons on a clicker. A screen in the corner of the room suddenly displayed a picture of me from a couple weeks ago with my black eye and split lip. I audibly gasped. How the hell had they taken that photo? I could practically feel eyes landing on me and I felt like a deer caught in headlights. “Can’t be a coincidence,” the lawyer added dryly.

My dad shot up from his seat. “Jetterson had nothing to do with that, you smug son of a—”

The judge banged her gavel and glared at my dad. “Take a seat Coach, or I’ll have you thrown out of my courtroom.”

I held my breath for my dad to listen. Griff thankfully pulled him down by his sleeve.

Tyler kept his head down, but when he peeked at the screen, it looked like he’d just been slugged in the stomach.

Bile rose in my throat because I knew this was killing him. He’d spent his whole life trying to prove that he was nothing like his father, and here these two were, trying to make him out to be an abusive boyfriend.

Casey next to me wasn’t holding up much better. His eyes were rimmed in red, like he was about to cry. He angled his jaw to the side and took in a shaky breath.

“How can they spew all these lies?” I hissed.

Casey’s throat bobbed again. “Don’t worry yet. Look at his lawyer. He’s prepared for this.” Which was thankfully true, Tyler’s lawyer’s head was bent down as he shuffled through papers in front of him.

But the Haleys’ court-appointed attorney was on a roll. “And look at what happened at his workplace,” he drawled sarcastically. The screen in the corner of the courtroom now lit up with footage of Tyler punching Garrett, then of him putting Garrett through the glass.

“Objection!” Tyler’s lawyer *finally* spoke up. But the damage was done. Stevie’s grandparents sat back in their chairs like this whole case was taking candy from a baby.

And I felt like it was my fault.

I couldn’t control getting hit in the face at work, and Tyler wasn’t ever a fighter on the ice— he fought *one* time. Because of *me*.

A tear escaped my eye and I had to quickly

swipe it away. I needed to stay strong for him. It wasn't my reputation that was being drug through the mud, but I couldn't seem to get a hold of my emotions.

Because Tyler didn't deserve any of this... And I made it worse.

A vision of him walking back to our apartment complex without Stevie flashed in my mind and I knew I wouldn't be able to handle it. It'd kill him.

It suddenly felt like my air supply was cut off and I was left gasping. I held my chest and tried to breath, but my anxiety was suffocating me. I gulped and tried to make a break for the bathroom, but Casey caught my hand and shared a pained look. "It'll be okay, breathe," he whispered, then mimicked a deep breath for me while holding my hand. "Tyler needs you here. He's worried. Every time they say he's violent, his eyes snap this way. I know my brother, and I'd be the same way. He's used to people leaving. If you leave now, he'll think you believe the lies. He can't be worried about losing you too right now. If you can tough it out, please stay for him."

I closed my eyes and continued trying to breathe steadily.

And that's when Tyler's lawyer finally stood. He rounded the desk, buttoned his flashy suit jacket, and slid a hand over his slicked back hair.

John started off by reading a progress report from Stevie's teacher: "Stephanie is making excellent progress in my class. She has an easy ability to make friendships and she clearly always wants to stand up for the underdogs during recess. She has no fear of questioning authority when she feels something is unfair." Tyler smirked a little at that. "And she's excelling at math and shows a keen interest in art. She's an excellent addition to my class," John finished. "This is the same school where my client's girlfriend, Josephina Petersen, works. My client should never have been

accused of injuring Miss Petersen in the first place,” he said, then he used the screen across the room to display a side-by-side picture of my face along with my administration’s email regarding how it happened.

Tyler bit his bottom lip nervously and cut his worried eyes to mine like he was sorry for even bringing it up. I tried to give him a reassuring nod.

John then spoke from my mom’s testimony– I hadn’t even known she was a character witness– about Fiona and Tyler’s past relationship. He argued that Fiona kept him off the birth certificate because she didn’t want to distract from his hockey career, but by putting Tyler’s name as Stevie’s middle name, it proved that Fiona held him in high regard.

Unfortunately, the Haleys’ lawyer popped up from his seat and shouted, “Hearsay.”

John didn’t hide rolling his eyes. “Fine, you can say Fiona’s feelings about my client are hearsay, but you cannot argue that she ran away from those two,” he said, jerking a thumb toward Fiona’s parents. “Please direct your attention to this Missing Persons alert. Fiona was reported missing the September of her senior year of high school because she ran away from home. Why would she want her daughter to go back to the same home she ran away from?”

Casey was nodding his head now.

“I hope he touches on hockey,” I whispered to him because I needed to say it aloud. It was difficult to sit still and keep my mouth shut.

