



Pittsburgh Titans' Plan Crashes Killing All on Board

It's a devastating scene at International Airport as a plane for the Titans crashes on landing Wednesday. Reports are citing "a problem in the landing gear" that caused the plane to drop to the ground. The chartered Airbus 320X somersaulted on impact, bursting into flames. Officials described it as "an unimaginable tragedy." The Titans were leading following a 3-2 victory over the Columbus Hawks, earning another playoff berth. The Titans were expected to clinch the row and clinch

PITTSBURGH TITANS

HENDRIX

Betrayal hurts more than a puck to the face.

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SAWYER BENNETT

HENDRIX
PITTSBURGH TITANS

By
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Kindle Edition

Published by Big Dog Books

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About the Author

CHAPTER 1

Stevie

I HEFT A case of Michelob from the floor to the top of the back bar in a swoop. I might be on the small side, but I'm strong.

I'm also stubborn and prideful and don't know how to ask for help, though there's at least one burly man in the shop next door I could ask for this for me.

But why should I? This is my pub and I'm responsible for everything that goes into running it. So if my opening bartender is running late this morning I'm not above moving some cases of beer from the stockroom.

After that, there's not a lot that goes in to opening this place. We open until eleven a.m. so I set up the register, filling the till with ones, fives, tens, twenties, and rolls of coins to make change until the end of the switchover. I note the amounts on my balance form and the day book and the computer will update it before shift change.

After that, I pull all the stools off the main bar where they're parked at night when the floors are mopped, walk around to turn on the neon signs hanging along the walls and then I'm ready for business.

Terry will be here any minute and I'll leave it up to her to unlock the front doors to let in the trickle of early patrons. I don't serve a lot in terms of food. It's basically frozen pizzas I can cook in a toaster oven, chips, jerky, and pickled eggs my dad makes every week. I sell those for seventy-five cents apiece and they're not worth the time or effort, but it's tradition. My grandfather started it back in 1979 when he opened this place and since then my dad never had any ownership interest, he was and still is involved in the success, so he makes the pickled eggs.

Most of the people who come into Jerry's Lounge—named after my grandfather—come in for the beer and liquor. My day patrons are a mix of retirees from back in Grandpap's day and bikers who ride with my grandfather. At night, the old guys wobble out and more bikers come in, but I wouldn't

it any other way. I love my customers just the way they are.

With nothing left to do until we open, I head next door to my dad's shop. While he grew up in this place under his father's eye, he had no intention of slinging beer for a living. He instead went into the army, wanting to travel the world. As happens, plans didn't work out for him because I came along. Being in the military is a hard thing to handle as a single dad.

Instead, he developed a new passion enabled by insane natural talent and opened his tattoo shop—Hard Ink—right next door to Lounge. The landlord even let us connect the two spaces via a doorway. I can even freely move back and forth to help each other out. If Jerry's is slacking to do my bartender has things covered, I might pop over to my dad's area to check customers in or clean up. My dad does the same for me.

The adjoining door from my stockroom leads right into his break room. During business hours we keep the door unlocked and since it's my first morning through of the day, I pull my keys out to open the dead bolt.

I find my dad sitting at the table, one large hand wrapped around a steaming mug of coffee. He's chatting with two of his artists.

Roy is a linebender of a dude who rides with my dad's motorcycle club and has been doing ink with him for the last four years. Sienna, who's been working here a few weeks ago, is quite the talented artist, but she's a bit of a rapid skank. It's evident in the way she dresses—today, it's a bustier barely holding in her breasts and fake-leather skinny pants that sit so low on her hips I can see the top of her ass crack as she pours a cup of coffee. She moves to the table, sitting next to my dad, and angles his way. Crossing his leg over the other, she leans toward him—boobs just about to pop out, trying to catch his eye.

Eww... gross. While my dad is by no means old—he's forty-eight, but he looks far younger—Sienna is only twenty-five, same as me, and it's not surprising she flirts with him in a hypersexualized way.

Although, in fairness to my dad, he's not interested. I know this from his demeanor as he ignores Sienna and listens to Roy talking.

Not to say John "Bear" Kisner's bed is empty, but he prefers his women a little more mature. Not to say he hasn't dated younger women, but I know he's confident and with the ability to carry on meaningful conversations. My dad might be a Harley-riding, tattooed, gun-wielding badass of a man, but he's got a lot going on upstairs.

His eyes light up when I walk through the door. “There’s my Carrots tattoo” “Good morning, Peas,” I say affectionately as I bend to kiss his forehead. When I was thirteen, he introduced me to the movie *Forrest Gump* and I sobbed on his shoulder at the end I asked him, in between hiccupping and could be called Peas and Carrots the way Forrest and Jenny were together.

He said, *of course*.

I share the same grayish-blue eyes and dark—almost raven-black—hair as my father, but his is turning silver on his face and at his temples. His beard is kept somewhat trimmed, his hair is long and loose, hanging just past his shoulders. My dad’s still in excellent shape, his bulging muscles carved in ink, and I know I shouldn’t blame Sienna for being attracted to his room. just... gross.

“Hey, Stevie,” Roy says to me with a chin lift. His eyes are so full of yearning—he’s wanted to go out on a date with me forever—but I’m not into him. He’s hot—all muscled and tatted the way I like them—a pretty much what I was raised around. He’s such a good guy, but there’s just a little clubspark and I can’t explain it.

I keep it affectionate but friendly by lifting my fist to his to tap. “You’re also a pup?”

My eyes cut to Sienna and because she knows my dad’s watching she attempts to be nice by bestowing a bright smile my way. “Hi, Stevie.”

“You have spinach in your teeth,” I deadpan, and thank someone for providing me that little green piece of embarrassment to point out.

Sienna claps her hand over her mouth while gasping, “Shit.” She jumps out of her chair and clacks away on her spiky heels toward the bathroom and down the hall.

Roy snickers as he stands. “I’m going to get my station ready.”

“See ya,” I say as I move to the coffee pot and pour myself a cup. The coffee from his dad’s is almost empty, so I refresh it.

When I sit opposite him, he gives me a chastising dip of his head. “You’re a nice woman.”

“I was being nice. I pointed out she had something in her teeth and that’s a deeper hour of potential embarrassment down the road.”

My dad chuckles, lifts his cup for a sip. When he lowers it, he looks at me. “What’s on your agenda today?”

ts.” “The usual. Harlow’s coming by soon to go over final plans for bearddrive. I’ve got the plumber coming to look at that leaky faucet in the mp. Asbathroom, and—”

3, if we “I can handle the faucet,” my dad says.

to each I ignore him because it’s my responsibility. “I’m going to meet M lunch and then make a grocery store stop after, so let me know if you me to pick up anything for you.”

k—hair “Your mom, huh?” His voice is deep, gruff and disapproving. I had hile hisI’d glossed over that piece of information enough that it was lost, ust pastmuch gets by Bear Kisner.

covered “Yeah.” I keep my tone light, as if it’s not a big deal. “She tex im, butnight.”

“No doubt because she needs something from you,” my dad mutter newhat Sounds like harsh judgment, but he’s got legitimate reason. My m just notat the very bottom of my dad’s list of people he respects and it’s a p s that’srightly earned. He’s never forgiven her for abandoning me when I w ’s not attwo years old. He doesn’t give a fuck that she left him, only that she and didn’t look back for the longest time. I’d probably go so far as to What’sshates her for it because he had a very heartbroken kid who didn’t und why her mom didn’t love or want her.

ng, she My father is amazing, and I wouldn’t change a thing about how he me all alone, luckily with the help of his parents. He did a far better j upstairsmy mom ever could have and it’s why we’re so close.

Peas and Carrots.

pushes But I’ve reconnected with her somewhat and while we don’t throoparent-child relationship, I do spend time with her.

I don’t say anything more about her and Dad doesn’t give me any warnings. Since my mom has reappeared in my life over the last few I noticehe’s let me know to be careful with my heart around her, but other pretty much stays out of it. He’s one of those dads who isn’t afraid to ad. “Bekid fail, so I make sure to learn the lesson well.

I glance at my watch. “Got to go. Stop by if you want to see Harlow d saved He rises from the table to tower over me. “I’ve got a customer con so just give her a hug for me.”

ie asks, “Will do.”

I start to turn away, but his hand comes to my jaw and he bends c

the toylock eyes with mine. “You have whatever relationship you want with my mother, Stevie... but mark my words... if she hurts you, I’ll ruin her.”

“I know,” I murmur, bringing my hand up to cover his and leaning in to touch. My dad is a good man, but he would kill for me and that’s not what you want love you.”

“Love you too.”

I hoped When I return to the bar, Terry’s behind it rearranging beer in the back but not and Harlow is sitting with a bottle of water in front of her, surfing her phone.

ted last She’s as stunning as ever, her vivid red hair spilling down her back. Her head turns my way, those green eyes brightening. “Over visiting your parents,” she asks.

om sits “Yeah. He said to give you a hug, so I better do it before I forget.”

osition I take the stool next to hers and lean over for a quick embrace. As only Alston and I have been friends since our freshman year when I left my districting landed me in a new school where I didn’t know anyone. I say hesmack in the middle of a wealthy Pittsburgh suburb and I stuck out like a thumb. Harlow took me under her wing on my very first day and we’ve

close ever since. While our paths diverged slightly after school—I ended up working in my grandpap’s bar because the thought of college made me more than out in hives and she went on to law school—our bond has remained tight.

My dad adores her and she’s spent many a night at our modest home for sleepovers, and her parents have always welcomed me with open arms. I have their affluent life. In a way, we’re like peas and carrots too.

“Good Thanksgiving?” she asks. While we usually talk at least once a week and text more frequently, we haven’t spoken since before the month three days ago.

wise he “Just me and Dad, but it was good. You?”

o let his “Stone and I ate at my parents’. It’s nice having a boyfriend for the holidays, so I think I’ll keep him.” Harlow reaches into her tote and pulls out a folder, handing it to me. “I can’t stay long as I have a hearing coming in, but here are the flyers and an outline of the basic game plan.”

I flip through the documents, my lips curving into a grateful smile. It is amazing. Thank you. You really didn’t have to do all this, but—

lown to She punches me in the arm, hard enough that I yelp. “Are you kidding?”

th your This is a really good cause, and we're all excited to do it."

without By all, she means some members of the Pittsburgh Titans hockey

She and her boyfriend, Stone Dumelin, who's a first-line left-winger, are doing a charity toy drive the day after tomorrow to distribute through Allegheny County's homeless shelters. My grandpap did a small toy drive every year and it's become an important Christmas tradition for me and my dad. We manage to collect a decent box of goodies each year, but Stone suggested combining the Titans' star power to help increase donations.

This idea came about a few weeks ago when she and Stone stopped by the bar for a bit with me. Of course, I think the real reason Harlow suggested it was because they could see that business wasn't all that great. There were more empty tables and stools than filled, and she thought having them come in for a celebrity appearance to get donations would bring in new customers and help drive business.

Harlow It was a sweet offer and one I wasn't going to refuse. But I'm well aware of how much she's doing this as much for me as she is for the needy kids in our area.

It was She nods to the folder. "I've got two players committed including one who's a sore thumb but I'll probably have a few more. Cover charge is one unwrapped toy per person. We'll set up a photo station and charge for pictures with the players. All money collected will go to a charity of your choice."

break "And they really don't mind doing this?" I ask in awe.

Harlow laughs. "They not only don't mind, they love getting involved in the community. I think it's their way of giving back to a city that's shown them so much love and support since the crash."

Leaning over, I nudge her shoulder with mine, leveling her with a devilish grin. "I still can't believe you're dating a famous hockey player." Her eyes glitter as she nudges me right back. "Say the word. I could have five single guys right now who would kill to go out with you."

I scoff at the notion. "Yeah, right. As if they'd ever want to go out with a bartender."

"Don't," Harlow says, and it's the same tone she used on me back in high school if I ever got down on myself. "Don't ever define yourself by what you do for a living. And for the record, you're not a bartender. You're a businesswoman who owns a retail establishment."

I try to mollify her without letting go of my realistic expectations. "I'm kidding? comes to my love life. "I'm just saying... I'm so busy here most of n

is tied to this business. It doesn't make dating or relationships easy.”
y team. “Well, if you want to be with someone, you make the time. But m
ger, are words... when we come in for the charity event, I bet every one of the
ughout guys hits on you and tries to get your number.”

y drive “It's good that I'm not afraid of the word *no*, then, right?”
and my Harlow rolls her eyes and swivels off the stool. “You're hopeless
Harlow love you anyway.”

. “Ditto,” I say as I hop off and we hug goodbye.

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"Well, if you want to be with someone, you make the time. But mark my words... when we come in for the charity event, I bet every one of the single guys hits on you and tries to get your number."

"It's good that I'm not afraid of the word *no*, then, right?"

Harlow rolls her eyes and swivels off the stool. "You're hopeless, but I love you anyway."

"Ditto," I say as I hop off and we hug goodbye.

CHAPTER 2

Hendrix

I'M BORED. WHEN can we leave?

They don't serve wine here. How lame is that?

The women here are all trashy. Have you seen what that barte wearing?

And the most recent, the one that causes me to lose my shit: “I do the way the women put their arms around you when taking pictures.” pouts with her own arms crossed over her chest. “You need to tell them to stop, and you shouldn't touch them. Hold your hands out the way Reeves does when he takes photos with fans.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” I snarl, and I don't lower my voice the way I often do when I'm arguing with Tracy. “You have done nothing but complain since we got here. Hell, you do nothing but complain whenever you're with you. I'm fucking sick of it.”

I'm well aware that my buddies have gone still and are silently listening. None of my teammates likes Tracy, not a single damn one of them, and that says something. They're also vocal in their feelings that I should talk to her, but I make my own decisions.

Their willingness to tell me how they see it only goes to show how much they care about us. I appreciate that they feel comfortable telling me their exact feelings because I know it's coming from a place of care.

And I have listened to them.

Hell... I've agreed with most of what they've said. But I'm worried about this relationship because I've always been taught it takes hard work. It's what my parents have told me when imparting wisdom. It's what my Aunt has said as well.

I'm an athlete, which makes me a competitor and that means winning is my favorite thing. However, I also know that sometimes you can try your best and still not succeed. I'm reaching the realization that no amount of effort

effort will fix what's broken here.

I'm particularly perturbed that she's ruining what is an important event this evening. We're at Jerry's Lounge, collecting toys for children and raising money for homeless shelters. How in the world could she be upset about me putting my attention to such a worthy cause beyond me. Maybe I need to focus on that flaw.

It's not specifically about her being bored, or that this bar doesn't have good wine, or even that she's upset when I take pictures with female fans. I just don't like it when she refuses to understand that I'm doing something good tonight with my team, that it's part of my job. Sure, I'm having fun—although not with her—but it's still a team event and she can't expect me to cater to her alone. We've had dozens of conversations about this but she either doesn't get it or she doesn't want to.

I glance over to my left and find both Kace and Coen watching me. I don't want to embarrass Tracy in front of them, so I take her by the arm and lead her over to a small, private corner.

"What are you doing?" she demands, pulling her arm free. "How dare you manhandle me like I'm some piece of property for you to push around." I suck in a deep breath, biting my tongue to keep from saying what I really like to say. My voice is low and calm. "I'm merely bringing you to a private place so that we can discuss this."

"Discuss what? You're acting like a fool."

I take another deep breath, closing my eyes, and I let it out on a momentary count of four. When I open my eyes again, Tracy is glaring at me.

Trying to find something redeemable at this moment, I don't repeat anything away. I search for anything about her that might remind me what I was attracted to in the first place.

When we first met, she was not like this. Granted, there wasn't much substance between us. Tracy was a hot hookup and I kept going because it was fun. But we were having fun and I thought I might be at the stage where I could settle down with the right person.

It seemed the minute I committed to her she became possessive, and difficult to please.

As I study her, I can't latch on to a single thing to give me the will to stay anymore. There's nothing there.

"This isn't going to work," I say with a heavy sigh.

Tracy's eyes narrow, and her hands go to her hips. "What's not going on with teamwork?"

I'm needy Tracy She waves a hand in exasperation. "Of course it's not. Because you're a narcissist. You want to dive bars, let women fall all over you, and you would prefer to go to your buddies rather than me."

It's not serving me. *Because you're a raging bitch*, my inner voice says, but I don't let her. It's that my mother taught me better.

With my hand on her—good enough for you, Tracy. You deserve far better than what I'm giving those give."

It doesn't Her eyes narrow until they're tiny slits and I can see she's trying to reason out whether I'm being serious. I wait with hope that she comes to see me. It's the same conclusion so we can make this a nice parting.

Tracy's arm and She wraps her arms around my waist and presses in close. Tracy's blue eyes and long eyelashes as she tips her head back to look at me. "I'm tired and tested. You shouldn't take it out on you."

What I'd do Goddamn it. If she would've stayed in bitch mode, it would've made it so much easier to break up.

I fortify myself with one more deep breath and then spell it out as clearly as I can be. "I want to break up, Tracy." I gently unwrap her arms from me and create space between us. "I don't believe that you and I have anything in common for the long haul. All we do is fight. You don't seem happy. I can tell you I'm not happy."

It wasn't I was "You asshole!" she shrieks, and I wince. "How dare you just use your power to toss me to the curb?"

A lot of back because of the emotional whiplash she's doling out.

Where I take her elbow again and start walking her toward the door. "Uber to take you home. I'll wait outside with you until it arrives."

I'm needy, Tracy jerks her arm away and hisses, "I'm not going anywhere. A car will take me home since *you* brought me here."

Well, to try I shake my head. "You're more than welcome to stay. It's a free car. But I'm not taking you home. We're done."

The one thing I'm grateful for is that Tracy has never used that

going to manipulate me, although she has tried to manipulate me plenty through

She stares at me icily. “You can go to hell, Hendrix. I’m out of here.”

“You don’t dare follow me. I don’t need your pity.”

Oh, thank God.
Spinning on her foot, she melts into the crowd. I stare in the direction she went, considering if I should follow to make sure she’s safe, but that would only send mixed signals.