“And the fact that they’re discriminating against my client because of his respectable profession when it’s the very thing allowing him to provide for their granddaughter is pretty questionable,” John said loudly. He went on to compare Tyler’s penalty minutes to the league average– which Tyler was way below.

John ended his argument by saying, “And if hockey is a problem, my client is ready to give it up in a second in order to obtain full custody of *his* daughter.”

Tyler’s nose flared as he gave a swift nod in confirmation. He was choosing Stevie over hockey... just like Fiona knew he would so many years ago.

John strolled over to his seat beside Tyler and stayed standing.

The judge bent her head over the paperwork in front of her for a minute, then pursed her lips. “Before I ask Miss Stephanie Tyler Haley to come in, I’d like to ask the two parties seeking full custody a simple question.”

54. Tyler

I stood quickly and could see Rhonda grumbling under her breath as she reluctantly got to her feet.

The judge's eyes narrowed to Rhonda. "What do you call her?"

Rhonda shared a flustered look with her husband. "Her name, obviously," she scoffed. "Stephanie."

I couldn't stop myself from blurting out, "That's not her name." I clenched my jaw, trying to harness my rage over the fact that she didn't even fucking know her granddaughter. She was dragging her in here, wanting custody, all because she felt she was owed it, not because she actually knew Stevie and wanted her.

Rhonda's furious eyes flashed to mine. "Yes, it is. You were not even aware of her existence until a few weeks ago." She laughed shrilly. "I shouldn't be surprised."

Heat climbed my neck as the judge banged her gavel. "Mr. Jetterson," she addressed me, "what do you call her?"

I tore my eyes from Rhonda and looked at the judge. "Her name is Stevie. She's named after Stevie Nicks because Fiona, who was my best friend, was a huge fan. I wish I could ask her to confirm everything I'm saying right now, but Fiona used to analyze the shit—" John harrumphed at my curse word, but I licked my lips and continued, "she used to analyze all of Stevie Nick's lyrics and all her interviews. She called her a true feminist icon." I chuckled thinking about her yelling at me to listen harder to the lyrics. "She was all about women making their own money from their art. Fiona, she was a beautiful artist, and I know she was teaching Stevie how

to paint, and if she's interested, I'll make sure she learns as well. But I know Fiona would say she named her Stevie so she grows up to know that there's power in being a woman and there's power in being an artist. I will raise Stevie to know that. I will raise her with Fiona's wishes in mind." I was still slightly shaking when I sat back down.

The judge nodded and motioned to the sheriff in the back of the courtroom. "Let her enter, please."

My little girl entered the room and I immediately stood and smiled at her. She gave me a shy smile and looked nervously at all my teammates in the benches, then she gave them a little wave. "Hi boys. Nice to see you today."

My guys all laughed and waved back, and that eased away a little tension from the room. Rhonda rolled her eyes. Earl cracked his knuckles in frustration.

"Hello honey. What is your name?" the judge asked her.

"Stephanie Tyler Haley," she enunciated. Rhonda flashed a smug smirk at me. "But my friends call me Stevie," she announced.

John's large hand landed on my neck and he forced me to look straight ahead instead of at Rhonda and Earl.

"Okay, may I call you Stevie?" the judge asked.

My little girl twisted her lips and cocked her head to the side. She had no fear in her voice when she said, "That depends..."

Her eyebrows popped up at her response. "On?"

She squinted at her. "Are you going to let me live with my Dad?"

I couldn't help but crack a little grin, to which John elbowed me to knock it off.

The judge's lips curved up in an amused smirk. "Why don't you come up to the witness stand so we can chat a little."

Stevie let out a little huff before scampering up to the stand.

"How old are you, honey?" the judge started.

"Eight. I turn nine in February."

"Do you enjoy school or any other extracurricular activities?"

Stevie sucked on her top lip, thinking for a second. "I do like school, but I'm getting a little tired of asking questions."

I leaned forward, concerned now.

"What do you mean?"

She made a big show of sighing. "Well, most of the kids are scared to ask the teacher questions, so they tell me their questions at recess so I can ask them because I'm not afraid of Miss Kelly."

Damn. Listening to her say that reminded me so much of Fiona. She'd throw down for the underdogs and I'd never forget her punching that Bradley kid in the face for making fun of my reading ability. I was so proud that my daughter was just like her.

"And you're annoyed about this?" the judge inquired.

She shrugged. "I guess not really anymore. I like helping my friends. And Josie told Miss Kelly about it and Miss Kelly is trying to be nicer to everyone now."

"Well that's good."

"Yeah. My mom said to make sure to help people in school because people have problems that you don't know about."

Her words punched me right in the chest. I wished so badly I could talk to Fiona again. Even just for a moment, so I could thank her. For everything.