A hand claps down on my shoulder, and a shot glass filled with liquor is thrust into my grip. I twist to see Coen grinning at me. “Congratulations. You are free and single again.”

I toss the liquor back and it tastes like pure celebration. I feel like a thousand pounds of weight has evaporated from my body.

Coen loops his arm over my shoulder and grins wickedly. “I guarantee you everyone in our group tonight will be fighting to buy you the next round. Prepare to get drunk.”

Laughing, I follow Coen through the crowd to where the rest of my group is congregated.

made the



clear as ^{THERE ARE SIX} Titans players here tonight.

Stone, Coen, Foster, Kirill, Kace, and me, which means a total of six shots to celebrate my breakup with Tracy. We’re all enjoying this little party Harlow set up for our charity drive and given that we only have a light tomorrow, I know I’ll have zero regrets over the hangover I’ll suffer from. There may have been a moment between the second and third shot where I considered if this was a wise course of action, but I realize I wouldn’t be alone in my suffering because for every shot I drink, my friends will toss their own back in brotherly solidarity.

The fifth, and I say final, shot of the evening (because I don’t want to wake up like absolute shit tomorrow) arrives via the same bartender Tracy was trashing a few hours ago when we arrived.

I noticed her when we walked in, running back and forth behind the bar. Harlow seems to know her as I’ve seen them talking here and there the woman had a few seconds to spare, but she’s been so busy with the masses we drew in tonight, I’m surprised to see her headed this way.

anger. She's totally hot and not trashy the way Tracy said. While Tracy is a blonde and sunny California looks—golden hair, tanned skin, and a lush figure—the bartender is quite the opposite, and I'm guessing that's why Tracy has a hard time looking at her on sight.

She's utterly unique with almost raven-black hair cut in shaggy layers that would surround her face and coming down no longer than her shoulders. Her eyes are an unusual mixture of blue and gray, like forming storm clouds. Her hair is a dark amber-fringed with dark lashes, and she has a nose piercing in addition to septum piercings in both ears. I'm guessing Tracy thought she was trashy because she's wearing a tight Harley Davidson tank top cut low, but not so low you can see her breasts. She has a cleavage, along with faded jeans and biker boots. Her arms are a collection of tattoos, her eye makeup is dramatic and smoky, and her nails are painted a dark, iridescent black. Totally beautiful in a rocker-chick way, and sexy as fuck with a confident strut.

The tray hoisted on her palm above her shoulder sports six shots of whiskey, a glass of bourbon and a bottle of water. She winks at Harlow who's balancing on the bar. She leans over Stone's knee as he sits at the table we've commandeered at the back of the building.

She goes to Harlow first, who takes the bottle of water since she can't drink. "Thanks, Stevie."

Stevie. I love it. That name totally fits.

"Bottom's up," she says as she twirls the tray and lowers it before she can spill without spilling a drop. Her voice is husky, like she's been singing at a concert all night.

The guys reach in for their drinks until only mine is left. Stevie looks at me and nods down at it. "I heard these shots are in celebration of you cutting toxicity from your life. Congrats."

Kirill snorts and since he's the closest to me, I steal his glass right from his hand and offer it to Stevie. "You should celebrate with me."

Those tempestuous eyes drop to the liquor and then back up to meet mine. Her lips—full, soft looking, and without a trace of lipstick—curve upward. "I'm interested."

She puts the tray under her arm and starts to turn away. I slide quickly in front of her, bringing her up short. "I'm Hendrix, by the way."

I hold out my hand, and I'm surprised she takes it. "Stevie."
She tries to pull free, but I hold tight. "That's an interesting name."

y is all “My dad’s an interesting guy,” she says, our hands still connect
re—thenamed me.”

ited her “Oh, yeah?”

She nods, then turns toward the bar. “See that big dude sitting
7 layersend?”

eyes are “The one glaring at us?” He’s massive, and his eyes are narrowed (

They’re “He’s glaring at *you*, not us.”

veral in Hmm... I could probably take him, but I’m far too chill to throw f
earing abar. Also, that’s her dad, and if I want to impress her, I can’t be knock
e muchguy out.

llage of So I drop her hand. “I’m assuming he’s a Stevie Nicks fan.”

painted “I’m impressed you even know who that is.” She tucks a hand in th
ith thatpocket of her jeans and appraises me. “You look like Justin Timbe
more your speed.”

hots of My hand covers my heart and I wince. “That hurts. My Aunt Re
cing onhuge Stevie Nicks fan, so I can assure you I know all about her music.”

κ of the She cocks an already perfectly arched eyebrow. “You’re not just
that, are you?”

doesn’t I take my forefinger and draw a diagonal line over my heart a
cross it in the opposite direction. “Like, a serious fan. She always p
Stevie Nicks’s decision not to have kids and just be a crazy aunt who
us menher own niece as validation of her same life choice.”

ng at a “That sounds plausible,” Stevie admits, although her expression
dubious.

tips her “Sure you won’t have a drink with me and talk about it more?” I pi

of you Her eyes lift up to the ceiling as if she’s considering it, but then sla
into mine with a coldness that dashes all hopes. “Still not interested.”

ht from When she starts to turn away, I scramble. “Just ten minutes of you
That’s all I want.”

ne. Her “What could you possibly need ten minutes of my time for?”

d. “Not “To convince you to go on a date with me.” I offer a very charming
but it doesn’t soften the set to her jaw.

ickly to “You’d need far more than ten minutes and probably a gallon of b
convince me.”

“Just ten minutes,” I assure her. “Alone.”

’ Something sparkles in her eyes and if I had to take a guess, it’s i

ed. “HeBut she shuts me down again. “Sorry. My time’s too valuable.”

“Then let’s wager something for those ten minutes.”

“Like what?”

g at the “How about a game of pool or darts? I’ll let you choose. If I win
quality alone time with you to plead my case.”

on me. “And if I win?” she asks, taking a step toward me.

“What do you want?”

ists in a She glances around the bar, which is starting to clear out a bit.
ing the done all the pictures and meet and greets with fans. “You have to
cleanup at the end of my shift.”

“Deal,” I say without hesitation. I’m not afraid of cleaning and if
he back that still gives me time around her to try to win her over.

erlake’s “Be right back,” she says.

I turn to my friends, hand Kirill back his shot, and hoist my
ory is a “Cheers.”

” They follow suit, knocking back the whiskey like champs.

aying I step over to where Stone and Harlow sit, throwing my thumb o
shoulder. “What’s the deal with that waitress, Stevie?”

nd then Harlow laughs. “She owns the bar. We went to high school together
oints to Well, that makes her even more interesting. “Put in a good word
o spoils okay?”

“A good word for what?” Harlow asks.

l seems “I’m trying to score a date with her.”

ress. “Dude,” Stone drawls with an amused shake of his head. “You jus
up with someone.”

m back “Your point?” I ask, reaching for my draft beer on the table. “Ev
of you has been bitching at me for weeks to dump Tracy.”

ar time. “Rebound much?” Stone teases.

“It’s not a rebound. To rebound, you have to have a broken heart
don’t have that.”

g smile, “He’s got a point,” Harlow says, wrapping an arm around
shoulder, but then her green eyes come to mine. “But Stevie is
ooze to definitely not your type, so you’re wasting time.”

“How do you know she’s not my type?” The minute the question is
my mouth, I answer it myself. “Okay, granted... you’re personal friend
nterest. her, so you might know something, but I think I’ll make the

determination myself.”

“Hey,” Harlow says, hands out in surrender. “Knock yourself out, buddy.”

“I bet her a game of pool and if I win, she has to give me ten minutes of her time which I will magically use to get her to agree to a date.”

Harlow bends over laughing, and Stone chuckles.

“What?” I demand.

“Laughing too hard to answer, Stone says, “Dude... she owns a bar. The only one in town, she inherited it from her grandfather. She was raised in this town.”

“There’s no way you’re going to beat her at pool.”

“Hmm... that could be problematic, but I’ve been playing pool since I was a kid too. Thanks to Aunt Rory, lover of all things Stevie Nicks, I also have a bar out in some bars along the way.”

“I’ll get you a glass.”

“I’ll get you a glass.”

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Laughing too hard to answer, Stone says, “Dude... she owns a bar. Not only that, she inherited it from her grandfather. She was raised in this place. There’s no way you’re going to beat her at pool.”

Hmm... that could be problematic, but I’ve been playing pool since I was a kid too. Thanks to Aunt Rory, lover of all things Stevie Nicks, I also hung out in some bars along the way.

CHAPTER 3

Stevie

“WHAT’S WITH PRETTY boy?” my dad asks as I walk back behind the bar to deposit the tray beside one of the beer coolers. He looks over his shoulder where Harlow, Stone, and his teammates sip on draft beers to chaser whiskey shots.

“Trying to get a date,” I say nonchalantly as I reach for my pool cue. “I declined, and he said if I gave him ten minutes he could talk me into a date.”

“So, you’re going to give him ten minutes over a game of pool?” I ask, returning his attention to me.

“No, he bet me a game of pool with the prize being ten minutes of your time.”

My dad chuckles as he lifts his beer mug to his mouth. When he sets it down before him, he says, “Does he know you’re a shark?”

I grin impishly. “Didn’t ask.”

After opening the case, I screw my stick together and glance down the bar. It’s nowhere near as busy as it was when the event started, but there are still more patrons than we normally have. I’ve got two working the bar, one circulating, but I hesitate. I never take time for something personal on evenings that I work.

“I’ll help cover if necessary,” my dad says, reading the worry on my face. “Besides, you should hang out a little with Harlow. You’ve been working hard all night and haven’t been able to enjoy the success of the evening.”

My heart lurches in boundless love for my father. He reads me like an open book and is always the first to make sure I’m taking care of myself, even if it means insisting I take a few minutes to have some fun.

And it will be fun to beat the gorgeous hockey player who thinks I’m too charming for me to say no to him.

“Holler if it gets too hectic,” I instruct my father as I come around behind the bar and bump my shoulder against his.

“Got you covered,” he replies in that gravelly voice I’ve heard de on more than one occasion as a dead ringer for Sam Elliott. “Also, t boy if he holds on to your hand like he did before, I’ll cut it off.”

I snort and shake my head. Not that my dad wouldn’t do exactly t he’d have to beat me to it. If I hadn’t wanted Hendrix to touch me, I made him let go. You can’t be a female bar owner with a rougher c and not know a thing or two about putting handsy men in their place.

bar and Carrying my cue toward one of the empty pool tables, I catch He ilder to eye and jerk my head, indicating for him to follow me.

ase the To get his ass kicked.

He meets me at the table, followed by Harlow, Stone, and th ie case, players I haven’t had a chance to meet formally yet. We were sw) it.” tonight, so Harlow handled running the toy collection and photographs ie asks, allowed me to keep the bar running efficiently. The Titans’ celebrity l in more customers than I’ve had in the last thirty days combined, and I ; of my prepared for it.

ettles it Harlow introduces me, although I recognize each of them since huge fan.

“Choose your game,” I tell Hendrix as I pick up a square of blue ch

“Nine ball,” he says, moving to the wall rack to choose a cue.

own the I shoot a wink at Harlow, who grins back at me. She knows how there’re am and I wonder if she gave him a heads-up. I fully intend to win, ex bar and prize by having Hendrix clean up the bar tonight, and then I’ll laugh : onal on with my friend next time we talk.



ly face.

king all MY JAW DROPS as I watch the nine ball slowly roll into the side poc Hendrix’s impressive bank shot. He leans against his cue, grinning so well across the pool table. From the corner of my eye, I see his friends excl en if it money, and it’s obvious some of them knew he was pretty damn good he’s far bet on him.

Not that I didn’t think he might be skilled at pool, but it’s just t really, *really* good. Sadly, I didn’t play up to my potential tonight.

id from Harlow moves to my side, leans her head in, and whispers, “It’s al if you wanted to lose.”

scribed “I didn’t want to lose,” I growl under my breath. “I hate losing.”

ell that “If you say so,” she murmurs playfully, her eyes cutting across the table where Hendrix’s buddies slap his back. But he’s not paying that, but attention, instead staring at me intently. “If I had to guess, you’re g’d have enjoy the ten minutes he just won.”

lientele I wheel on Harlow, taking her wrist in my hand and pulling her a few feet away. “What is he expecting in that ten minutes?”

ndrix’s Harlow laughs. “Nothing more than what you’re willing to let him do, so relax. Hendrix is a nice guy, I promise you.”

“But he just dumped his girlfriend.” That doesn’t sound so nice.

e other “Trust me,” Harlow says with an incline of her head. “She needed to be dumped. She was one of the most unpleasant people I’ve ever known.”

s which “Then why was he with her?” I ask curiously.

rought Harlow shrugs. “You have ten minutes with him. Maybe you should just wasn’t I scoff, because I don’t care about his personal life. “Although I suggest you continue the flirting you two had going on. It was fun to watch.”

e I’m a This time, I roll my eyes, because the last thing I could ever be called a flirt. I mean, sure, I’ll turn on the charm with my customers when I’m behind the bar, but that’s part of my job—and it increases tips.

Still, I did find myself engaging with Hendrix as we moved around the pool table, analyzing angles and calling shots. I know the booze probably buoyed his natural charisma, but damn, he’s fun to be around. Playful, witty, and actually quite the gentleman, despite his obvious interest in me as a woman.

“I want my ten minutes now.” I turn around to find Hendrix behind the bar, his eyes cutting briefly to Harlow. “And I want them to be quality. It means we’re not talking while you’re working behind the bar so we can get the place quiet.”

I twirl around, noting the still thirty or so patrons, and then nod to the jukebox. “I can’t make it quiet in here.”

He grins devilishly as he hands his pool cue to Harlow and takes a deep breath. “Luckily, I’m an observant guy.”

To my shock, Hendrix leads me through the bar to the small hallway where the branches off to the bathrooms on one side and the stockroom on the other.

It’s the stockroom door handle he grabs, pulling me in behind him. He glances back once into the bar area and notes my father watching.

unmoving. He knows I can handle myself, but I can tell you Hendrix pulled a point against himself for pulling me into a private place. I don't see any problem though, especially since after he gets his ten minutes, I'll be going to him again.

The door closes and Hendrix looks around, taking in the rough view of a few feet built-in shelves around the perimeter filled with supplies, as well as cases stacked in the center. Using his hold on my hand, he tugs me over to a lone, lonely stool in the corner. It has a slight tear in the seat, which is why I'm here.

He releases me and admittedly, I'm charmed when he presses down on the stool top, testing for stability. It holds strong because the rip is the only defect, and then he's got me by the shoulders, spinning and pushing me gently onto it.

"I'd ask." Hendrix reaches a hand up to one of the wooden shelves, casually pulling out his other hand in his jeans pocket, and crosses one ankle over the other.

"Okay... since I only have ten minutes—"

"Starting now," I say, glancing at my watch.

He powers on without missing a beat. "You should know my ultimate goal is in securing a date with you. It would help if you could tell me about the hesitations you have in agreeing to such a thing. Like... for example, if you're not attracted to me, there's not much I can do about that, and I don't want to waste our time."

"It's really that I'm too busy to—"

"Aha," he says in triumph. "So you *are* attracted to me."

"I didn't say that," I exclaim as I stand from the stool, trying to hold my ground, which results in the twitch of a threatened smile.

"You didn't not say it either." He smirks, moving very quickly over to a casual lean. He backs me up into the shelves, putting his hands on them toward my shoulders, caging me in. "Looked like you were going to escape."

"Just don't like having to look up at you," I counter, still needing to keep my head to look him directly in the eye because he's so tall. "And to answer your original question, the main reason I don't want to go on a date with you is that I'm too busy."

"I'm busy, too, but we can find time."

"Well, you did just dump a girl today, so you probably have more time than I do."

rix just “I didn’t dump her on a whim, you know.”

Not my “And you’re already on the prowl,” I point out.

ver see “Not prowling.” He moves in a bit, dips his head a little closer. “/ relationship with Tracy was severely broken. I should’ve ended things woodentime ago.”

as beer I hear a bit of disappointment in his tone, and that makes me c ver to a “Why didn’t you?”

y it’s in “Because it takes effort to make a relationship work and I tr damnedest. I’m not one who gives up easily and I don’t ever want own onregrets. Now, I definitely might have hung on too long trying to he onlythings, but I won’t wake up tomorrow with any remorse for finally ca e downquits.”

God, I can never let him know that right there would convince me y tuckshim a try. One of my pet peeves is quitters. People who run when thi e other.too hard, and that stems directly from my mom abandoning me l “having a kid was just a little too hard.”

Still, I’m stubborn and unwilling to let him know that meant anyt ltimateme. “We wouldn’t be well suited. You’re all preppy polos, and I’m re whatbabe.”

ple, if Hendrix laughs, truly amused by my description. “Going to hav I won’tbetter than the way we dress as an excuse.”

“It’s not just the way we dress,” I snap in defense. “You’re just.. vanilla.”

If he found me funny before, he thinks I’m fucking hilarious as h ld backof laughter is loud and deep. His humor wells up from his belly, laughs so hard, tears form in his eyes.

it of his Shaking his head, still chuckling, he reaches a hand to tug on a locl e woodhair just above my shoulder. “It’s cute you think I’m vanilla.” His eye .” meet mine, and his voice drops an octave. “If that’s a true conce g to tipwilling to disprove that theory right now. I could have you screaming back toname in far less than ten minutes if you gave me the go-ahead.”

is that “Less than ten minutes, huh? Not a lot of lasting power, buddy.”

“I didn’t say I’d be screaming in that time frame. Only you wo Trust me, I’ve got a lot of ways to get you there.”

re time God help me, but that hit me right between the legs and my thro parched my words come out in a rasp. “So, you’re all about a hot /

then, huh?”

“Did I say I wanted a hookup?” His eyes twinkle with humor, but I still feel a low simmer of heat deep within. “I believe I asked for a date, and I can make it what you want.” Hendrix’s voice drops even lower with a rumble. “I’m very willing to please.”