“That’s good. Sounds like your mom was smart,” the judge said.

Stevie’s chin quivered and it just about killed me. She chose to nod instead of speaking.

“What about other activities? Do you enjoy anything else?”

“My mom taught me art. Josie said her mom can start teaching me too. *Her* mom taught *my* mom, can you believe it?” she smiled excitedly.

The judge, along with some of my teammates behind me, chuckled. “And who is Josie?”

Stevie pointed to Josie in the courtroom. “My dad’s girlfriend,” she whispered, and a tiny smile pulled at her lips. “Well, I *think* she’s his girlfriend,” she added with raised eyebrows. “They hold hands and dance together. And I seen them kiss a few times. Oh! And my dad said I can try out for soccer in the spring. I want to do that too.”

The judge made a few notes, and I started sweating, really hoping she was writing good things. “Okay Stevie, do you know why we are here and talking today?”

Stevie nodded.

“Do you understand that everyone here just wants you to be happy?”

She paused for a second before nodding again.

“And you understand that I will listen to your opinions, but I am the only one who chooses which person you live with, okay?”

I understood why the judge said that... Because

kids going through this would probably develop trauma if they felt responsible for choosing one parent over the other in front of everyone, but I didn't think that was the case with Stevie based on how she screamed the other day when her grandparents were trying to shove her in their damn van. My fists tightened over the memory of her panic and how helpless I felt.

Stevie rolled her eyes and huffed out, "Fine," making a few of my teammates chuckle again.

"Can you tell me what you and your dad like to do together? Or can you tell me a fun time you've had with your dad?"

Stevie smiled brightly and her happiness gave me relief. Half the time I felt imposter syndrome over trying to parent, but maybe I was doing alright. "Oh yeah," she started, "I like to go to his hockey games, and I like when he takes me to Uncle Casey's house because I get to play with Beau and Ty."

Beau and Tyler both jumped up and tried to run to her. Casey had to catch them by the back of their little suits to keep them in place. They squirmed against his hold and waved to her.

"And one fun time was when we went on a secret mission to save Josie."

The judge's brow furrowed. "Save Josie?"

"Yeah," Stevie giggled. "She's afraid of storms so we went on a mission to save her and bring her home so she wouldn't be scared. We stayed up late" – I cringed hoping that didn't make me look bad– "and made s'mores in the microwave, and we watched a movie. She tried to teach my dad how to braid my hair, but I fell asleep."

"And can he braid your hair?" the judge inquired.

"Ha! Nope," she said, and the way she said it so succinctly made everyone let out a little chuckle.

“Oh, and Christmas was great. I was worried Santa wouldn’t find me, but he did. And then we went skating and I even scored a goal on him! It was so much fun,” she gushed.

The judge bent her head to write down a few more notes. When she looked back at Stevie, she was making silly faces at Beau and Ty.

“Okay, now can you tell me something you and your grandparents like to do together or a fun time you’ve had with them?”

Josie’s eyes flicked to them for the first time today.

I could practically feel white hot tension building in the room as she stayed silent for what I’m sure was two full minutes.

“Stevie, can you tell me something you and your grandparents like to do together or a fun time you’ve had with them?” the judge repeated.

Stevie’s face turned red and she burst into tears. She looked so small and scared up there that it killed me. I lifted to my feet but John’s hand on my shoulder shoved me back down. He was much stronger than he looked. He gave me a firm negative head shake, but I hated feeling so helpless, and I hated even more that she had to go through this.

“Can I ask why you’re crying?” the judge asked calmly.

She flung her arms out. “Don’t you get it?”

There was my girl with her little attitude. I grinned even though my vision of her was blurring a little from my own tears.

“Excuse me?”

“I cannot tell you anything. I have zero things to say. I don’t even *know* them,” she wheezed between

sobs. “My mom didn’t like them. She said we’re not allowed to say hate but she hates them. We saw them in the grocery store once and we ran away and they were chasing us and screaming mean things.”

I had no clue she’d be able to recall meeting them because she was so young, but her ability to remember spoke to how traumatic it must’ve been for her.

The judge paused. “And do you remember your mom ever talking about your dad?”

Stevie swallowed and wiped at her eyes. I leaned forward, curious as to what she’d say because I’d never asked her that before. “Not really,” she shrugged. “She said he was her best friend in the whole world but she had to move away so he helped her make a new best friend, me. She said he was very good at hockey too and that maybe we’d visit him one day.”

“And is that true?” she asked Stevie.

She turned to me and a look of mischief flashed in her still teary eyes. Her nose scrunched as she said, “Well, he’s kind of a bender, but that’s okay because he’s *our* bender.”

That broke the tension. My whole team started busting up laughing. I covered my face and my shoulders shook with laughter. I think my body forgot what it felt like to laugh until that minute. The judge didn’t quite know what to make of all of it.

She banged her gavel to quiet everyone. “I mean, is it true that you were going to visit him one day?” she clarified.

“Oh,” Stevie waved her hand in front of her like that wasn’t a big deal, “yeah. She said maybe after my ninth birthday because then I’d be old enough to decide for myself.”

The judge went back to taking notes, but a

minute later, Stevie tapped on her desk and whispered something to her.

55. Josie

The judge whispered with Stevie for what felt like five full minutes, then she nodded and Stevie got to her feet.

As soon as Stevie climbed down from the witness stand, she ran to Tyler and squeezed between him and his lawyer on the bench. Tyler brushed her hair back and dropped a kiss on the top of her head.

“I think what Miss Stevie had to say was very enlightening. I’m awarding full custody of Stephanie Tyler Haley to Mr. Tyler Jetterson.” she said with a bang of her gavel.

The courtroom erupted in applause and hoots and hollers from all the hockey boys. For me, it was like a damn broke inside me and tears of happiness streamed down my face.

“Wait just one minute there, you hoity-toity judge bitch!” Rhonda screeched. “What about back child support? My daughter had to raise her with no help.”

The judge’s face hardened. “I can tell what kind of person you are just by that question. You argue more about back support than my decision pertaining to custody.” She shook her head in disgust. “And that was your daughter who supported Stevie, not you. Stevie has also made me aware that she overheard you talking about your plans to sell off her mother’s paintings. Those are not your property. I’m ordering them to be seized and handed over to Miss Stevie Haley immediately.

Tyler whispered down to Stevie and held her in a tighter embrace. He briefly lifted an arm to wipe his shiny face and his head tipped toward the ceiling in relief.

I think everyone in the courtroom was tearing up

a little over the sight of the two of them together.

As they walked out of the courtroom holding hands, Stevie said, "Let's go home." Then she held a hand out to me. "You too, Josie, c'mon!"

EPILOGUE

Tyler

She was practically shivering in here. Damnit. I wanted everything to be perfect, but this was not starting out well. I rubbed a hand over my jaw, feeling miffed by this complication. I should've warned her to put a jacket over her cute spaghetti-strap dress, but I was never one to think about having her cover up. Hell, I loved that dress. And I usually had my jacket to give her, but I stupidly dressed in a polo shirt to look nice today.

Jeez, I needed to calm the fuck down. My thoughts were racing.

"You cold?" I asked. Thinking quickly, I shook out the cloth napkin that was folded into the shape of some kind of bird. "Well, you're in luck. They gave us tiny blankets, babe. You can have mine too." I shot her a wink.

Amusement flashed in her eyes. "Tiny blankets?"

I shrugged and felt the smile pulling at my lips. I was always smiling around her, I couldn't help it.

She accepted my tiny blanket and put it on her lap. "I'm only taking yours because I know you never use your napkin anyways," she said, giving me a conspiratorial grin. That was correct. My girl knew me well.

The waiter, dressed in a fancy-pants, three-piece suit, wandered over to our candle-lit, white table-clothed table. "Good evening, may I offer you a choice between S. Pellegrino and Aqua Panna?"

I tried to read his face. Between what and what? I eyed Josie to see if she understood.

“Water,” she whispered helpfully.

“Uh, the free kind?” I blurted out, then immediately put a fist to my mouth. *Should not have said that aloud, dude*, I chastised myself.

The waiter pursed his lips, unimpressed.

Josie started giggling across the table. “We’ll take the Aqua Panna. No sparkling water for us. Thank you,” she said graciously.

The waiter nodded and swiftly walked away.

“Thank you,” I whispered to her, pulling a face. “Who knew there were different kinds of waters?”

She laughed lightly as her kind eyes scanned over the large menu.

When the waiter came back with a wine bottle full of water, he asked, “Any appetizers for the table?”

I cleared my throat and spoke up. “Yes. We’ll take the beef carpaccio.”

Josie’s eyebrows popped up. She must’ve been impressed.

As soon as the waiter disappeared, she whispered, “I’m surprised by that choice.”

“Really?” I shrugged and went back to scanning the menu. To be honest, it was like trying to read a foreign language. I was trying hard to read the ingredients to piece together what they fucking meant. Was there some kind of rule about making food sound complex at pricey restaurants? Like, the fuck? I wanted chicken parmesan. How hard was that to write on a menu?

When the appetizer arrived, I paused.

It looked like he handed us a plate of grass. Where the hell was the beef? I prodded around with my fork and lifted what looked like a piece of thin salami.