Curious. And I have no doubt he’d deliver if I let him.

I think about the opportunity before me. It’s absolutely true that I’ve tried my very hard and don’t have a lot of free time, but it doesn’t mean I don’t want to have a date. Granted, it’s been a long damn time since I’ve been on one and I might have changed into a bit of a rut. But the question is, should I give Hendrix a try? He’s gorgeous, and Harlow wouldn’t have let me take this bet so fast if he wasn’t a decent guy. It’s true I think he might be a little vanilla, but the fact that he confidently challenged me makes me think I might be misjudging things. All things in his favor, but most of all, I can’t let go of the fact that because he works hard on relationships is important to him. Not that I’m thinking about anything past a first date, but I respect anyone who isn’t going to get scared when things get tough.

A biker. “Okay,” I say before I can talk myself out of it.

“Okay?” Hendrix says, eyebrows lifting in surprise.

He to do. “Okay,” I affirm.

“What’s your phone number?” he asks, pulling his phone from his pocket. I watch as he types in my number. My phone rings, and I move to pull it out, but his hand wraps around my wrist and stills me. Hendrix places his hand against his ear and waits a moment, then speaks to my voicemail. “Hi, it’s Hendrix. Leaving this voicemail for you to listen to later in case you’re having doubts and try to weasel out of our date.” His eyes are locked on mine, his mouth curved into a boyish smile. “Just listen to this message as a reminder that something happened in the stockroom tonight that makes me want to change your mind about me. Something that made you decide you could give me some of your time out of your hectic schedule for a date. Remember what that was.”

He hangs up and winks.

I try not to be enchanted, turning sideways to slide past him. “Should I text and let me know your availability?”

“I already know my availability,” he says as he follows me to the car. “I can have tomorrow night off, then the night after that I have a home game. You can go out tomorrow, or I’ll get you a ticket to the game on Thursday,

can go out after.”

there’s “I have to work,” I reply automatically, reaching for the door but weBecause I’m here almost every night.

a sexy “But do you really?” he asks, nabbing my hand before I can open the door. “You’re the owner. I’m sure you can find someone to cover for you

I’m not about to get into it with him that I pour so much of myself into this business, so I don’t have to put myself in the dating world. My dad’s not date.abandoning me might have left an indelible mark, making me wait for him to have more than a few trust issues. Instead, I merely say, “Let me look at your schedule, and I’ll let you know.”

far if he I turn for the door again, but Hendrix pulls me back until my attention is on him. “Is it too forward if I kiss you?”

him. Cocking an eyebrow at him, I say, “That’s pretty vanilla for you, but with your permission, especially when not but two minutes ago, you were practically begging us we’d you could make me scream.”

to run Hendrix laughs, pulls my hand to his mouth, and brushes his lips against my knuckles. “I know. I like keeping you off-balance.”

He releases my hand, reaches past me to the door, and opens it. He motions me through and I precede him out. Once the door is closed, he leans down to put his mouth near my ear. “It has been a real pleasure getting to know you tonight, Stevie.”

it free, I shiver over the way he rolls out the word *pleasure* like it’s a promise. Then he walks away without a backward glance.

Stevie. Shaking my head in equal parts amusement and consternation since you started didn’t go at all how I’d planned, I move back behind the bar.

ed onto My dad stares at me with one eyebrow lifted. “I don’t like him.”

ge as a “Why not?” I ask, grabbing his empty mug and moving to the tap to get you another.

ld slice When I return it to him, he says, “He’s too pretty.”

My gaze moves past my dad’s shoulder back to Hendrix, now talking to Stone and Harlow. I wonder if he’s telling them what went down in the storeroom.

Turning my regard back to my dad, I say, “He’s not too pretty.”
door. “I He’s actually remarkably handsome with his dark shaggy hair that he has. He has wind-swept, expressive brown eyes, and lips that are too full and well-disregarded. I wonder what they’d feel like, and the bad girl inside me

I might learn the answer to that question.

orknob. My dad twists his neck to look over his shoulder, stares at the play a moment, and then looks back to me. "Did he make a move on you pen the storage room? Because I could rearrange some parts of his face."

ou." Leaning over the bar, I pat my dad's arm. "You're cute. And no, h elf into perfect gentleman."

y mom Although if he knew the promises Hendrix made that involved scre ry with my dad would kill him right now.

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"I agreed to a date."

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My dad twists his neck to look over his shoulder, stares at the players for a moment, and then looks back to me. “Did he make a move on you in the storage room? Because I could rearrange some parts of his face.”

Leaning over the bar, I pat my dad’s arm. “You’re cute. And no, he was a perfect gentleman.”

Although if he knew the promises Hendrix made that involved screaming, my dad would kill him right now.

“Are you going out with him?”

“I agreed to a date.”

“You let him know that I have lots of guns and I have broken men’s bones before.”

“I’ll let him know,” I promise with a smile.

CHAPTER 4

Hendrix

STEVIE SIPS HER water and I take that moment to study her in the candlelight dancing across her face. She sure looks different from last night. Gone is the Harley tank top, and in its place is a black fuzzy sweater. Still wearing the boots, but these are dark and paired with high-heeled boots rather than the white boots. The eye makeup isn't as dark and dramatic, but her slate-color hair is just as mesmerizing.

In fact, it's like a lighter version of the rocker chick, and I like it much.

"Why are you staring at me?" she asks, taking the folded linen napkin and placing it on her lap. Her fingernails still sport the black polish, but she's now wearing a delicate silver ring set with an amethyst stone on her middle finger. It's feminine and flirty.

"Just noticing the subtle changes between bar owner Stevie and night Stevie."

"What can I say?" she quips, shifting in her chair to cross one leg over the other. "I'm multifaceted."

"I could've told you that before I even picked you up tonight and I didn't see the changes, but moving along to my next observation... I was prepared for your bear of a dad to open the door when I picked you up."

Stevie laughs, smoky and deep. "He was there installing a new ceiling in the bedroom, and it's funny you call him a bear because that's his nickname."

"You're kidding me. Bear?"

"He'll answer to that or John," she quips.

A waiter appears and we look his way. "Would you like to see the menu list?"

I glance at Stevie in question.

"I'd rather have a beer," she says.

“Same,” I reply.

The waiter looks slightly offended since this is an upscale restaurant. We put our order in for two IPAs and listen to the specials.

“Anyway,” I say, returning to my curiosity about her dad. “Why do you look like he wanted to pound me into the ground?”

Her shoulder lifts in a half shrug, but she smiles mischievously.

“If I don’t have you home at a reasonable hour, will I be killed or have my legs broken?”

Stevie chuckles. “I’m an adult, Hendrix. I’m even allowed to stay out all night if I want.”

“How old are you?” I ask.

“Twenty-five. You?”

“I’ll be twenty-six in a few months. But I also get the impression that your dad doesn’t care that you’re an adult. He’s going to be overprotective no matter your age.”

Stevie’s smile softens, awash with tenderness. “He’s been that way my entire life and I wouldn’t change it for the world. But to ease your mind, I’m pretty sure your life and bones are safe. He just looks tough.”

“What about your mom?”

Stevie’s tiny burst of laughter is mirthless. “That’s a complicated question and one that’s not worth our time discussing.”

“I think anything you want to discuss is worth my time.”

Those eyes focus intently on me as if she can’t quite figure out what my next move is. “What is this?” she asks.

“What’s what?”

She motions with her hand. “What is this going on tonight? Is it a hookup? I don’t get why you’d think what I have to say has any worth.

I frown, leaning forward and crossing my arms on the table. “It’s a little weird that you don’t understand how you could even be perplexed.”

“Because this time twenty-four hours ago, you had a girlfriend. I’m a little weird that you’ve brought me to this expensive restaurant, and now you’re asking questions that make it seem like you’re genuinely interested in getting to know me.”

“Okay,” I say, leaning back from the table, creating space between us. “I’m not sure what I’ve done to make you think anything other than that I wanted to go out with you. Or why you can’t understand that I fi

interesting and beautiful and would indeed like to know more about you, but Stevie takes a breath and holds her hands out in a silent gesture that seems to say, *Let's stop a minute and back up.*

"Sorry," she murmurs. "It's just... I don't want to be a rebound."

"You're not." I don't know how to say it any simpler or more straightforward than that. "I agree the timing isn't the best, but honestly I checked out just my relationship—if you can even call it that—a long time ago. I'm more than happy to tell you anything you want to know about it."

The waiter returns with our beers and frosted pilsner glasses. He sets them before us and then asks, "Would you like to order?"

I shake my head. "Haven't even cracked the menus open."

He bends at the waist slightly. "Take your time. I'll check back."

When he's gone, Stevie says, "I just want you to know, I'm not looking for anything serious."

"Can't say that I am either."

"And not really looking for a hookup," she says, a bit of challenge in her tone.

"Wasn't on my agenda."

"Although a hookup is preferable to a relationship," she clarifies, "it completely muddies things."

"I have a really good idea," I say, picking up my beer and lifting it to my lips. "How about we just start off with a good meal and a few beers, and then we evaluate where we are at the end of the evening?"

And I'll never forget this moment because if I thought Stevie beautiful before, she knocks the breath out of me now. Her smile is a date, a every bit of her face—full lips, gleaming teeth, glittering eyes that are relieved and playful—and I am lost.

She lifts her beer, taps it against mine, and says, "I'll drink to that."

I don't say it out loud, but the one thing I know with certainty is that at the end of the evening, I won't need to reevaluate anything. I know I'll see you again.

We sip our beers, and then I suggest, "How about we figure out what we want to eat, even dessert, so we don't have to interrupt conversation except to give our orders?"

"That sounds good," she says, and we take a few minutes to peruse the menus. The waiter must be watching us like a hawk because we no

u.” close them than he’s there.

ire that We both order rib eyes, finding our first thing in common, and o
waiter is gone, Stevie lifts her glass. “I still need a full beer in me to
your question about my mom. Tell me about your family.”

surely So our date begins without any expectation other than agreeing
of that how we feel at the evening’s end.

re than My family is great, so it’s no hardship to talk about my parents
and Tonya—as well as my mom’s sister, Rory, who is like a second
e pours me and dotes on all her nieces and nephews.

“Do you have any siblings?” Stevie asks.

“I had an older sister, Rachel. She died thirteen years ago from leukemia
but I’ve got lots of cousins I’m close to.”

looking “Oh my God,” Stevie says, reaching her hand across the table to
mine. “I’m so sorry about your sister.”

I smile at her, taking note that time does indeed dull the pain, although
e in her never quite leaves. “She was two years older than me.”

“I can’t even imagine how hard that was.”

I nod, remembering the weeks after Rachel died, losing not only
, which but my best friend. The days of uncertainty where I didn’t know if I
would ever recover from the loss, but with a lot of support and therapy
toward pulled herself out of a very dark place. “My mom took it really hard. I
ers and it was hard for me—I was just a kid—and for my dad, but Mom and
were really close. She was depressed for a long time.”

ie was Something flickers over Stevie’s face, and I’m guessing it has to do
engages her own mother, who she said is complicated.

re both I don’t go there, though.

’ “Harlow said you two met in high school.” A subtle shift in conversation
puts the spotlight on her.

s at the She grins, shaking her head as she runs a black polished fingertip
want to top of her glass, and in that fond smile, I see years of good memories
redistricted into her school my freshman year and was like a fish out of
what we Harlow took me under her wing, staved off a lot of bullying, and we
n again close.”

use the “That doesn’t surprise me one bit about Harlow. She’s good people

“The best,” Stevie agrees. “While she had good intentions with the
sooner the charity toy drive at my bar, she did it to help me bring in cus

Things have been a bit slow lately.”

nce the “I’ll definitely be coming back and I’ll bring more Titans too.”

answer “Oh, you don’t have to do that, Hendrix. My bar—”

“Is an amazing place to hang out, and besides, I’ve kind of got to see for the owner.”

And holy fuck... Stevie blushes, gaze dropping down to her beer. —Mick multifaceted woman, all right, but I didn’t think I’d ever say anything to would pinken that creamy skin.

I take advantage of her discombobulation. “This would be the party you say you’ve got the hots for me.”

Her gaze snaps back up, and gone is the embarrassment. “You’re going on me.”

I clutch my heart, pull my chin in, and look wounded. “That’s not got?”

“I like to keep you wondering,” she says coolly, and I like she does me.

What I don’t like is that a thought about Tracy comes unbidden, that a sister wasn’t a bit of mystery about her. I had to guess at nothing, which she may have been a comfort, but in hindsight was apparently a turnoff.

Laughing, I drum my fingers on the table. “I’ll give that to you. I mean, me about your dad. He’s about as fascinating as you are.”

Rachel “He’s great. You might not see that because he’s overprotective, raised me all on his own. Was in the army, then helped my grandfather do with the bar for a while before becoming a tattoo artist.”

“Jerry is your grandfather?”

“Yeah... it was his bar. My grandpap died when I was twenty and conversation passed to me.”

“How did your dad raise you on his own while he was in the military over the ask, completely impressed. I’ve seen some single hockey dads over my life. “I got—like Drake—but they’ve always had a great support system.

“He found a way with the help of friends and other military families. I became long deployments, I stayed with my grandparents. He got out when I was four. He couldn’t stand being away from me, even if I was happy, so he stayed with his parents.”

“He’s a scary dude, but you’re making me like him,” I concede.

“He’s the absolute best person I know.”

I learn a lot more about her dad, including the fact he rides with an president of his motorcycle club. We discuss tattoos and she's surprised to have a few of my own, but she's got me far outnumbered.

he hots "When did you get your first tattoo?" I ask.

"On my eighteenth birthday. My dad's name." She holds out her wrist for me to see. "How about you?"

ing that "Sixteen." She raises her eyebrows. "Without my parents' permission or knowledge."

t where Her expression becomes knowing. "If your parents didn't see it, I'm assuming you can't show it to me."

growing "Left hip. Maybe you'll get to see it one day."

"Maybe not," she counters.

all you Our food comes and she asks me more about Tracy, which I answer with complete transparency.

is that to *Yes, she started out as a hookup.*

Yes, she became a convenient hookup.

at there *Yes, I liked her and we dated exclusively.*

ould've *Yes, we had our problems and when they never got better, I broke up.*

We order our second beer near the end of our meal, before our waitress approaches about dessert, and I ask Stevie, "You going to tell me about your mom?"

but he "Yeah, sure... why not," she says as she pushes her plate away. She takes a few bites of steak behind and I'm an opportunist, so I reach over and take a piece with my fork.

Stevie smiles at the intimate gesture. "It's not all that long of a story about my dad when I was two. Said it was too difficult to be a mother."

"She said that to you?" I ask, horrified.

tary?" I "Well, not when I was two. She told me later when I got older." I ask, "Career asked."

"You continued a relationship with her?"

ies. For "Not at first. She left and didn't look back and for a long time, it was just me and my dad. She ended up getting married a few years later to a guy with a lot of money, and they had two daughters."

"Two half sisters," I muse.

"Liza and Maggie. They're now twenty and twenty-one, respectively."

"Are you close?"

d is the Stevie's nose wrinkles slightly. "No. A relationship was discouraged."

I frown at that phrasing. "What does that even mean?"

"It means my father tried... he invited the girls over, but there was some excuse why they couldn't come. And I was never invited over to his house."

"What the fuck?" I growl, because despite her solid backbone, I feel a vulnerability in her tone. "You were never invited over to your own mother's house?"

"My mom's an odd duck. She married Cameron for his money and had him two daughters. But she once again discovered she wasn't the material and left them. She ended up divorcing Cameron and he remarried. His new wife is a good mom to the girls... supposedly."

"Do you have any relationship with your sisters?"

"Not really. It's all very fractured and honestly... they're a bit spaced out from their dad, and we don't have anything in common but a deadbeat mother. We follow each other on IG and text once in a blue moon, but they have their own lives and I have mine."

"And your mom?"

Stevie doesn't mask emotion, and I see the disappointment in her eyes.

"She's not a mom. She just couldn't do it. She found the responsibilities she was left with too much. It was too hard."

"That doesn't sound like supposition."

"We've had conversations about it. She's at least honest about her own limitations."

"So you do have a relationship with her?"

Stevie shrugs. "I'm not sure what we have. We talk. We have dinner sometimes. She has moments when she tries to act like a mom, but it doesn't really work for me at this stage of the game."

"I imagine not," I murmur.

Stevie's smile is quick and easy. "I've got a healthy enough respect for her to acknowledge her weaknesses and know they didn't have anything to do with me. I had a father who built me up to be the best version of myself, and it hurt for a long time when I was younger not to be worth her effort, but I found my peace with it. But still... I give her my time not because she needs it because I do."

never I study her a moment, focusing on her wistful words. “You want to
mom in your life.”

Stevie laughs, clearly at herself. “I’m a glutton, right?”

always I shake my head. “Not at all. You’re aiming for something you want
to their “My father says I’m destined for heartbreak with my mom. That’s
only using me.”

near the “Maybe,” I muse, reaching across the table to take her hand. I study
mother’s delicate bones, soft skin, and midnight polish on her nails. “But you’re
for it. You’re older and wiser since the last time she broke your heart.
and gave a tough woman with a strong parent at your back if she fails you
mother There’s no reason why you shouldn’t try to make something with her.”
married. Stevie blinks at me in surprise, mouth parted slightly. I’m thinking
needed someone to give her permission to go for it, knowing it might
flop.

ruined by And without questioning the sanity of her wanting something
from. A woman who hurt her.

we their “You’re definitely not what I expected,” she says, her eyes drop
where I’m holding her hand.

“What did you expect?”

her eyes. Her eyes lift to mine. “That you just wanted to get in my pants.”

try to be “I totally want to get in your pants,” I tell her truthfully, because
insanely attracted to her. “But that’s not the primary agenda.”

“What is, then?”

in her I consider the question and admit a truth I’ve never told any
teammates, especially since they all rode my ass to dump Tracy. “
there’s this sort of image professional athletes portray, at least around
the lunch table. That we’re hot shit and can have any woman we want in our beds
out that “Like berries for the picking,” she muses.