“We got scammed, bro,” I muttered.

Josie burst out laughing, causing people around us to look, and I could feel my face flaming red. “I wondered if you knew you were ordering raw beef for us.”

“Bleh.” I quickly dropped the raw meat off my fork and swallowed hard. “You’re telling me I just wasted thirty bucks on this raw shit?”

Her eyebrows pulled together in pity. “You totally only ordered that because it had beef in the name, didn’t you, honey?”

I dipped my head, but a grin pulled at my lips, giving me away. I loved when she called me “honey.” She started laughing again.

“You can’t come at me like that, babe,” I said under my breath. “You know I can’t lie. Why’d you let me order it?”

“Honestly? I wanted to see your reaction,” she said, her eyes dancing in amusement.

“Wow,” I said dryly, leaning back in the uncomfortable chair. “Mean.”

Josie put her menu down on the table and brushed her hair behind her ears. “I know you really wanted to have this fancy date night, and I really appreciate it, but we don’t *have* to stay here if we don’t like it, ya know?” She scrunched her nose as she looked around us. “It’s not really our scene.” She leaned forward to whisper, “And is it just me, or does it feel really weird to be at dinner without Stevie?”

I forced out a tight chuckle and pulled at the collar of my shirt. It did feel weird. But this was supposed to be our proposal dinner. The waiter had my ring back there and was going to put it in her wine glass... But the more I thought about it, the more I knew she was right. This wasn’t us. Like at all. We were more take-out food

in front of the tv vibe with Stevie sitting between us.

“Yeah, let’s—”

The rest of my sentence died because ice cold water was drenched on me out of nowhere.

I sat perfectly still, shocked.

The teenage waitress gasped at the sight of her tray and about fifteen empty water glasses shattered on the ground at my feet.

I shook my now slightly damp hair out and cringed.

Josie burst out in laughter again.

“I’m so, so sorry, sir,” the girl whispered, holding a damp towel out to me.

The poor girl looked like she was about to burst into tears.

“It’s my first day,” she whispered. “I’m so sorry.”

I sucked in a deep breath, struggling hard to keep a straight face because Josie was laughing so hard.

“You’re good. It was my fault,” I told the girl, brushing ice cubes off my lap. “You’ll tell everyone that?” I said with a firm nod, trying to convince her.

Her throat bobbed with a swallow. “Thank you so much,” she whispered before swiftly walking away.

I shook my head as Josie continued laughing her ass off, fanning her face so she wouldn’t cry and ruin her makeup.

“Yeah, yeah, laugh it up, buttercup,” I retorted, standing from my chair. “You’re right. This isn’t us. I’m trying to be something I’m not,” I admitted. “And I got bitten in the ass for it.”

That spurred on another giggle attack. “Yeah,

don't do that," she said, standing and giving me a pat on the cheek. "I love who you are." She lifted on her tip-toes to press a kiss to my jaw.

"Love you too, babe." I held a hand to her lower back. "Let's get out of here. I'm just gonna run to the bathroom real quick." *And get my ring back*, I mentally added.

Finally back in my truck with the ring securely in my pocket, I looked over at her pretty self in my shotgun seat. "Where to?"

"Let's go get Stevie." She smiled. "I miss having her with us. She totally would've roasted you so hard back there."

I grinned as I eased my truck into drive. I missed having her with us as well. And that was true— while Josie laughed at me, Stevie would've cackled and video taped the whole thing to show her friends... and then it'd probably end up on social media.

Josie and I were always sneaking away for little make-out sessions lately and we always talked big game about hiring a sitter to get some alone time, but as soon as we were away from Stevie, it seemed we both missed her like crazy. That really said something to me about Josie as well— that she felt the same way as me, that she loved my daughter like she was her own.

As I pulled onto the highway toward Casey and Addie's house where Stevie was surely tearing it up with TJ and Beau, Josie said, "By the way, my sixth hour is saying they'll track you down and rough you up if you guys don't make the playoffs this year."

"Oh really?" I grunted, unimpressed. I could take those teenyboppers.

“You know they love you,” she said with a laugh.

“Yeah, yeah.” I loved those little shits right back, and I loved hearing about all their nonsense in class. I just wasn’t a fan of them highlighting all my mistakes to my girl as soon as she walked into class the morning after games.

“Ever since your little stunt coming in my room, they ask about you every day and they keep jokingly calling me ‘Mrs. Jetterson.’ They say they’re just manifesting for me.” I could practically hear the eye roll in her voice.

I grinned. “I do love the sound of that.”

She paused for a beat. “Yeah?”

“Do you?” I briefly shifted my eyes off the road to sneak a peek at her. She was blushing. I nodded and couldn’t keep the grin off my face. “Noted, wifey.”

She laughed. “Okay, hubby,” she added, matching my energy.

“Ooh,” I blew out a sigh and adjusted my pants.

“That did not just make you hard?” she deadpanned, her eyes narrowing on me.

All I did was grin.

As soon as I let us into Casey’s house, Stevie came barreling at us for a hug, then she quickly ran back to the den.

“We’re all in here!” Addie yelled.

In the den, Stevie was on her knees in front of a mini-sticks net while Beau and Ty were battling it out for the mini-puck on the rug. Addie, looking ready to have her baby at any second, was stretched out on the couch with her laptop in front of her.

“You guys are back soon. Casey’s manning the grill out back. He’s making dinner, why don’t you go tell him you’re here?” she said, not taking her eyes off her work. “Ooh,” Addie grunted in pain.

“You good?” I asked, my eyes zeroing in on the hand rubbing her belly.

“I’ll go tell Case,” Josie said, going to her tip-toes to plant a quick kiss on my jaw.

“No need to tell him about me!” Addie called after her. “Just tell him to add steak for you two!” She finally directed her attention to me. “He’s such a worry wart these days.” She winced in pain again and shifted on the couch. “It’s just braxton hicks.”

“I don’t blame him. You don’t look too...”

“What?” she demanded with an arched eyebrow.

I lifted my hands in innocence. “Comfy. You don’t look too comfy, Adds.”

“I’m not,” she said through clenched teeth. “Your brother puts monstrous babies in me.”

“Hey!” Beau called out.

“We’re not monsters!” Ty chimed in.

She waved away their concerns and they went right back to their war on the rug. She continued typing, so I plopped on the recliner and flipped the TV channel to SportsCenter.

“Annnd done,” Addie said, slamming her laptop shut.

My eyebrows popped up. “With the project? Really? Can you say what it was now?”

She grinned. “Okay, I’ll tell you because I need a name for it and maybe you guys can help me. I’ve been interviewing some of our friends about their love stories. The first one was Grey and Jules. It’s really such a heart-

wrenching story. I kinda... turned it into a romance novel," she said shyly.

"Damn, that's awesome, Adds."

Her cheeks pinked up a bit. "Really?"

"Yeah, that's fuckin' cool." I leaned forward. "If ya haven't heard already, I'm kind of a hockey romance reader now."

She dropped her head back against the couch laughing. "I forgot about that!"

"Who else are you gonna write about?"

She twisted her lips in thought. "Maybe TJ and Ellie, Savannah and her husbands, and maybe Duke and Claire would be funny."

"So, everyone from the Ice League?"

"Yeah, I guess those are all couples who skated at the Ice League at one time or another— Oh oww!" she cried out, making me jump to my feet.

"You're sure those aren't real contractions? When are you due?"

She squeezed her eyes shut and breathed through her mouth to ride through the pain. "Not for another two weeks, it's fine. Distract me."

It was suddenly all too quiet in the room. I turned to see Stevie and the boys staring at Adds in concern.

"She's okay," I told them gently. "Stevie, why don't you take the boys in the backyard by Uncle Case and Josie? Maybe play a round of soccer before dinner."

They scampered off, but Stevie kept glancing back in concern. I gave her a reassuring smile.

"Distract me, please," Addie begged.

"Okay, our story would be a good one," I said.

"Yeah, it would be, but you two haven't finished

your story yet," she said.

"No?"

"Nah, you need to at least get engaged first. Or promise your undying love to her or something. Actually, you better get on that. If you take too long, Coach is gonna be on your ass about it," she said with a smirk.

"True, especially because I already asked for his permission to marry her. He'll be expecting it soon," I added.

"Wait really?" Her face lit up with excitement. "How are you gonna ask?"

I snorted. "Well, I was actually gonna ask tonight." I pulled the ring from my pocket and showed her.

"OhmyGod." She took the ring and her eyes widened. It was a simple gold band with a singular oval diamond. As soon as I saw it in the store, I knew it was hers. "What happened? Why didn't you do it?"

I shrugged. "The fancy restaurant vibe wasn't really us, so my new idea..."

Addie cried out again and panic lodged in my chest. I hated seeing her in so much pain.

"You sure you're alright?"

"Yes, now tell me the plan," she demanded.

"Okay, well," I rubbed my jaw, "I was thinking about crashing a school assembly one of these days. Feels right since the first time I met her was at school. And I'd like her kids to be hyping me up. I don't think she'd be able to crush their little hearts by saying no to me," I chuckled.