“Exactly. And yeah, I was that way. Many of my teammates are
guess I want something more.”

ego to “Ready to settle down?” she asks.

do with “I don’t know if that’s what you’d call it. Maybe not quite, but I
did want something more solid. That’s what I was trying to attempt with Tracy.”

I made I almost expect her to pull her hand away, because the real
reason is, but the implication would be that I want the same with her. Stevie was hesitant
out with me, and I don’t want her to think I’m rebounding.

o have a I definitely don't want her to think I'm looking for something deep
I don't know that I am.

I don't know that I'm not.

it." I just know that I like her, and I want to see her again after tonight.
at she's heads-up, I know the night isn't over yet, but I'll be asking for a
date."

udy the Stevie pulls her hand from mine, but only to take her pilsner. She
e ready up, prompting me to do the same.

You're As our glasses tap against each other, she says, "I'll drink to that."
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I definitely don't want her to think I'm looking for something deep.

I don't know that I am.

I don't know that I'm not.

I just know that I like her, and I want to see her again after tonight. "Just a heads-up, I know the night isn't over yet, but I'll be asking for a second date."

Stevie pulls her hand from mine, but only to take her pilsner. She holds it up, prompting me to do the same.

As our glasses tap against each other, she says, "I'll drink to that."

CHAPTER 5

Stevie

MY MOM SAUNTERS down the sidewalk toward me, looking in shop windows and getting distracted twice as she peers in at something. Mandi See is a woman who transforms herself over and over again, depending on the man she's with.

When she was married to my father, she rode on the back of his motorcycle and dressed like a biker babe. During her marriage to Cameron See, she wore designer labels and cut her hair into a conservative bob.

These days she's dating a fitness trainer named Randy who's ten years younger than her junior, so her preferred clothing is workout leggings, sports bras, and hoodies. Her dark brown hair is pulled into a high ponytail, and her makeup is flawless.

I'm not sure if my mom cared about her appearance back when she was married to my father the way she does now, but she's without a doubt vain. I don't hold that against her because she's always used her looks to attract a man to take care of her and thus they are sort of a necessity. She never could take care of her kids because she neither wanted nor knew how to, but she can barely take care of herself. It's been a source of pride for her when we get together that her boyfriend is ten years younger, or sometimes puts it, "He's only ten years older than you, Stevie."

My mom got pregnant by mistake, and my dad did what he called the "right thing" by marrying her. It was a stupid decision since he didn't love her and she most certainly didn't love him. I was the product of a hook-up, but whereas my father was willing to give up his rowdy, free-living lifestyle to become a parent, my mother was not.

The difference between me and my father is that I've learned to forgive my mother for her weaknesses and he never will. As my dad has repeatedly pointed out, it's not so much that she was absent as a mother, it's that she was absent as *my* mother. Because after she abandoned me, within just

years, she remarried and bore two daughters for her new husband. C she left them the way she left me, but for a time, she put all her ener her new husband and children while I was nothing but a piece of her p

I was lucky if I saw her a handful of times a year and usually on my father browbeat her into it. He doesn't think I know that, but I ov his calls to her.

“Jesus Christ, Mandi... for once in your life, can you put your d windows above your needs?”

gar is a Despite having an incapable mother, I grew up incredibly happ he man father provided enough love and stability to compensate for my shortcomings. It meant the difference between being deeply hurt o

Harley mom's abandonment versus being irrevocably crushed. My dad a gar, she parents created an environment that made me believe my mom was who was losing out. That her inability to be a mother was squarely n years shoulders and had nothing to do with who I was. I love them for ir ind zip- that in me.

and her Sadly, I don't think those lessons ever got passed on to my half sis she was shunned our mother and want nothing to do with her.

t a little It's probably why she clings to me a bit more desperately. Now t to snag daughters are adults and we can take care of ourselves, she wants to ot only of our lives. Liza and Maggie won't give in to her, but I do.

how to, My father doesn't like it at all, but he'd never stand in my way. I for her understands that there's something about her needing me now that fills as she of the hole she left behind. I'm enough of an optimist to believe sor might be built from the ashes.

ed “the Regardless, every time we get together, a simple smile from her ca ove her, quite the emotional punch because I didn't get them growing up. It ot, wild fucked up how much I love those scraps of attention from her, and I'n spirited have my dad there to keep me grounded in reality.

forgive display. “Mom,” I call out, and she jolts, turning my way from an antiqu

eatedly Her smile widens and she rushes to me, arms open. We hug and I r she was even though I still have that tiny, dark niggling at the back of my mi t a few this isn't real. Not in the way my father hugs me. Not real in the shows me love and devotion on a daily basis.

granted, My mom's hug comes with too many doubts and it feels foreign. I also give myself permission to let it feel good to have it for now.

ast. "Aren't you a sight for sore eyes," she gushes, pulling back to study my face. "Is it my imagination, or are you letting your hair grow a little?"

erheard Reaching up, I brush my fingers through one side. "Maybe. I have time to get it cut lately. We'll see."

ughter "Well, you're beautiful regardless how you wear your hair."

My mom draws away, looking at me expectantly, wondering how I react to her compliment.

mom's While it seems sweet on the outside, part of me knows it's forced. Ever since we first reconnected about five years ago—and by reconnected, I mean her making efforts to want to see me—we had several uncomfortable moments where she criticized everything about me. My clothes, my hair, my piercings, and my tattoos.

stilling All the things that reminded her of my dad.

She'd say things like, "I can't believe you'd tattoo yourself up like your father," or "Did your dad pick out that outfit?"

entially It galls her that every bit of me is my dad, and she envies how close we are. She hates our relationship, which is ironic since the reason we're so close is that she left. My mom can't reconcile it because every great quality she exhibits does nothing but shine a spotlight on her failures. She attacks outward appearances to make herself feel better.

He also At least, that's what I surmised as I tried to figure out this woman.

is a little Regardless, I had to set a boundary with her. "I'm an adult, Mom. Nothing has no say in how I do anything with my life, which includes how I dress or how I look."

an pack She didn't get it at first and thought that the mere fact she spent ten years in labor with me gave her the right to offer what she termed as "advice." I was glad I was blatant criticism. It's only when I stopped accepting her invitations for lunch that she decided to live by my boundaries.

ie store So now I get compliments that sound legitimate, but there's still that look in her eyes that tells me she doesn't mean it deep down. I remind myself that she doesn't know how to be a mom. She's been so bad at it that her other daughters have cut her completely out of their lives, and it's for that reason I've opened the door and let her back in. I feel sorry for her.

I've been craving Mexican, so I chose a good restaurant I've d

n, but I several times before. And since I'm the one who's footing the bill, I choose. My mom is as unemployed as she ever was, relying on Randy to pay my bills.

Once we're seated with chips and salsa and a margarita for my mom, she asks the obligatory, "How is your father doing?"

"He's doing great." And I offer no more.

Still, she pokes, asking if he's dating, how his tattoo shop is doing. I'll like that. I give vague answers and eventually, she gives up.

"And how are you?" she asks, plucking a tortilla chip with an elegant manicured nail. I give myself my own manicures, not because I can't get them done, but because I like the routine of it.

"I'm good," I say, swirling a chip in the salsa. "Super busy, but that's for the course. Actually, busier than usual. Harlow invited some players last week for a charity event, and it brought in a ton of new patrons."

My mom's eyes sparkle and she leans forward, wrapping her lips around the straw in her drink and taking a long sip. "Harlow's the friend dating the hockey player, right?"

"She's an attorney," I say, because I don't like Harlow being identified so closely with her significant other. "But yes, she's seeing Stone Dumelin."

In fact, Stone pulled me aside the other night and told me he was going to propose soon and wanted to get with me on some ideas. It was hard to keep a straight face and not scream with happiness.

"Oh, that's so wonderful for her," my mom coos, even though she knows Harlow. They've never met nor has she asked to, but my mom is legitimately happy for her.

And for a brief moment, I have an idea of what it might be like to have a mom where we share similar interests. In this case, it's happiness for her, but I poke at the edges of this new feeling. Lowering my voice to conditions of secrecy of this—not that my mom knows Harlow and could let the cat out of the bag—I tell her, "Stone's going to propose soon."

My mom rests her hand over her heart and purses her lips. "Please tell me she has some very romantic, over-the-top idea?"

Laughing, I shake my head. "He asked me for some help, and I'm just thinking about it."

"Oh, I have a ton of ideas," she says, and for the next ten minutes she offers me what are actually solid possibilities that I'll pass on to Stone.

I get to We order bowls of chicken tortilla soup along with fajitas to share
to pay odd but tossing around proposal concepts seems to have opened
flowing conversation that doesn't come easy to us. My mom is so enr
om, she by the romanticism of it all, she seems softer and more genuine.

And it causes a yearning within me to have her excited about *my* l
"I went out on a date last night with a Titans player," I say.
, things My mom, mid sip of her second margarita, chokes. She stares at r
watery eyes as she coughs.

Expertly "Tell me more," she gasps and takes another pull on her drink.
t afford I give her the short version of meeting Hendrix, leaving out the tal
storage room, and an opaque version of our date last night, leaving
at's partalk about her.

Titans My mom grins. "Did he kiss you good night?"
rons." I almost snort thinking about how our evening ended. Hendrix t
aroundhome after dinner and just as he was leaning in for a kiss on the front
l who's the light came on and my dad opened the door. He had no reason to st
my place other than to wait so he could interrupt what I'm betting w
ified by been a great kiss.

I'll give Hendrix credit. He didn't jump back but instead leaned in
going to and planted his lips on my cheek as my dad glared at him.

to keep a "See you Friday night," he'd said, then beamed at my dad. "Nice
you, Bear."

doesn't We both watched him trot down the porch steps and into his
sounds When he pulled away, my dad asked, "Friday night?"

"Our second date. He wants me to come to the home game to
to have a night and then out after, but I can't take off two nights in a row."

Farlow. "I'll cover for you," my dad offered as I brushed by him and he cl
vey the door.

t out of "I thought you didn't like him," I teased.

"I don't. But I'll still cover you if you want."

tell me My dad and I shared a beer while I told him all about my first da
Hendrix. I gave him way more detail than I've given my mom. My
nd I'm not only my full trust but the biggest piece of my heart, so I was ex
share how wonderful the evening was. I declined his offer to cover n
tes, she tonight because a date isn't a good enough reason to take my dad's fr
like that.

. It's so "Stevie," my mom says, throwing a chip at me and jolting me out of my free-memories. "Did he kiss you good night?"

captured I smile at the way his lips felt on my skin. "On the cheek."

My mom sighs dreamily. "What a gentleman. Will you see him again in your life." "Tomorrow night." I don't bother telling her that he asked me to do that tonight but I declined because I didn't want to miss another night of my life. I don't feel like listening to her lecturing that I'm wrong to let this opportunity go. She doesn't understand what it's like to own your own business, and I'll only get angry if I have to explain the concept of responsibility.

out our To my relief, she focuses on him as a player. "What position does he play and what team did he come from?"

She doesn't know much about sports, but like everyone who lives in Pittsburgh, she knows about the plane crash that killed nearly the whole team. "He was actually on the original team."

will be at Hand clapping over her mouth, my mom squeaks her distress. "Oh my god, a lucky man. I imagine that's got to be all kinds of emotional for him."

I wouldn't know as we haven't talked about it. Not that it was a secret, but we avoided it, but we spent our time talking about family.

Maybe tomorrow night. The fact our conversation was so wonderful was why I agreed to his request for a second date.

The waiter walks nearby, and I wave for his attention. "Can I get a BMW check?"

"You have to go already?" my mom whines, her lower lip stuck out. "I was having so much fun."

"I know. Me too. But I've got to get back. I'm trying out a new distributor, and I've got to meet the rep in half an hour."

"Well, in that case... I guess I ought to bring up one other thing."

Immediately, all the goodwill and warm, fuzzy feelings I'd been feeling from our genuine girl talk evaporates. I can hear it in her voice—she's saying something from me, and I brace for it.

dad has "I'm in a really bad place, Stevie," she says, playing with her napkin. "I'm refusing to look me in the eye."

ny shift "What do you mean?"

ee time "Well... I'm in a bit of a financial pickle."

Of course, she is. "How much?"

t of my Her fingers twist at her napkin as she raises her gaze to meet mine.
thousand. Dollars.”

I gasp, my eyes feeling like they’re going to pop out of my head. “
ain?” kidding me? I don’t have that type of money, if that’s why you’re bring-
ie gamethis up.”

work. I “I thought you would. You own a business.” She worries at her
uch anlip, glancing out across the restaurant before looking back at me.
ur ownwouldn’t ask if it wasn’t dire.”

cept of I have to force myself not to roll my eyes because my mom
dramatic. Dire probably means she and Randy are a few months behind
he playrent or car payments. “I don’t have it,” I say again.

Because I don’t.

lives in My mom looks around erratically before leaning in and lowering
e team.voice. “If I don’t get the money, I could get seriously hurt. Maybe
killed.”

h wow. I rear back, chin jerking with shock. “What?”

” She doesn’t say anything, just stares at me, and I can see she’s
subjectwhat she just said.

“What in the hell have you gotten yourself into?” I demand,
ful overforward to keep the conversation private.

“Not me... Randy. But, well, okay, me too. I’ve been helping him
get theside hustle—”

“Side hustles aren’t usually dangerous,” I snap. “What exactly is it
out. “I Her voice drops to a whisper. “Okay, Randy has been laundering
money.”

ow beer “Jesus,” I mutter, rubbing my hands over my face. I close my eyes
in a breath. When I let it out, I glare at my mom. “What are you doing?”

She tells me a story that sounds ridiculous, but I suppose could I
havingShe and Randy are given counterfeit bills, and they go around the store
e wantsmake purchases with it. Later, they return the item for a refund.

The dirty money stays in circulation, and they get clean bills back.
kin and “We get twenty percent,” my mom explains.

My lips curl in disgust. “And you kept ten thousand dollars, when
guessing is far more than the twenty percent you earned?”

“No, we didn’t keep it. We used it to make more money.”

“How?”

e. “Ten “At Rivers Casino,” she admits quietly.

“Jesus, Mom. You gambled away ten thousand dollars.”

‘You’re “It’s not like it happened in one night. It happened over time and ringingthey’re demanding an accounting, and we’re in the hole. I don’t know do.”

bottom I slump back in my chair. Over the last few years while my mor
“And I have worked to rebuild a relationship, I figured out she can be
gullible, and blundering. But I never thought she’d get sucked into sor
can be criminal.

hind on Of course, now that she’s sucked into doing something like lau
counterfeit money, and adding her cluelessness on top, it appears s
some deep shit. I have no fucking idea how to help her.

ing her “Maybe your dad could give you the money,” she suggests.

oe even My eyes snap to hers in fury. “No. Don’t ever suggest he get invc
bail you out. You have no right.”

“Of course,” she simpers, her hands lifted before her. “I can see t
believes a bad idea.”

Sighing, I sit up straight again, pushing my plate to the side. M
leaning churns in my stomach, but I know it doesn’t have a damn thing to do v
spiciness of the dishes.

on this “Okay... start from the beginning and tell me everything.”

My mom talks for a solid fifteen minutes and the more I hear, the
?” feel like I’m going to throw up. I have no obvious answers, and when
g someways with an awkward hug on the sidewalk, the only thing I know for
that she’s in serious trouble.

es, take On the drive back to my house, I consider my options. Without a c
?” will not involve my father, even though he’d find a way to come up v
be true. money if I asked him. I consider calling Harlow. She does criminal
ate and work, and she’d have good advice. But for now, I’m hesitant to let an
on this, mostly because I’m embarrassed. Anyone who knows me and
what I went through struggling to grow up with a mom who didn’t car
me, would never understand my need to help her through this. And
ich I’m feel like justifying my actions. This goes double for my father who
give me major hell for even considering it.

Of course, I have no clue how to help her. I don’t have that
money. Nowhere close to it.

My mom said that Randy is going to stall for time to get the money. Even so, she doubted he'd be able to buy more than thirty days, if the wind blows.

I could sell the bar, although I'm not sure its value would net much more than what my mom needed. It's a cash business, and it makes enough to support me a decent salary and fund a modest retirement account. Past that, it's not worth much, and am I really willing to sell away my livelihood to help my mom out of trouble?

If her life was on the line, yeah... I'd have to do it. I'm not about to let her get hurt or killed because of her bad choices. So, I guess I do have one option that will fix the problem.

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My mom said that Randy is going to stall for time to get the money, but even so, she doubted he'd be able to buy more than thirty days, if they were lucky.

I could sell the bar, although I'm not sure its value would net much more than what my mom needed. It's a cash business, and it makes enough to pay me a decent salary and fund a modest retirement account. Past that, it's not worth much, and am I really willing to sell away my livelihood to dig my mom out of trouble?

If her life was on the line, yeah... I'd have to do it. I'm not about to let her get hurt or killed because of her bad choices. So, I guess I do have at least one option that will fix the problem.

CHAPTER 6

Hendrix

“YOU SURE ABOUT this place?” Bain asks as we step inside Jerry’s Bar. The music is loud, and it’s filled with bikers, biker chicks, grizzled old men who look like they might have seen a war or two, and a handful of new, interesting-looking individuals.

“Totally sure,” I assure him, immediately feeling comfortable. I wouldn’t you know it, “Edge of Seventeen” is blaring on the jukebox.

Camden pushes past both of us and heads straight for the bar. The bar is crowded tonight, at least not the way it was three nights ago for the top of the night. My gaze immediately lands on Stevie, pouring a draft beer from a tap. She’s talking animatedly to a guy sitting opposite her. He’s huge, arm muscles rippling under a black T-shirt with a leather biker vest. She slides the beer over to him, and he hands her money.

Stevie doesn’t put it in the register right away, but instead rests her forearms on the bar and leans closer to the man as they talk.