Her eyebrows pinched together. "Oh wow, I love that so much," she gushed. "That's definitely more your guys' vibe. Good—" she was cut off by the sound of water

tinkling on the hardwood floor.

I looked down to see that it was soaking my socks. “Addie...” I lifted my wet foot. “Is that... Is this...” My nose wrinkled. “Did you just pee on me?”

Her eyes widened. “Oh my God. Was that my water?”

“Are you asking *me*?!” My stomach lurched. I covered my mouth. “Fuck, fuck, fuck, Casey!” I gagged. “We need help!”

Addie reached forward and grabbed my shirt in her fist. “So help me God, if you throw up right now, I will end your ass, Tyler,” she screeched. “Help me up.”

“Okay, okay.” I reached for her hands and craned my neck not to look at the ground.

“Fucking breathe!” she screamed at me. I had a feeling that’s what I was supposed to be telling her, but I couldn’t exactly think straight.

As soon as she was standing, there was a woosh of water spewed all over the ground.

My brother finally ran in the room. His hands found his head and it looked like he’d just been punched in the gut. “Oh my God, I told you they weren’t braxton hicks!”

“Well I know that now!” Addie seethed.

“See, didn’t I tell you?” Casey was saying to me now. “Her whole independent woman thing can backfire because she never wants to ask for help.”

“Now is not the time!” Addie growled at him with a murderous glare.

Casey pushed me aside and grabbed his wife’s hands. “Okay, let’s get to the car.”

“No, no, no,” Addie whimpered, gingerly sitting back on the couch. “I don’t think I can do it.” Tears

streamed down her face as another contraction hit.

Casey was looking at her helplessly, trying to mutter directions to her, and I felt horrible for them.

“I don’t wanna have this baby in the car, Casey,” she said weakly.

“Honey,” he smoothed her hair back, “we can get to the hospital,” he said with conviction. “I promise. I’ll drive fast.”

“No!” She frantically shook her head. “The baby’s coming now. It’s happening *right now*. Call 911.”

His eyes darted around. “Right now?”

She nodded urgently.

“Right now. Right now,” he repeated as if in shock, then he fumbled with his phone to dial 911.

The kids were suddenly in the den’s doorway, watching with horrified faces.

“What’s going on...” Josie’s sentence died away as soon as she saw what was happening. She marched forward and shoved the platter of steaks at me. “Go take the kids back to the kitchen. Why are you wet?”

“I don’t... I don’t feel so good.” My stomach lurched again.

“Just go,” she ordered, then she rushed to Addie’s side.

I made my way through the doorway and urged the kids to follow me, but the twin’s looked terrified.

“It’s okay guys. I promise. This is just what happens when you have a baby.”

“I’m never having a baby,” Stevie snapped, crossing her arms over her chest.

Shit. I wasn’t sure what to say to that because I was feelin’ the same way as her.

The twins stopped walking and were now whispering to each other.

“C’mon guys.” I nodded forward to the kitchen table. “Dinner time.”

But Addie released a cry of agony and the boys made a run for it. I grabbed Beau’s t-shirt to stop him and dropped all the steaks on the ground. Their golden retriever was there in a second to gobble them up. Ty slyly skirted past us and ran for the den. Beau started scream-crying to join him.

“Uh, I need some help, Josie!” I called out.

“No, you don’t,” Addie screamed. “Babies! Mamma is okay, I promise!”

“I’ll switch with him,” I heard Josie say. “He can’t handle the kids.”

“He can’t handle *this*!” my brother argued.

Stevie gave me a doubtful look.

“Hey, I can hear you guys!” I snapped back at them.

A minute later, Josie came striding out of the den holding Ty on her hip. She was rubbing his back as he cried into the crook of her neck. Beau ran up to her and hugged her leg.

“So... are you gonna go in and help? Cuz I’m not gonna,” Stevie said matter-of-factly.

I shook out my arms and did a few high-knees, then cracked my neck to both sides.

“You better not barf, dad. Aunt Addie will kill you,” Stevie snorted.

I playfully shoved her head and slowly made my way back to the den.

Josie

Addie was right— she didn't have enough time to get to the hospital.

I kept the kids busy playing soccer in the backyard, and I think I distracted them enough so that they missed the EMT's rushing into the house to help out.

It was only about an hour later that Tyler finally stumbled into the backyard looking like he'd just lived through war. His face was void of all color and his entire body was trembling.

"Yeesh, you give birth too, dad?" Stevie quipped with a laugh.

"Is everyone okay?" I asked, nodding at him to answer yes in order to assure the kids that everything was fine.

"Oh yeah. Yeah. All good. Mom, good. Baby girl, good. Kids can go say hi."

The kids stampeded into the house.

I rushed to hug him, but he held me at an arm's length away. A second later, he bent at the waist and barfed on the ground.