I take a moment to note she’s dressed pretty much the same way as she was the night of the charity drive. As she leans on the bar, my eyes narrow on her cleavage but on the biker’s gaze that drops there.

I hate the burning in my gut, but I know it comes with her job. The one thing that calms me a little is that the biker pushes some more money my way, which Stevie puts in a tip jar, then offers her fist to his, which he takes in a friendly manner.

“Come on,” I say to Bain, who hasn’t moved from my side. We move toward Camden sitting at the end of the bar with one empty stool beside her.

I plop down on it, and Bain moves to the other side of Camden. There’s another bartender there’s room to stand on the corner. Another bartender approaches me, a pretty blond I remember from the other night.

She recognizes me, and while Bain and Camden weren’t here that night, she must be a hockey fan because I can tell she recognizes them too.

“Great game tonight,” she chirps as she sets down three coasters for us. “First round is on me.”

Camden pulls out his wallet. “Actually... I’ll buy everyone in round.”

We give our orders, Camden hands over a credit card, and before the bartender can walk away, I say, “Do you mind nudging your back and sending her down this way?”

Bar. The “Sure thing,” she replies with a smile.

men who I watch as she walks over to Stevie who’s at a sink washing mugs. She bumps her with her hip and says something, and Stevie’s head whips around that way, eyes round with surprise.

because She smiles, lifts a soapy finger to indicate she needs a minute, and then she looks back at her.

It’s not I didn’t know how she’d take me showing up. She wouldn’t go on a long drive. me tonight, which included a ticket to the game and a late dinner, but I didn’t want to take two nights off in a row. We’ve got plans to go to the gym tomorrow, my last availability for several days as we’ve got back-to-back games in Nashville.

“Is that her?” Bain asks from the other side of Camden.

lists her “Yeah,” I reply without taking my eyes off Stevie. I’d told Camden that I was coming here tonight after the game (rather than to see Mario’s) to see a girl. I gave them the quick lowdown on how we’d already heard through the grapevine that Tracy and I had broken up and that I’d invited them along as I didn’t want to seem like the creeper dude just here drinking beers and staring at the girl who’s been occupying my thoughts the last few days.

he only bumps It’s safe to say that our first date went great.

they her Better than great. I’d actually go out on a limb and say it was my best date ever, even right up to the moment Stevie’s dad interrupted my attempt at a good-night kiss. I thought it was hilarious, and the way Stevie looked at me while her dad scowled told me all I needed to know about her.

s us, a She’s going to be a lot of fun to hang with, and that’s why I’m here tonight. Even if she’s working and I might only get a smile or two, here and there... it’s a good way to spend the evening.

at night, “She’s hot,” Camden observes. “In a very non-Tracy-like way.” My head twists to stare at him. “What does that mean?”

before “It means that if that were Tracy, she’d be doing something to get your attention. She’d have come over to you, batted her eyelashes, stuck her hand to your face or something. Your girl is washing dirty mugs and hasn’t even looked back at you. She’s confident and self-assured, and that’s what makes her more than a non-Tracy-like way.”

and I shake my head, not in disagreement but awe. “That’s actually one of the reasons our beers make it to us, along with several patrons coming up to Camden to thank him for the round. We’re recognized, which is expected, and she starts buying us beers. When that happens, the bartender sets a wooden tray in front of us to collect the brew when we’re ready so we don’t have any cold poured drafts going warm.

I wink It feels like forever, but it can’t be more than ten minutes before the drinks come our way, and yeah... I’ve pretty much been staring at her throughout with time.

as she Her eyes flit to Bain and Camden before returning to me and then she goes out there. Stevie leans an arm on the bar and angles her body to face the two of them. “This is a pleasant surprise. Or rather stalkerish. Not sure which.”

Bain laughs, and that draws Stevie’s attention. She reaches out her hand to me. “Stevie.”

and “Bain,” he says as they shake hands.

er than With her other hand, she points to the flat-screen TV behind the bar. “Great game tonight.” She then extends her hand to Camden. “I’m glad you did—congrats.”

t sitting We beat the Chicago Bobcats tonight 1–0 in a tough defensive battle. I personally had an excellent game. I wait for praise from Stevie, but instead she motions to the three of us and asks, “Is this like a defensemen type thing? Do y’all hang out by virtue of your positions?”

est first I shake my head and throw my thumb at my teammates. “Nah. I don’t really hang out with them very much. I just asked them to come along as I knew they’d leave me alone while I flirted with you.”

Camden and Bain chuckle as Stevie rolls her eyes. I think she might be trying to make it hard for me, but she turns fully my way and leans across the bar. “Give me about twenty minutes and I can take a break. You can take on your friends in a game of pool. If they’re foolish enough, we can win some money.”

“I like it,” I say with a conspiratorial grin, not even remotely aware of the

let your tits in beat her when we played the other night because her curvy little body glances fucking distracting as hell.

her hot “You played a great game, too,” she adds on softly. “You were distracting to me.”

point.” Stevie turns and moves down the bar, checking on drink refills along Camdenway. I stare after her until Bain punches me in the arm. “Dude... you people it bad.”

coin in “I like her,” Camden says as he clamps a hand on my shoulder line of squeezes. “And for the record, I despised Super Lint.”

“Yes, I know,” I drawl, well aware of how everyone on the table Stevie about my former girlfriend.

the entire “Super Lint?” Bain asks.

“Tracy was way too clingy,” Camden explains. “And she was staying happy. Always bitching about something.”

three of “Not always,” I say, feeling a weird need to defend Tracy. Or defend my lack of common sense in being with someone like that.

or hand. “Always,” Camden says with a pointed look. “In fact—”

A loud crash at the far end of the bar makes us whip that way, only two men fighting. Well, more like shoving back and forth with a whole bar. “I profanity.

Both of Two bikers covered in leather, tats, and scars, their bodies large enough to send other patrons scurrying as they go at each other. One of them is built like a tank, and throws a punch that lands square on the other dude’s jaw. But the other, instead, who’s got long hair in a single braid down his back, is built like a truck and barely gets rocked. His expression looks almost amused as he strokes his jaw before his eyes go ice cold, promising retribution.

actually And then I’m horrified to see Stevie coming up over the top of the table with a baseball bat in hand as she jumps to the ground. Her face is livid as she storms toward the two combatants, and I’m shocked even more to see her light walk clear a path for her to get to them.

cross the “Son of a bitch,” I mutter as I bolt that way, intent on intercepting her before she gets hurt.

can bet I’m too late, though. She steps right into the fray, elbowing one of the guys hard in the ribs and bending him over with a grunt of pain. She holds the bat with her hands at both ends and shoves it into the other guy’s

prised I driving him backward.

dy was “What the fuck, Louis?” she yells at the bald man, who immediately holds up his hands in surrender. “I told you if you pulled this shit re verygoing to crack your head open.”

The man looks somewhat chastened, which is weird considering how long thelike he’s done some seriously hard time in prison for hurting people, I’ve gotnot taking any chances. I gently grasp Stevie’s arm and maneuver her me, stepping back so I can put distance between us and the guys who ler andfighting. Bain and Camden appear and make a united wall with me.

“You the protection brigade?” the bald man named Louis asks am felteyeballs the three of us with a hard set to his jaw.

“Yeah... that’s us,” I reply, knowing Bain, Camden, and I could take this dude.

s never “Then I owe you a beer,” Louis says with a grin. “Because I was ten seconds away from Stevie using that bat on me.”

rather, “I would’ve kneed you in the nuts,” Stevie says as she pushes between me and Camden to come toe to toe with Louis again. “Get out of here. cut off for the night.”

y to see I watch in part confusion, part fascination as the man heads toward the lot ofdoor without further argument. She then rounds on the guy with the bat should throw you out, too, Jimmy.”

ough to “He started it,” the man growls, and I step in closer to Stevie.

ald and “So he did,” Stevie says with a sigh. “I’ll buy you a beer.”

ier guy, “Fair enough,” Jimmy says and heads back to his stool at the bar a Macknothing happened.

l as he “Dude,” Bain says, leaning in close and speaking in a low voice girl is a badass, and I’m slightly terrified of her.”

the bar, “I’m turned on,” Camden says with obvious awe.

as she I’d laugh if I wasn’t still trying to process what I just saw. Stevie, peopleinto the middle of a brawl without a single care in the world.

She moves toward the bar, but I reach out and snag her arm. “What the hell was that?” I ask.

She doesn’t seem to take offense but tips her head at me in curiosity. e of the “You could have been seriously hurt,” I point out.

olds the Her smile is brilliant, followed by a light pat on my cheek with her s chest, “It’s cute that you think I don’t know what I’m doing.”

“But—”

“No buts,” she says, moving her hand to my chest where she presses, I was my heart, which I realize is galloping. “Now, go get a pool table set up, I’m going to buy Jimmy a beer, grab myself one, and we’ll play a few more looks okay?”

I can only nod mutely because I’m starting to understand Stevie behind more intriguing than I’d originally thought, and I’d already thought she was so fucking cool as shit. Granted, I’m not sure I like her needing to break up fights and I know I’ll have a million questions later, but for now, I have to behave to trust that she knows what she’s doing.

I easily



STEVIE SINKS THE eight ball, and Bain tosses his cue onto the table. “That’s it, I’m drunk and tired of getting my ass kicked. I’m out of here.”

“Me too,” Camden agrees, picking up Bain’s cue and returning it to the wall rack along with his.

I glance at my watch and note it’s almost two a.m. The bar is completely cleared out, except for us and one old man sitting by himself, nursing a couple of dregs of a draft beer. The other bartender is at the register, counting and making notations on a notepad before putting everything in a bank.

Stevie unscrews her cue stick, and I start to panic. I’m not ready for the evening to be over, and I haven’t had any time to really talk to her alone. In the past few hours, all four of us have been drinking beers and playing pool. Every once in a while, Stevie would dash around and help pick up pool mugs and beer bottles for the other bartender, but she didn’t serve any drinks.

“It’s against the law to drink and serve alcohol,” she explained. “I’m slowing down, and Giada can handle things.”

I loved it because that meant she could hang out with me—and my buddies—the rest of the night.

But now they’re shrugging on coats, and I’m not ready to leave. It might be the beer talking, but it’s talking too loudly to ignore.

“Let’s play another game,” I say, directly to Stevie.

Her eyes lift to meet mine, then slide over to Bain and Camden. “Your friends are leaving.”

I step in closer to her. “And I’m glad. I haven’t had any alone time with you.”

up. I’m A dark eyebrow rises, and her lips twitch. “Alone time?”
games, “You know,” I say, nodding toward the pool table. “For us to have
on-one rematch.”

is far “Is that code for something else?” she asks with an amused smile
she waseyes sparkle, and I wonder how much of that is alcohol glitter.

up bar One more step closer to her, and my hand goes to her hip. “I don’t
I’ll justin code. So, if you want honesty, at the very least, I want that kiss you
screwed me out of the other night.”

“At the very least?” She’s the one who moves in now. “That implies
might want more.”

I bend my head, shrinking the distance between our faces. “I’ll let
hat’s it, on a little secret... when it comes to you, I’m always going to want to
take whatever you want to give.”

t to the Whoa, those were some strong words considering I’ve only known
woman for three days, but I evaluate the sincerity within me, and it’s
pletely beer talking.

the last And I’m not sure I’m talking about sex.

money Okay, yes... I’m talking about sex, but if she only has time to get
bag. another game of pool and we end the evening with that kiss, that’s okay
for the

ne. For No fucking way is this a rebound. When I ended things with Tracy
ig pool, wasn’t left with any emptiness that needs filling. There wasn’t a single
empty involved in that parting of ways.

y more Rather, whatever this is with Stevie is fresh and doesn’t have anything
thing to do with whatever happened in my life before meeting her. I have
clue what will come of it, and I don’t have any expectations. I’m
But it’s necessarily looking for a relationship, as I didn’t have the best experience
committing myself to Tracy. All I know is that Stevie has my attention
and my it’s never been caught before.

“Tell your friends goodbye,” Stevie says, eyes dancing with devil
e. That maybe a little challenge. Still no way to know how much alcohol is playing
part, but I don’t think Stevie needs a single drop of liquid courage to get
what she wants.

n. “But “You guys get out of here,” I say, loudly enough for them to hear
without taking my eyes off the woman before me.

ne with They snicker and Bain calls out, “Good to meet you, Stevie.”

 “Same to you,” she replies, eyes still locked on mine.

 “Great bar,” Camden says. “We’ll be back.”

e a one- “Looking forward to it,” Stevie says dismissively, her eyes falling
 mouth.

le. Her And there’s no way in hell we’re playing another game of pool. I
 no way in hell I’m waiting another second to kiss her.

t speak I lift my hand from her hip to slide it around the back of her slender
our dadI feel her muscles jerk and then loosen under my touch, and she’s
 rising onto her tiptoes. I don’t hesitate... don’t care if Bain or Camden
ies youleft or are gawking. I touch my mouth to hers where it hovers for just
 second before fully claiming it.

: you in Stevie sighs into my mouth. Capitulation? Pleasure? Both?

ore. I’ll Regardless, the room spins, and everything melts away. The boys,
 teammates, the old man sitting with his final beer of the night. All of
own thewith nothing else mattering but the heat of Stevie’s mouth, which
not thesends an insane swell of lust rocketing through my body.

 A kiss isn’t going to be enough for me.

 Will it be enough for her?

give me My hands dive into her hair, and I press the kiss deeper. She
y too. every bit of it, her fingers hooking through the belt loops of my jeans.
racy, I tugging me closer. If she continues and pulls me all the way into her
le acheshe’s going to feel exactly what this kiss is doing to me.

 Stevie turns her face, breaking the kiss. My lips go to her temple
a damnsucks in a deep breath. I pull back slightly to look at her, and when her
ave nomeet mine, my knees weaken with the pure, unfiltered heat radiating
’m notgaze.

erience “What if I ask you to come home with me?” she whispers.

ion like “Only one question... is your dad going to be there?”

 She laughs, light and tinkling. “He’s at his own house tonight. It
ltry andjust us... and my fish, Shenanigans.”

aying a “You have a fish named Shenanigans?”

go after “Yeah... I’ll introduce you. If you come home with me.”

 My answer is a soft kiss. “Let’s get this place cleaned up, then, so
ear butget out of here.”

g to my

There's

er neck.

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we can

CHAPTER 7

Stevie

I KNOW I should be second-guessing myself, but I'm not. I want Hendrix Bateman more than I think I've ever wanted a man in my life.

Not that there have been a lot in my relatively short sexual history there have been a few. Men I felt a connection with for sure, or else I never been intimate. But I've never slept with someone I just met. It takes time to warm up to people on a deeper level.

Not with Hendrix, though. I seem to have a swift level of trust in him. I'm going with my gut.

I don't chastise myself for making this decision under the influence of inebriation, because really... those beers only helped me come to a decision a little faster.

We take an Uber to my place, which is only a five-minute ride from the bar. Five minutes that we make out in the back seat, uncaring if the driver notices or that the windows fog.

It's freezing outside, but the cold doesn't seem to touch me as we run up the porch steps hand in hand. Never have I unlocked my door and then Hendrix is pushing me inside and slamming the door behind us. He rips off our coats and tosses them to the floor.

My lips are already tingling from his kisses in the car, and now that we're in the privacy of my home, we don't waste time pushing things along.

With deft hands, he has my tank top up and off before tossing it over his shoulder. Hendrix stills, lets his eyes rove over my body clad in jeans and a simple black cotton racer-back bra. His eyes linger on my chest already heaving because he makes me breathless.

I wait for him to do something... say something... my nerves jump because I know he's going to pounce at any moment.

His gaze lifts and meets mine. "I'm going to be a gentleman and ask if you're sure you want to do this?" His voice is deep and gravelly.

with lust, making me shiver. “You know... given the fact we’ve had beers.”

“I’m sure,” I reply, and relief washes through his expression.

“Thank fuck,” he mutters before lunging at me.

I hop into his arms—somehow knowing he’ll catch me perfectly. I wrap around his waist, and as we kiss, I manage to direct him up the stairs to my bedroom without both of us breaking our necks. It’s a testament to how strong he is, and I feel the proof of his muscles as I explore his shoulder and back.

In my bedroom, Hendrix sets me down... a slow slide down his back where I can feel how much he wants me. It’s dark and shadowed, the light spilling in from the hallway. He steps over to my bedside table and turns on the lamp.

With the room softly illuminated, Hendrix takes a step back from me. “Take off your clothes, Stevie.” His voice is heavy with lust. “I want to watch.”

“Oh God,” I whimper, but my ass goes to the edge of my bed and I take off my boots and socks. When I’m barefoot, I rise to shimmy out of my jeans with only the slightest bit of embarrassment to be under the spotlight of his gaze. Hendrix stands there, arms loose at his sides but his hands balled into fists as he watches.

Although nervous, I’m strangely empowered. I see in his expression that he wants me in a way that might surpass bodily desire. Like, he wants to crawl inside me, not just for the pleasure but to know me from a perspective no one else can.

Hendrix is still as a statue, observing me intently as I step out of my pants and kick them away. It’s weird, but rather than making me feel more self-conscious as I stand before him in my simple bra and panties, the weight of his appraisal calms me. The only way I know any of this affects him is when his chest rises and falls faster and his teeth bite into his lower lip, as if he’s considering what to do next.

Once more, Hendrix lets his gaze move over my body in no particular pattern... just languid brushes of regard that stutter and then pin on me. “Take it all off, Stevie.”

His voice is so gruff with need, the timbre scrapes at my nerves in a delicious way. My hands move to the front clasp of my bra, and I j

and a few mechanisms. I watch him watching me as I shrug off the cotton underwear.

Hendrix groans as he takes in my nipple piercings, and then I almost go into flames as his hand rubs at the erection pressing against his jeans.

“You are so goddamned hot,” he mutters, squeezing his length as I try to get some measure of control. My nipples harden just from seeing his cock turned on him right now.

to how “Panties... off,” he commands.

My heart feels like it’s thrashing around inside my chest trying to get free as I slip my fingers into the elastic band at my hips and push them south, giving a little wiggle when they reach my knees so gravity takes care of the rest of the way. I pull one foot free, kick them aside, and I am suddenly turned snaked.

We’re squared off against each other, and it never occurs to me to move toward him. Instead, I wait for his next instructions.

I like that I want him to tell me what to do, which seems contrary to my independent and decisive nature.

“Come here,” he says thickly, reaching out a hand.

I place my palm in his and let him lead me to the bed. He sits down on the edge and spreads his legs. I gasp as his arms encircle me, then he turns his hands forward to press his mouth to my stomach. A shudder races up my spine.

His lips skim to my ribs. My hands grip onto his shoulders for support because I want to melt into him.

Hendrix kisses his way up, grazes his stubbled cheek along the upper curve of my breast, and then his tongue circles the piercing in my nipple.

I groan as pleasure sizzles straight through me, a golden path of desire ending right between my legs in a deep ache of wanton need.

Hendrix hums his approval, moving his mouth to my other nipple. My fingers find their way into his silky hair. He seems in no rush as his tongue laves over my piercing, and I almost lose my shit when he bites gently with his teeth. My hands involuntarily contract, gripping his waist to hold him in place, feeling like I’ll die if he stops.

Releasing the hoop and giving a tiny lick, Hendrix pulls back to look at me. His hands go to my ass where he squeezes roughly. “You’re the sexiest, most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.”

My heart lurches over the admission because I hear the utter truth in his eyes, his genuine honesty. No one has ever called me

argument. beautiful before. I'm the tough chick, strong and able. I'm cute, perhaps beautiful?

No... no way.

of trying "I'd say the same about you," I murmur, feeling the blush of how compliment on my cheeks, "but you're not naked yet."

Grinning, Hendrix stands from the bed, causing me to step back. I hold out his hands, he says, "Get to work."

to burst I don't need to be told twice. My hands move to his shirt, and I pull it off his torso, but because he's so tall, he has to help me get it off. Then I pull his jeans open, and I relish the buck of his hips when I have his cock in my hand.

My head tips back to find Hendrix watching me with hot, hungry eyes. He steps forward, stroking his length and he groans, the naked desire on his face once again punching lust straight through me.

Instinct forces me down, my knees bending with an insatiable desire to have him in my mouth.

I'm stopped when Hendrix puts his hand at the front of my thighs. He shakes his head. "Later."

His hand then slides around to the back of my neck, and he hauls me up so he can kiss me. His tongue plunges deep, causing my head to spin. His other hand smooths over my lower back, down along my ass to the back of my thigh where he hitches my leg up. I feel his hardness between us as he's pushing me down onto my bed.

"Stay," he says with a pointed look, which is absolutely needed because I want to lunge at him. I need my hands on him. But I obey, holding myself in a gawk. He puts on a show as he strips out of the rest of his clothes, and quick, but that doesn't mean it's not entertainment. His body is sturdy as his combination of lean muscle, golden skin, and a variety of tattoos I want to tug at time to look at later.

And then I see it... right over his heart.

Rachel.

His sister's name with a date under it... April 18. I assume the date is the death, and my heart constricts with empathy.

My gaze immediately drops not to his cock but his left hip bone where I see the very first tattoo he got when he was sixteen.

The Tasmanian Devil.

aps, but That's adorable and totally a tattoo a teenager would secretly get.
Movement snags my attention.

Hendrix's hand is on his cock, stroking it, and my mouth goes dry of hisgot a condom foil in the other hand and he has no modesty, coming c the bed for me to get a close-up view. The surety of his actions rende holdingtumultuous mess. I feel so inexperienced compared to his sexual conf and yet the perceived disparity also turns me on.

sh it up Ripping the packet with his teeth, Hendrix rolls the condom on wi 've gotfluidity, it's clear he's done this a time or two. I don't think about tha k in mycontext of who he's been with before but rather he's probably brii wealth of experience to bed with him. Just the fact he was assured en eyes. I pull on my nipple piercing with his teeth tells me he knows what the h e againdoing.

Hendrix crawls onto the bed and pauses with his knees between n need tohis palms planted on the mattress beside my head to stare down at me.

"Can you even imagine all the dirty, filthy things I want to do to yo oat and I take in a sharp breath and shake my head, knowing that actual wo impossible because I about swallowed my tongue in shock.

is me up No man has ever talked to me like that. Rather than be repulsed, I in. Hisdemand further litany.

back of "I seriously don't even know where to begin," he muses as he look nd thenbetween our bodies. His eyes light up as his mouth curves wicke suppose I ought to test out a few things first."

ecause I "Like what?" I practically wheeze.

till as I He doesn't answer with words but shows me with one hand slidin s. He'smy stomach and right in between my legs. I moan when he presses ming, a finger deep inside me.

'll take Hendrix hisses, his eyes flaming with desire. "You're fucking Stevie. What exactly made you that way?" he rumbles.

"You did."

"Yeah... but what did I do to get you there?" His finger slides free of herpressing back in ever so slowly. "Tell me."

My hips gyrate to draw him deeper, and I lick my lips. "Back at th where Iyou told me you will always want more with me."

Hendrix laughs low, and I can hear the pleasure in his voice. " been wet for me this entire time?"

My answer is to rock my hips against his hand, conveying that I'd like more right now.

He's Dropping down but still holding most of his weight off me with his loser toelbows, Hendrix kisses me again with a laziness that drives me crazy. He cocks his hips heavy between my legs, and I wiggle my hips, trying to increase the friction I'm craving.

Hendrix mumbles against my mouth. "Greedy."

I bite his lip, and he curses.

Then he laughs, lifting my leg to wrap it around his hip. He uses his hand to guide his cock to me, and thrusts gently until he has his full length inside me.

"Mmm." My eyelids flutter as I wrap my other leg around his waist and gyrate against him. "Feels good."

"Unbearably good," he mutters, pressing a kiss to my temple and lifting his body up a bit. His head dips, and he looks down the length of my body. "Look at us... connected. Me... deep inside you."

I'm almost afraid to look, but I do as my hands come up to brace his thick biceps. It's staggeringly erotic and my muscles involuntarily want to contract.

Hendrix groans. "Fuck, woman."

I start to laugh, but Hendrix pulls out and thrusts back in with more force. "Oh God... just like that."

Hendrix kisses me as he starts to move, and I close my eyes so I can myself feel. Hendrix lowers onto me, pressing his torso to mine, and his legs go around my back to hold me close as he moves within me. His head flutters against my cheek, moving to my jaw before he presses his lips against mine.

Sharp bursts of air from his mouth waft against my neck, causing goosebumps, and Hendrix moves faster.

Harder.

My hips flex counter to his moves, an erotic dance that is so synchronously perfect it feels like he's become part of me. He's hitting me deep, and I can't help the pleas that come pouring out. "Hendrix... don't stop. It feels so good."

"Trust me," he says softly into my ear, his hand slipping between my bodies to find my clit. "I'll get you there."

and really His simple yet effective touch sends a live current through powerful that it knocks my orgasm loose.

with his I groan as my entire body locks tight for a blisteringly long moment. His ecstasy takes me hostage. I feel myself rippling around his cock, and get the exploding through me, causing Hendrix to buck harder. I'm absolutely with the force of it.

"Jesus... right there with you," he growls and then gathers me in again as he starts to come.

in his hand With our bodies pressed tight, his hips locked hard against mine, I feel a buried entire body shudder. He pushes into me once more, so very deep, and with relief. "So fucking good, Stevie."

against and *Nothing has ever felt better.*

I lie under Hendrix's heavy weight, feeling safe and spent in the before of his strong arms. I'm jolted back to reality when he lifts slightly, and I feel our chilly against the sweat on our bodies.

Tenderness glows in his eyes. "You good?"

against Warmth spreads through my chest as I smile. "I'm boneless, but without a single complaint."

Hendrix laughs before pressing a gentle kiss to my mouth. "That's amazing."

enough "Beyond."

that." He regards me thoughtfully. "You want me to go?"

can let I shake my head. "I want you to stay. It's so late—or rather one morning—you should get some sleep."

mouth "Not sure I'll sleep lying next to you."

temple I love the teasing nature of his words, but he's serious too. "Well, you try."

goose "I've got to be at the arena at ten for practice. I'll have to get out by nine."

"I'll set the alarm," I assure him.

is so Later, when we're both snuggled under the covers and I'm pulled into a spooned position before him, Hendrix squeezes my hip. "Don't even please about canceling our date tonight."

I can't help but chuckle, as he might know me better than I gave him credit for. There's a part of me wondering if now that we have given in to lust and had sex before our second date, does he want to keep seeing me

me, so “The thought might have crossed my mind,” I admit.

“Well, uncross it. I’m leaving for a three-day road trip and I want to go out to another nice dinner.”

I’m flushed with a wave of giddiness that he wants to spend time with me. Not just sex, but a meal, which means more talk. I have a million curiosities about him, and I’m glad that this somewhat drunken fall-in-closet sex didn’t derail our desire to get to know each other better.

“It’s uncrossed,” I murmur, turning in his arms. Although the lights feel dim, I can see his face from the glow of the light from the bathroom I’d left on. I can walk around my house in the dark, but I don’t want Hendrix taking an accidental tumble down the stairs.

I press my hands to Rachel’s name over his heart. “When did you get that tattoo?”

“About three months ago,” he says.

“Really? Only three months?”

“Let’s just say my earlier tattoos didn’t hold a lot of meaning.”

“I saw the Tasmanian Devil on your hip.”

Hendrix’s smile gleams. “My sixteen-year-old self didn’t make the best decisions. But to answer your question, it wasn’t until after the crash that I started thinking a little deeper about Rachel’s death.”

My arm goes around his back and tightens. “Why is that?”

Hendrix lifts a shoulder, as if he doesn’t quite know the full answer. “I was early-grieved for my sister. I still do. I did throughout my entire life after her death. My family has coped with it, we’ve had therapy, we all talk about Rachel, but it wasn’t until I had my own brush with death that I realized how fragile you can really be. I don’t think I appreciated that before. And I never wanted to lose her, so I put her name over my heart.”

“You had a brush with death because you weren’t on the plane, but I was. I understand that with understanding.”

“Does that sound overly dramatic?”

I shake my head emphatically. “Not at all. I don’t know why you weren’t on that plane, but you easily could’ve been.”

“Minor injury. I pulled a groin muscle and was only out for twelve days. I went to the game. In fact, I almost did go, but the coaches decided to give me one more night of rest.”

“A twist of fate is all that stood between you and death.” A tiny

skitters up my spine at the scary truth that your next minute on this earth is not guaranteed. “How have you been since the plane crash? It’s not just with death. You lost close friends.”

He with “Too many close friends,” he murmurs, his voice so slight, it would be more lost on the wind if we were outside.

Too fast “I can’t imagine.” I skim my fingers over his collarbone, across his shoulder, then smooth my palm down his arm. “How did you even manage to cope with those losses?”

Halfway “Therapy,” he says, and my eyes lift to his. There isn’t an ounce of hesitation in his admission. “There was only me, Coen, and Camden. Coen went off the rails.”

Get this I had indeed read all about Coen’s troubles following the crash. “He seems good now.”

“Yeah. He’s good now. Met a woman who healed his heart.”

“You believe that can happen?” I ask.

“That a woman can have such power?” Hendrix asks for clarification.

“That love can fix things.” I wonder, maybe if I love my mom enough, will I be able to heal what’s broken inside her?

On the plane “All I know is that a heart can be healed. And I suppose that can be done by the love of someone. I mean, I had my parents, but not a girlfriend or anything. Just a good therapist named Pete.”

Answer. “I laugh, trying to imagine what Pete looks like. “And Camden’s okay.”

My “I don’t know,” he says, and I hear self-condemnation in his voice. “I haven’t talked about it in such a long time.”

Simple life I lift my head, locking eyes with him. “No one says you have to forget you don’t want to.”

“Yeah... I know. It’s just... he seems fine, so I don’t ask, and he doesn’t ask me. He’s a little off on the ice this year, but he was fine last year, you know.”

I settle back down, contemplating whether I should ask my next question. “Did you have a close friend on the plane? I’m sure you were close to your teammates, but was there someone that you were closest to?”

That one I feel Hendrix flinch slightly as he releases a soft sigh. “Yeah... Heinen. He was a defenseman on the first line. In fact, he took my spot on the first line, moving me down to second when he came to the team two weeks ago. He was so good I couldn’t even be upset by it. We just clicked.”

th isn't know. Hung out together in our spare time, traveled together during a brushsummers. I was a pallbearer at his funeral and that was one of the things I've ever done. It made me understand that I can't continue on without getting every opportunity to live my best life."

"I'm sorry about your losses." It's all I have to offer, along with the long his press to the base of his throat because it's closest to my mouth.

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ince of I wince. "That's going to hurt like a son of a bitch."

en left. "I hope so. It will mean more that way."

His words compel me to snuggle closer, and I lock my arms around him in a tight hug. He reciprocates with a gentle squeeze, and I place my head against his chest, listening to the steady thrum of his heartbeat.

"Do you think your dad would do the tattoo for me?" he asks.

I smile at the thoughtful gesture as Hendrix could get his tattoo anywhere. "He definitely would not turn his nose up at your money, but he might be a little hurt, it hurt a little more than necessary, since you're dating his daughter."

"But I'll be tough about it, and then I'll earn brownie points with him." "Probably," I admit.

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"Probably," I admit.

CHAPTER 8

Hendrix

THE MOOD IS jubilant as we exit the bus that just delivered us from the Badgers' arena to our hotel. We took the first game 2–1 in this back-matchup in Nashville, solidifying another hard-fought victory. We're eight weeks into the regular season and no one can call all these wins anymore.

Brienne Norcross and Callum Derringer have built a serious competitive team that has eased back into the top ranks far sooner than anyone expected. As an OG member of the Titans, I can testify that a lot has to do with how well all this talent meshes on a personal level. Maybe because this entire organization is like a phoenix rising from the ashes, but it has made our bonds stronger than what I'd normally see on a professional sports team. Or maybe it's pure fucking luck.

Maybe it's both.

Regardless, every member of this team now believes we can have it all—the best of the best since Nashville sits at the top of the league.

Because we play them again tomorrow night, Coach West has suggested we don't make a late night of it but said no more than that the coaches would forbid us from partying after a game, but Coach isn't like that. He empowers us to make our own decisions, knowing we're all adults who will accept the consequences for any bad choices.

Unilaterally, everyone agrees not to go out partying, but a handful of us decide to have a couple beers in the hotel bar. We've got all day tomorrow to relax, minus a light skate midmorning, so we'll have a little mini celebration of our win.

I'm nursing my second beer, munching on pretzels and surfing my phone. I read back through the text exchange I had with Stevie today. Just casual, light banter, wishes of good luck before the game. Every single one of them makes me smile.

I glance over the last text conversation with Tracy. She sent a few we broke up, pushing at the boundaries to see if we could talk. I kept arm's length, having to repeat to her that we were not happy together never responded after that, so I assume she's moved on.

Putting my phone down, I glance around. Almost the entire team is here. None of the coaches have joined us, but they don't usually hang after a game. Drake is absent, but Brienne traveled with the team from the Nashville, so that's not a shocker. A few of the other players' wives to-back significant others traveled to the game, so they've all gone straight almost rooms. I know that's exactly where I'd be if Stevie ever came to a game. I flukes

Funny, I never asked Tracy to road trip to a game for me. It didn't seriously cross my mind, probably because that was much-needed time away from her than Time for me to have some freedom and hang out with my buddies.

That right there should have been a clue that it was never going to be a lot of it. I'd kill to have Stevie come on the road with me. Away games are ybe it's because you're battling that extra member of the opponent's team—titles that because you're battling that extra member of the opponent's team—titles that professional Just having that one fan in the stands cheering you on can make difference. Even if you can't hear them, you can *feel* them. At least what some of the guys say when their girls come to cheer them on.

I can believe it with Stevie. She's the type of woman that if she's on your side, you'd never have to worry about what might sneak up on you. That has become super apparent the more I've learned about her. Many includes how she was raised by a single father, a biker tattoo artist who ke that, all accounts, is a phenomenal dad, after her mom decided it was too late for her to be a parent.

I mean, what does that do to a child? And yet, Stevie is very stoic about the entire thing. She understands her mother probably better than the crowd to understands herself. On this side of adulthood, Stevie has become strong independent with a tremendous capacity for care, tenderness, and kindness.

I've seen all those traits so far during our deep talks about her lack of a phone, figure and me losing my sister.

And the thing that touches me the most, and also makes me a bit nervous for Stevie, is that there's still a part of her—that little girl inside—who her mom to be a mom to her. She's an optimist, and she's holding on to that maybe one day they'll have something meaningful.

“My man.” A hand comes down on my shoulder, and I jolt to fit her at there. “You are lost in some heavy thoughts.”

“Just thinking about Stevie.” No sense in lying.

I half expect him to rib me about it, but he says, “She’s cool as fuck.”

“Yeah, she is.”

“But... she’s not here. So come join our sedate little party and celebrate with us.”

Grinning, I grab my beer from the bar top and follow Bain to where everyone’s gathered at the back. To my surprise, several girls have mixed in with the players, sipping glasses of champagne.

“Puck bunnies came out of the woodwork,” I observe as we draw closer.

“Not puck bunnies.” Bain nods to the right, and I see a few women I don’t even remember, one wearing a crown on her head and sash across her front from her shoulder.

Bride To Be. “Bachelorette party starting up. They’re apparently staying at the hotel to party the night away. They’re having a pre-party drink here.”

“Hundred bucks says they don’t head out as long as there are some tough players here,” I muse as I take in the heavy flirting going on between some of the fans, my mates and the women.

I follow Bain over to where Kirill, Boone, and Camden are holding court with a group of bachelorette partiers. We’re introduced, and because of the good with names, I remember the tall redhead is Harper, the equally tall blond is Mimi, and the short blond is Marisol.