"Everyone good but me," he groaned.

I was so relieved I started laughing as I rubbed his back.

"No, I'm serious. I'm not okay. I'm scarred for life, Josie," he rasped.

"What?" I cackled.

He wrapped his arms around my waist and rested his head against my stomach. "I cannot do that to

you, baby. I cannot get you pregnant. I'm getting a vasectomy," he whispered.

I burst out laughing and pushed him away. "You are not getting a vasectomy, Tyler," I teased.

But his pale face was serious. "Wanna bet? I'm gonna schedule it tomorrow. We can't take that risk. I can't see you in pain like that. I can't-"

"Daddy! Daddy!" Stevie rushed back outside toward us.

He swallowed hard. "Yeah, honey?"

"Can you guys get a baby?! A real one? I want one!" she said, bouncing on the balls of her feet. "She's so cute!"

The horrified look on his face made me start laughing hysterically.

"I don't know..." Tyler's voice trailed off and he looked to me in panic.

"I would love to try to have a baby," I told her honestly, "but we should probably wait a little so we don't steal the new baby's thunder, don't you think?"

"I guess so," Stevie said glumly. "But it'd be so cool to be a big sister. You promise you'll try to get a baby one day?"

I looked back at Tyler and shrugged. "I would, but you gotta ask your dad too."

He rubbed hands down his face looking miserable. "I don't know, honey," he said warily.

Stevie's eyebrows furrowed. "But she *just* said she would!"

Tyler gulped. "I love babies too, but-"

Her nose scrunched up. "Wait, how do you guys get a baby?"

Tyler's face blanched. I tried to hold back a giggle. This was a parenting moment for him.

"Umm... you ask God for one and-"

I shook my head frantically, making him pause. I pulled him toward me and quickly whispered, "My dad told me that and I freaked out forever that I would *accidentally* ask God for one at the wrong time because I loved babies so much."

He looked at me like I was crazy. "Well, what do I say then?"

The twins came bursting out of the house, yelling out in celebration about being big brothers, which quickly distracted Stevie.

"I don't know," I shrugged. "Just think about it, okay?"

"Well, *help* me think about it," he urged with a panicked look on his face.

I couldn't help but laugh. I grabbed his rough hand and interlaced our fingers. "Okay."

"She'll just forget about it, right?" he asked, watching his daughter.

I twisted my lips. "Maybe... But you'll have to think of something if I do get pregnant one day."

His head snapped to me. "I thought we decided I can't do that to you, baby?"

"We decided?" My eyebrows shot up in amusement, then I got a bright idea. I grimaced and patted his stomach. "Yeah, you're probably right. You can't do it. I'll have to try the donor route one day, I guess."

The smug smile dropped off his face. "What? No, I want to..." he trailed off and shook his head. "Don't use your reverse psychology teacher tricks on me."

“I thought my teacher tricks didn’t work on you, babe?” I gave a sassy shrug.

“Wow.” He dropped his head back to look at the sky. When he looked back at me, his eyes were fiery. “Well, now you’re making me want to prove myself.” He tried to snake his arms around me, but I anticipated his move and sidestepped his reach. His forehead creased. “What the...?”

I giggled as I ran away.

He reached out to grab me again, but I let out a little yelp and got away.

“That’s it!” He called out to the kids, “Chase Josie!”

Suddenly Tyler, Stevie, and the twins were all on my tail as I tried to dodge them around the backyard.

Beau finally grabbed hold of my legs and Tyler mock-tackled us to the ground.

We all laid there, splayed out on the grass, giggling hysterically.

When we finally settled down, we stayed there on the grass, just breathing in the early summer night air, watching the fireflies dance around us while the sun set in the distance.

I could’ve laid there all night, but my stomach started growling. “Wait,” I sat up. “What happened to the steaks?”

Tyler avoided eye-contact and slightly squirmed away from me like he was a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

“It was his fault!” Beau pointed at Tyler.

His mouth dropped open. “Buddy! You tried to run away!”

“Are you arguing with a child?” I whispered out

the side of my mouth at him.

He let out a chuckle and laid back on the ground. “Whatever. Steak-shmake. I say we order takeout, yeah?”

“Ooh, you know what actually sounds really good right now?” I asked, putting a hand on his chest. His eyebrows raised in question. “Chinese food,” I announced.

“Yeah!” Stevie piped in. “Can we get fortune cookies too?!”

“No! Nope.” Tyler shook his head vehemently. “Not allowed in the Jettensen household.”

“What?” I laughed.

He reached up and traced my jaw with his strong, rough hand. “Everything’s finally perfect,” he said with a grin before kissing me.