“You ladies should just stay here for your bachelorette party,” Kirill says, which I cut a grin at Bain.

“Well,” Mimi says with a coy grin. “We were hoping to see some hard-core strippers tonight. I suppose if you guys were willing to take off your clothes...”

“We can absolutely accommodate that,” Kirill says, and I’ve come to know him well enough the last nine months to know he’s not kidding.

Shaking my head in amusement, I take a sip of my beer and wander over to watch one of the large TVs on the wall, currently tuned in to a hockey game. They’re showing coverage of tonight’s league games, specifically a clearing brawl between the Montreal Wizards and the New York Phoenix.

My knuckles tingle as I watch for when I dropped the gloves tonight. I wanted to land a solid right jab into my opponent’s jaw before we both crashed out. It was a satisfying five-minute penalty, and we held off the power forward.

“Are you a fighter for your team?”

and Bain I twist my neck to see the redhead, Harper, standing beside me wearing a barely there silver dress, sipping on a fruity drink through a

“A defenseman,” I say genially, turning her way. “And I’ve been k.” to throw a punch or two when the time is right.”

She stares at me appraisingly. “We’re thinking about just hanging out tonight. Maybe you can buy me a drink?”

I blink at her in surprise. Not that I’m being hit on, because mixed in happened plenty in my life. Being a professional athlete has its perks.

The surprise is more of a slight panic, not knowing how to respond. I’ve been on two dates with Stevie, and we’ve had sex.

Plenty of spectacular sex.

I plan on seeing her when I get back.

But we haven’t made any commitment to each other. We haven’t talked about it, but deep in my gut, I feel like she probably has an expectation of me to keep my dick in my pants.

I quickly do a mental calculation and wonder how I’d react if I found

Stevie had sex with someone else tonight. The burn in my gut tells me she wouldn’t like it one bit.

Moreover, while Harper is sinfully attractive, I absolutely don’t want to fuck her.

Or even converse with her.

That took all of twenty seconds to tell me I’m committed enough to

Stevie that I’ll be monogamous, not because of any loyalty garnered from her because she’s the only one I want.

“I’m actually involved with someone,” I say with an apologetic smile.

“So?” She smiles and sips on her drink.

I don’t need to explain myself to her, so I nod. “It was nice meeting

Harper. I’m going to head up to my room now.”

“I could come with you,” she offers.

ESPN. “No, you really can’t.”

She’s the one blinking in surprise. “Are you serious? Your girlfriends would never know.”

I could be a douche and tell her I’m just not attracted to her, but I’m pleased by the label she put on Stevie.

My girlfriend.

My smile brightens, and I incline my head. “You have a nice night

She's "Idiot," she mutters as I turn my back on her. I set my unfinished straw on the bar and walk out.

I glance over at my buds, but it's only Bain's eye I catch. I throw my hand up in farewell, and he lifts his chin.

In my room, I remove my suit and slide into a pair of workout shorts and a T-shirt. I brush my teeth and turn on the TV, muting the sound as I flop that's down on the bed.

Stevie's working, and I wonder if she'd answer if I called. We've talked a few times today, but it's been superficial. We've both been busy, her with a business and me playing hockey.

But I want more right now.

We had a great meal last night, the second date even better than the first. A delicious meal, captivating conversation, and we ended up back in her house where we nearly broke her bedframe. I was insatiable for Stevie for what's in her head and for her body. She's so fucking easy to open up and I never had conversations like that with Tracy. I've talked more about my sister Rachel and about the plane crash with Stevie than I have with anyone except for the therapist I saw following both tragedies.

I don't know if Stevie's the same open book with others that she is with me, but she didn't hesitate to share her pain about her mother abandoning her. She even admitted the real reason she gave me a shot was because I worked at a relationship with Tracy before I finally called it quits. I appreciated how much I valued the effort it takes between two people, whether it's between a man and a woman or, in her case, a mother and child.

"Fuck it," I mutter and dial Stevie.

It rings four times, and just as I'm about to hang up, she answers me.

I can hear music from the jukebox muffled in the background, hiding in the storeroom so your dad doesn't know you're talking to me. She laughs, and it's husky. One of my favorite things about her. "I'm home, but I came in here for the quiet. You played great tonight."

"You watched, huh?"

"In between schlepping beers. I particularly liked that right jockey you landed."

"I'm not quite as tough as you are, but I was pleased with it."

beer on We share a moment of silence, and there's nothing awkward about not struggling to find words, merely basking in the teasing. That's sure how my something I never did with Tracy. I'm realizing she wasn't laid back to have such an easygoing humor about her. While I detest making sports and comparisons, they are validation I made the right decision in ending it.

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And then her voice rings sweet. "You're pretty much all I've been thinking about. Monday can't come soon enough."

I stare at her There.

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Stevie laughs. "You'll just have to wait and see."

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and her "I'll call you tomorrow. How early is too early since you've got to go ahead of you working?"

"It's never too early. Call when you want."

. "Hey, I smile, thinking of an early-morning wake-up call, knowing she'll be sleepy and discombobulated. I can wish her a good morning and let her go.

l. "You back into slumber, and she can wake up later, wondering if it was a dream or not?"

"Good night, Stevie."

He's at "Sleep well, Hendrix."

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We share a moment of silence, and there's nothing awkward about it. I'm not struggling to find words, merely basking in the teasing. That's sure as shit something I never did with Tracy. I'm realizing she wasn't laid back enough to have such an easygoing humor about her. While I detest making these comparisons, they are validation I made the right decision in ending it.

Even more, I made the absolute right decision in pursuing Stevie.

"I can't wait to see you Monday night. We still on?" I ask. At the conclusion of our second date, I asked for a third.

There's more silence and for a demoralizing moment, I wonder if it's wrong to wear my heart on my sleeve like this.

And then her voice rings sweet. "You're pretty much all I've been thinking about. Monday can't come soon enough."

There.

That's all I needed to hear. "Same."

"I have to get back to work," she says dolefully. "But I was thinking... rather than going out to eat, how about I cook for you?"

"I don't know," I drawl hesitantly. "Are you any good?"

Stevie laughs. "You'll just have to wait and see."

"We can always order pizza as a backup. Any interest in coming to my place? I have a hot tub we could relax in."

"I could be down for that," she murmurs low in her throat, and I know without a doubt we won't get much relaxing done. "You should get some rest."

"I'll call you tomorrow. How early is too early since you've got hours ahead of you working?"

"It's never too early. Call when you want."

I smile, thinking of an early-morning wake-up call, knowing she'll be sleepy and discombobulated. I can wish her a good morning and let her fall back into slumber, and she can wake up later, wondering if it was a dream.

"Good night, Stevie."

"Sleep well, Hendrix."

CHAPTER 9

Stevie

MY DOORBELL CHIMES, and I lift my gaze. Through the door's rectangular, diagonal glass insets, I see my mom on my front porch.

Frowning, I save my month-end bank reconciliations and set my aside. Pushing up off the couch, I cross the living room and swing the door open. "Mom... what are you doing here?"

"I had to come talk to you," she says, brushing by me.

I sigh with a bit of frustration. She texted this morning, wanting to meet together for lunch, but I have too much to do. I'm heading in to work tonight to train a new bartender.

"I'm really busy," I say, a reminder that I don't have a lot of time. I also give her a slight brush-off because I'm not sure I want to hear what she has to say. She's been barraging me with texts every day about her "situation" and it's stressing me out because I don't have answers for her.

"I won't stay long," she says as she shrugs her purse off her shoulder and removes her coat.

I move back to the couch and motion for my mom to take a seat. She does, looking around my house with interest. She's only been here a few times since we've "reconnected." Her eyes land on the coffee table, specifically onto my leather-bound diary. It's open but facedown as I'd been doing journaling this morning while I sipped my coffee. That was not long ago when Hendrix called, pulling me out of a deep sleep. It was such a short conversation, although very short. Just wishing me a good day, but instead of falling back asleep, I got up and wrote about him.

I've kept a diary since I was ten years old. It was a way for me to vent all my bad feelings at first, particularly about the woman sitting next to me. Over the years, it became a way to memorialize events, random thoughts, dreams, and goals.

This morning it was about the new man in my life.

My mom reaches out for it. "What's this?"

I lunge and snatch it up. "It's my private journal."

"Oh," she murmurs as I close it, securing it with the leather string
ever saw my older diaries and the entries I wrote about her when I v
she'd be horrified by the feelings I put to paper.

I lean to my left and place the journal on my side table.

"So, what's up?" I ask, and then silently pray she has so
s three miraculously found her way out of trouble and that's why she's h
report the good news.

r laptop "I wanted to let you know Randy has bought us some time."

he door "What does that mean?"

"He gave them some bullshit story that we had to slow down th
frame between purchases and returns and had to extend our terri
; to get decrease suspicion. They weren't happy about it at all, but they d
rk early Randy more bills to clean, so I guess they trust what he's saying."

I don't really know what that means, and I don't want to. "That'
me, but right?"

has to "No," she snaps in exasperation. "I feel like someone's going to ju
n," and at any moment to hurt me. It's an awful feeling not knowing when
going to demand their money. But Randy said we have thirty days,
der and just going to have to trust that."

I don't like Randy. The one time I met him he seemed like a weas
at. She now he's got my mom messed up in this shit.

e a few "I think we're safe, though. They've given us more dirty money to
locking circulation, so that means they still trust us, right?"

g some "Mom," I say, reaching out to grab her hand. "You cannot continu
ig after this. If you get caught, you're going to prison."

t sweet "It's fine," she assures me, giving my hand a squeeze. "I'm just re
t rather stuff Randy buys. I'll play dumb if he gets caught and he'll cover for n

"He'll let you burn," I say as I pull my hand away, rubbing at the
o purge my neck.

to me. "Well, that's moot if we don't come up with the original money v
oughts, isn't it?" She pauses and sucks in a wet sniffle. Her shaking hand flu
her neck. "When Randy went to tell them we'd be late with the mone
hurt him."

"In what way?" I ask, my stomach rolling.

She reaches into her purse and grabs her phone. Flipping through she turns the device to show me one. “They beat him up,” she says in a quavering voice. I wince as I take in Randy’s swollen face, blackened eye, and busted lip. “They said this was just a taste if he doesn’t show up with the money—including the new job they gave him—in thirty days.”

“Jesus.” Nausea surges as I think of someone doing that to my mother. “Have you been able to figure out a way to get me the money?” she asks, her eyes filling with tears.

“No.” I feel utterly helpless. “I told you I don’t have that kind of money. Mom. Can’t you go to the police or something?”

“And what?” she asks with a warble to her voice. “Go to jail? I don’t want that for me?”

“It’s better than getting hurt.”

My doorbell rings again, and I take a deep breath before pushing open the door. I see a man through the glass holding something.

When I open the door, I’m met with a man holding a massive bouquet of white roses in a blue vase. “Stevie Kisner?”

“That’s me.” He hands me the vase, and it’s so big, I can barely lift it. There have to be at least two dozen roses, maybe more.

“Enjoy,” he says.

I close the door and bring them to the coffee table, my pulse hammering. There’s only one person who would send me a gift, and my hand slips as I pull the card free of the plastic stake.

No one has ever sent me flowers before, and while I don’t know about the business, I assume this many roses cost a small fortune.

The card slips free of the envelope, and I read a typewritten message: *Wear the necklace as a reminder of how we first met. Hendrix.*

Necklace?

My gaze goes back to the flowers, and nestled in the middle is a small box with a white satin ribbon tied in a delicate bow.

I take a breath to calm my racing heart, but my hand shakes hard as I lift the box free. I untie the bow, lift the lid, and then laugh in delight as a delicate silver chain with a single pendant—a porcelain nine ball pendant, yellow and white.

To symbolize the first game of pool we played that entitled him to a few minutes of my time, which then secured my agreement to go out with him.

photos, I lift the necklace free, my fingertips brushing the links.
with a “Who’s that from?” my mom asks. I actually jump because I
d eyes, immersed in the romantic gesture, I’d forgotten she was sitting a fo
with all me.

“Hendrix,” I murmur. “He’s in Nashville on a road trip.”
her. “Oh, wow,” my mom says, reaching out for the necklace. I hand i
re asks, as I read the card again. “What does it mean?”

“We played a game of nine ball when we first met.”
money, I read the card a third time, unable to control the smile on my face.
“I take it this is getting serious,” my mom says softly, and I turn
Do you her. She hands the necklace back to me with a knowing grin. “I’m sc
for you, Stevie.”

“No,” I immediately deny. “We started dating less than a week ago
off the “And he’s giving you roses and jewelry, and not just any jewelry
meaning. I wonder how he found a necklace with a nine ball on it wh
quiet of on a road trip? That took some serious effort.”

Okay, that makes me flush with pleasure as my gaze drifts to the f
hold on The great lengths he went to get me something meaningful... while he
another state. I know it’s been six days since we first met, but maybe
serious. Does time matter when you have a really great connection?
mering. We have amazing conversations, comfortable silences, and our
hakes a through-the-roof hot. I actually crave him with the ferocity of a s
animal.

v much “You could get the money from Hendrix,” my mom says.
My head whips her way as I exclaim with astonishment, “What?”
essage: She shrugs. “He’s a wealthy guy. He clearly likes you a lot. I’m su
hand over ten thousand without even batting an eye.”

Jaw dropping slightly, I give a slight shake of my head. “Do yo
a whitehear yourself sometimes?”

“Why? What’s wrong with what I just said? He has so much mor
der as I thousand wouldn’t mean anything to him.”

as I see “It would mean everything to him,” I say harshly. “It would mean
inted in misjudged *my* character because he knows money doesn’t mean anyt
me. You’d want me to put myself in a disingenuous position with him?”

i to ten My mom crosses her arms over her stomach and folds in on hers
aim. rocks back and forth, her expression awash with fear. “I’m scared,

and you're the only person in the world who cares about me. I'm de
was so and afraid of getting hurt or killed or whatever is going to happen to m
ot from we don't come up with the money. I have no one else to turn to."

I'm practically knocked backward as my mom throws herself i
arms and starts sobbing. I'm a good judge of emotions, and there's i
t to her fake about the tears. She trembles hard as she cries. "I'm so fucking s
know how stupid it was getting involved in this, but that's me... I'v
stupid choices my entire life." She lifts her head, stares at me with tear
cheeks. "Look at what I did to my own daughter. I'm the worst huma
to face in the world to have walked away from someone as precious as you a
happy here I am, asking you to give me support when I could never give it
You should kick me out of your house right now and lock the doo
." "I don't deserve what I'm asking of you. You have to push me away,
r. It has because I'm too weak-willed and will keep coming back, asking for
ile he's don't deserve."

Every single word is like a knife jabbing into my heart. As much
flowers, pissed at her, I'm equally brokenhearted for her.

was in My mom has incredibly deep flaws and has made horrible choic
e this isshe is a human being in pain, and I don't want her to be scared.

I pull her back into my arms and make a promise I have no idea h
sex is keep. "I'll get the money somehow. I'll help you out and keep you
starving swear it."



I DIDN'T RUSH my mom out but let her sob through her fears. Once I m
promise, she settled and didn't feel the need to throw ideas at me anyr

She's gone now, and I slump down on my couch, giving a baleful
my computer. I should jump back into my end-of-month reconciliatic
my mind is too preoccupied.

Instead, I lean over and grab my journal, opening it up to the last p
written on.

I read the last entry.

*December 6, 7:20 a.m.: Hendrix called this morning. Woke me
from a sound sleep. He told me he was going to call and hinte*

Stevie,

desperate when I got into my room and found nothing I cared. I had made a stained shirt on being and now I'm reading to you. You know, Stevie, help I'm as I'm see, but now I'll safe. I

might be early. Despite getting to sleep around three, I was invigorated when I answered his call. He was so sweet. Just wanted to wish me a good morning and then demanded I get more rest. Yet that didn't happen, so here I am sipping coffee and wondering how I got so lucky to hook up with such a sweet guy. I'll see him tomorrow and to say I'm excited is an understatement.

I flip to the prior entry that chronicles his call after the first November game.

And the one before that, which was our second date. I didn't focus much on the date as I did the sex, which was intense. My cheeks hurt. I read through the play-by-play.

Damn, Hendrix pushes all my buttons in the right way, and I find myself last night... as well as I'll find myself tonight... using my memories of this entry.

I flip back to the note after the first time we had sex. For that I didn't focus on the sex but rather on our talk after. The physical intimacy busted any constraints either of us might have had about opening up to each other. I shared more about my mother, and he opened his heart about his and the teammates he'd lost.

He made me think about the frailty of life and about making the most of our opportunities. I read the entire entry again to take me back to the connection we made.

December 3, 8:22 a.m.: I had sex with Hendrix. I'd like to blame it on the knee-wobbling kiss he gave me at the bar, but I had been pretty into him since our first conversation in the storeroom. The sex was mind-bending, but I want to get down my thoughts about the man himself. Our lives don't exactly parallel each other, but we've both suffered losses, and the ways in which we've handled them have similarities. Those losses have shaped the values by which we live, and that's where we're most alike. Hendrix didn't fully appreciate the frailty of life after his sister Rachel died. He was a kid and he grieved, but he bounced back. It wasn't until an entire plane full of his friends was killed down that he understood. The tragedy made him realize—coupled with therapy with a man named Pete—he had to live more robustly.

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*So, when he told me there was nothing wrong with me for attempting to build something with my mom, I listened to him. I can't v
around for things with her to be perfect. I have to make the effort
now.*

I read the last line one more time. I have to make the effort now.

I click on my pen, my eyes drifting to the flowers. My other hand
ashvilleup and plays with the nine-ball pendant at my throat. I should write
that, and maybe I will later, but I need to purge some dark feelings at
ocus soencounter with my mom.

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*December 6, 11:43 a.m.: Mom came by, and she's a mess. Suppose
she's been given a thirty-day grace period to come up with the money.
It didn't stop them from beating the shit out of Randy, and the picture
mom showed me wasn't pretty. I can't stand the thought of it
happening to her. I'm fucking scared for her, but I'm also pissed
this has become my problem. When I reconnected with her, I thought
we could at least be friends. I didn't expect her to be a caring, do
figure for me, but I thought, given I'm an adult, we might at least have
an easy friendship. There's nothing easy about her dragging me into
this, and now I have to figure out a way to save her from getting hurt
maybe even killed. At this point, I have a few options, none of which
seem good. I can get some money off my credit card... maybe a
thousand bucks, but it won't be enough. It could hold them off
though, if she offered it. I've been thinking about selling my car
might get five thousand out of it as it's almost twelve years old
would mean I'd need to buy a new car, and I don't have the money
that. I could ask my dad. It would be an all-out war bringing this
his doorstep, and he'll most likely say no. Just me asking is going to
dent our relationship because he's bent over backward to raise
when Mom walked away. I'd go so far as to say it might even ruin
relationship, and I don't know if I can do that. It's a lot to think
about.*

Sighing, I chew on the end of the pen, wondering if I should write
my flowers and necklace. I decide against it because I've got ugly feelings
rolling through me regarding my mom, and I don't want to taint my v

ting reread my entries often, and as much as they are a way to purge, th
vait things help me reconnect with glorious feelings.

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want to make sure I soundly connect those to the page. I'll reread th
many times, I'm sure. Just like I've reread my entry on the first tim
Hendrix, and the recap of our first date, and that first kiss at the bar,
first time we had sex. The second time too.

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e about Hendrix, and I have a feeling it's going to be a long, steady one.
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reread my entries often, and as much as they are a way to purge, the good things help me reconnect with glorious feelings.

The flowers and necklace produced some serious warm and fuzzies, and I want to make sure I soundly connect those to the page. I'll reread that entry many times, I'm sure. Just like I've reread my entry on the first time I met Hendrix, and the recap of our first date, and that first kiss at the bar, and the first time we had sex. The second time too.

Within these pages, I'm chronicling this new journey I'm on with Hendrix, and I have a feeling it's going to be a long, steady one.

CHAPTER 10

Hendrix

THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT walking into my house through the garage carrying grocery bags with Stevie following right behind me, that feels too right. It's a different sense of coming home, wanting to share my life and the routine of cooking with someone I really like.

Our plans aren't overly thought out, simply a desire to chill with each other.

I had a morning skate, and Stevie worked at the bar. She got off at 10 p.m., and I picked her up. We hit the grocery store, and I pushed the cart while she pulled items off the shelves. A few people approached me for autographs. An older man wearing a Titans' sweatshirt kept bemoaning that his grandson wasn't with him to see me. Stevie took a picture of us with the man's phone so he could show the boy.

And once again proving how cool Stevie is, two very attractive women asked for a picture. They moved in, one on each side, and all I could think about was Tracy telling me not to touch them. I froze, holding my phone awkwardly as Stevie positioned the phone for the shot.

"Pull them in closer," she'd instructed. "They don't bite."

So I did... draping my arms over their shoulders and drawing them closer.

"Say cheese," Stevie said.

When they left and I was once again pushing the cart, she bumped into me against mine and proclaimed, "That was cool."

Yeah... it was.

This is the first time Stevie's been to my house, so after we deposit the grocery bags on the counter, I give her a tour.

I was super proud when I bought this place three years ago because it represented the height of financial success. A young guy, a few years into the professional hockey scene, and I was able to afford a huge house. She had the sports cars and expensive clothes, but a house was a

investment. It was something I could show off to my parents and Aunt Rory and they'd be proud.

Not that they're not always proud of the things I do.

The main floor is an open plan with the kitchen, breakfast nook, and living area bleeding into each other. Stevie is way too impressed with the hidden pantry behind custom cabinetry, opening up to reveal another room with shelves and a long counter complete with a fancy espresso machine.

To the left of the kitchen down a short hall is a game room with a pool table and a large, screened-in patio complete with fireplace, lap pool, and promised, a hot tub to relax in.

"Look at you with a pool table," Stevie teases.

I can't help but be a little smug. "I'm not feeling an ounce of guilt letting you know I was good when we made our bet."

I take her upstairs, giving her a peek inside the three guest rooms and the bonus room I turned into an office.

"An office?" Stevie asks. "I hope this isn't an insult, but you don't like the office type."

Laughing, I shake my head. "It's for my Aunt Rory so she has a place to write."

I'd told Stevie all about Rory, so she knows she's an author—successful—who writes mysteries. She lives in Columbus, where my mom is from, and visits a lot since it's only a few hours away. I'm assuming I'll introduce her to Stevie sooner rather than later. I know she's going to love her and she'll be vocal about it. She likes to stick her nose in my locker and like my teammates, she wasn't shy about sharing her opinion of Tim.

I lead Stevie down the hall from Rory's office to the master suite. It's a way more room than I'd ever need, including a bathroom and walk-in closet that's almost bigger than the bedroom itself.

My mom and Rory helped decorate my entire house, but this bedroom is all me. The furniture is super modern—all ebony stained with silver hardware—and the décor is minimalist and includes a single piece of art above the cream leather headboard. My mom and Rory hate it, saying it's colorless, but I'd find it calming.

I joke, but not really, "This will be the room where I'll fuck you at dinner."

nt Rory Stevie chokes as she pokes her head into the bathroom, turning
look at me.

 I lean against the doorjamb, hands in my pockets, and shrug. “What
ok, and know it’s true.”

with the If I thought I’d enjoy a blush or maybe stammering from her, I’m
er large as her smile curves upward, and she saunters to my bed. Placing two
spresso down on the mattress, she gives a few pushes on it. “Why wait until
dinner?”

billiard That’s all the invitation I need.

and as I’m across the room and have her locked into a deep kiss, my
sliding under her sweater and lifting it up. Stevie huffs her exasperation
have to separate to get it off.

for not When I toss it to the ground, my eyes land on the nine-ball necklace
gave her. She’d thanked me via text right after she received it with
and the flowers, and again with a sweet hug when I picked her up a bit ago.

 But seeing it against her bare skin gets to me. I reach a finger
’t seem touching it. “I need to get you a hockey puck to go with that.”

 Her hand covers mine. “That would complete the story. But how
place to we finish getting naked?”

 There’s a lot of hurried whispers and frantic hands, but eventually
—quite clothes are gone and I give her a little push back.

family And damn... Stevie naked and spread out before me on my bed is j
ing I’ll I stare at her as she goes to her elbows, not a hint of shyness. I take
to love tattoos painted into her pale skin, her pierced nipples, and how at
ive life, seems with her lack of makeup today. She didn’t say why, but gone
racy. dramatic eye makeup, and the only thing I can think is this is the first
It’s got during the day we’ve hung out. Maybe she only wears the makeup with
a closet works at night or goes out on evening dates.

 Regardless, she doesn’t need the makeup at all. Her dark hair and
room is cloud eyes are all she needs to complete the beauty of her face.

hardware Her irises now seem darker, more turbulent as desire swims with
ove the pulls her lower lip in between her teeth and runs her gaze over my
d, but I giving just as much frank perusal.

 Her eyes land on my cock, already hard and ready to sink into her
ou after going to do something with that?”

 I snort and move her way, putting a knee on the mattress between

back to legs. “Eventually. Got something else in mind, though.”

“What’s that?” she asks curiously.

at? You I don’t answer with words, instead pulling a condom out of my
table drawer and rolling it on.

denied Pushing her legs apart, I slide my palms up the insides of her silky
hands Stevie falls back to the bed with a soft moan because she kno
til after intentions. I told her last time we were together I couldn’t wait to
mouth between her legs.

Bending over her, I run my lips across her belly, turn my stubble
handsto drag over her mound, and with only a slight readjustment of my
n as we press my mouth hard against her pussy.

Stevie’s strangled cry makes my dick ache, and then her hands are
kplace I head, pulling me harder to her. She rotates her hips, shows me w
with the wants, and it’s fucking on.

I give it to her with a long lick up her center that elicits a sob of pl
ger out, Then I give her everything—my teeth, my lips, my fingers. I circle,
and thrust against her clit while pressing a thumb deep inside her, an
v about fuck... in seconds, she’s unraveling. An orgasm hits her hard, and whi
still trembling in the throes of her release, I surge up her body.

lly, the And slam into her so powerfully, the bed rocks.

“You okay?” I think to ask, my voice strangled with lust.

just... Stevie nods, gyrates her hips, and slaps her hands to my ass. “I’n
e in the Fuck me now.”

odds it I do as she asks, thrusting hard and fast. But I do it with my mo
e is the hers so she can taste her orgasm. Her tongue slides and tangles with m
st time my mind is completely focused on how damn tight and wet she is.

hen she I’ve had a lot of great sex in my life, but there’s something incom
about Stevie. She’s as beautiful and sexy as any other woman I’ve be
storm-but infinitely more attractive because of her mind and her heart. De
more unique and interesting than most people I know.

in. She But what makes me want to pop off inside her right now is that f
y body, are already involved. A few magical dinners, long conversations ab
personal lives—opening up deep wells of pain due to death and aband
r. “You—add in some insane sexual chemistry, and yeah... this is the type of
will become addictive, and I’m here for it.

een her I bottom out in her body, grind my hips hard, and then go still s

watch her face. Her eyes are closed, face flushed.

Her lids flutter and her gaze locks on mine. I wish I could take a bedside of her right now... memorize that look of desire, joy, and tenderness stares at me.

thighs. It tells me this moment is as special for her as it is for me.
ws my I pull out, almost all the way free before pressing in slowly. I wa
get my play of emotions across her face that continue to tell me a story.

Stevie's hand comes to palm my cheek. "You feel so good."
d cheek Christ, that would be an understatement if I voiced the return ser
body, I Instead, I turn my face into her hand and press a kiss there before taki
my own. I push our hands between our bodies, force her fingertips o
e on my clit, and smile at her. "Want you to come again. With me, okay?"

hat she She nods, determination in her eyes.

Dropping to my elbows, I kiss Stevie as I move within her. Not ha
leasure. a steady pumping of my hips against hers as my tongue fucks her n
flutter, can feel her hand moving between our bodies, bringing herself more p
d Jesus along with what I'm giving her.

le she's Stevie's hips move more insistently against mine, and she moans i
mouth. My own chest heaves with exertion as I try not to come unt
with me.

It has to be with me.

n good. That's what this intense, emotional connection demands.

Stevie tears her mouth from mine and gasps, "I'm going to
outh on Hendrix. Tell me you're close."

ine, but I thrust faster. "I'm with you," I say through gritted teeth. "Let y
fly, baby."

parable Her legs wrap around my waist, her fingers move fast between
en with then she's bucking wildly as she cries out, "Oh... damn, Hendrix. So
finitely So good."

Her words set me off as much as the feel of her orgasm rippling
feelings my cock. My own release turns nuclear in its destruction of my senses
out our into Stevie's body, wrap my arms around her, and bury my face in her
onment come with a ferocity I've not felt before, and it's terrifying and beau
sex that at the same time.

I'm starved for air, gasping as my hips buck against hers. "St
o I can groan hoarsely. "God damn. Please don't ever let this stop."

“It won’t,” she vows. Her fingers dive into my hair, and she gyrates against me. The picture continued ecstasy against me.

As she It seems to take forever for the pulses of pleasure to quiet. I collapse her body, holding a good deal of my weight off her but not sure how long longer I can do it. I’m utterly depleted.

Stevie lets out a long sigh, and I lift up to look down at her. Her smile is gentle as she presses her palms to my chest. “I can’t believe I just met you a week ago. How am I in your bed having just had back-to-back orgasms? It might have broken me?”

“Because you’re a loose hussy?” I ask with a grin.

She grins back, and there... that right there. That we can joke like this and she knows I’m teasing. “Okay, Grandpa... pretty sure the term ‘loose hussy’ went out in the forties.”

But I’m also taking her question seriously. I bend down, brush my lips against hers. “I’ve been trying to reason out this connection myself.”

“It’s not normal, right?”

“I’ve never experienced it.”

Her fingertips play with the ends of my hair at my neck. “Not even if she’s Tracy?”

It’s the first time she’s brought Tracy up as a comparison, but before I can reassure her, her hand covers my mouth and she shakes her head. “No, I won’t answer that. That was a stupid, trite question for me to even ask.”

I lightly bite her palm, causing her to jerk away. “I won’t answer your question, but I’ll tell you a secret. I’ve never talked about Rachel or the crash with any woman I’ve dated.”

Stevie’s eyes flare, then go tender. “Really? Because I’ve never talked to anyone about my mom, other than Harlow. I don’t even talk to my dad about her because I don’t want to hurt his feelings that I have...”

Her words trail off, but I take a guess. “Feelings for her? It’s all about love her, you know.”

“See... I don’t know if I do.” Her forehead wrinkles in consternation. I gaze drifting off a second. When it comes back to me, she says, “I started journaling in a diary... journaling... when I was young. It was suggested by a therapist my dad sent me to as a way for me to process my feelings about my mom, by writing them on paper. Over the course of my life, I’ve continued to journal about her, and if I were to go back and read all my entries

ates hersingle one mentions the word *love* where she's concerned."

"It's also okay not to love her, but it's all right to care for her. It's a
use ontoto want more."

v much "Not sure my dad agrees with that."

I kiss her. "Your dad is a good man, I can tell. He might not ag
smile ishe'll let you figure it out on your own."

st you a "Yeah," she says with such deep fondness, her tone is wistful. "I k
ms that A thought occurs, and I bend closer. "Am I in that journal of yours
Stevie's face flushes. "Maybe."

"What did you say about me?"

ike that "None of your business," she says primly. "It holds my private tho

1 hussy Laughing, I bend down for a hard kiss. "You're entitled. Now, how
we get up and make some dinner? I'm starved. Then hot tub, then I'n
my lipsto fuck you again. Sound good?"

"Sounds amazing."

I rub my nose along hers. "One more thing."

"What's that?"

en with "I want you to come to the game tomorrow."

"I can't—"

re I can I slam my mouth on hers, shutting off the denial. "I've got two
). Don'talready at will call. One for you, one for your dad. I'm going to ma
like me. We'll go out after."

wer the "I have to work and—"

ie plane I kiss her again. "Please."

"Hendrix, I just can't—"

ilked to One more kiss. "I'm begging."

d about Stevie's eyes warm, and I see the capitulation along with a bit of c
"You know I have a job, and that includes tending bar."

right to "I am by no means making light of your responsibilities, but you
boss. Is it possible for you to switch to days rather than nights so
rnation,spend them together?"

started "I mean... I suppose. My day shift person would love to move to
ed by aas it's better tips. And I work nights mainly because I'm a night owl."

out my "Then switch, not just for me, but for us. Give us a chance since o
nued tottogether is already cut because of my travel schedule. I'm sorry that p
s, not aburden on you to make the change and I would if my schedule wa

flexible, but I want to give this a solid go.”

all right Stevie’s eyes twinkle. “You just want more consistent sex.”

“Yes. Not going to deny that. But what I really want is more co
you.”

ree, but Slipping her hands behind my head, Stevie brings my mouth d
hers, and it’s not a sweet kiss of assent. It’s a hot kiss with her tongue
now.” right into my mouth, stirring my dick. She doesn’t give me the word
?” can tell by the surety in her touch that she’ll commit herself to do
required so we can take our shot.

Same as me.

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flexible, but I want to give this a solid go.”

Stevie’s eyes twinkle. “You just want more consistent sex.”

“Yes. Not going to deny that. But what I really want is more consistent you.”

Slipping her hands behind my head, Stevie brings my mouth down to hers, and it’s not a sweet kiss of assent. It’s a hot kiss with her tongue sliding right into my mouth, stirring my dick. She doesn’t give me the words, but I can tell by the surety in her touch that she’ll commit herself to do what is required so we can take our shot.

Same as me.

CHAPTER 11

Stevie

“YOU KNOW HE’S totally buying my approval,” my dad grumbles and I move down the steps of the arena to our seats. Down, down, down until we hit row B, just two back from the Titans’ bench. “I’m mean where we’re sitting. It’s total bribery.”

I snicker as I step in and find our seats. The teams are already out on the ice warming up, and I search for Hendrix. I lower myself carefully balancing my beer, and then I see him.

Number 63.

We watch in silence as the guys run two-on-one warm-up drills and then move into single breakaways against the goalie. I’ve only been to a few games over my life. The tickets are super expensive, so it was a total luxury purchase growing up, and as an adult, I don’t go at all unless someone invites me. I’ve been twice with Harlow—once last season and once this season—but this is the first time my father and I have seen a game together. Years ago, long before I was an adult. He loves hockey, but his true love is football, so if he’s going to spend a lot of money on a Pittsburgh sport, it’s to watch a showdown on the gridiron.

Seeing Hendrix on television and seeing him out on the ice are two very different things. When I watch him on TV, there’s almost like a wall between us. But sitting here two rows back, feeling the same chill from the ice that he does, it brings to the forefront the reality that I’m dating a star. I have this weird moment where my life doesn’t seem real as I look around the arena. In a million years, I never thought I’d ever meet a player, much less date one.

And I certainly never considered I’d be in one’s bed, getting fucked there’s no tomorrow.

My cheeks turn hot as I catch my dad watching me.

“Your guy keeps looking over at you,” he mutters before taking a

his beer.

I look to the ice, but Hendrix isn't looking at me. He's standing in a rocking side to side on his skates while talking to Bain, who I don't recognize with his helmet on but his last name—Hillridge—is on the back of his sweater.

And then, he does it. Twists his neck slightly to look to where I'm sitting with my dad. I smile when we make eye contact, and he winks before leaning away as we away.

... we go "Christ, you two are adorable," my dad grumbles.

... look "Why don't you like him?" I ask, giving him my regard.

"It's not that I don't like him, it's that you do."

... on the I frown and angle my body toward him. "That makes absolutely sense."

"Yeah, it does, Carrots." His eyes move from the ice to me. "I've never seen you look at a guy like this. I've never heard you talk about a guy like this. So I know this is serious, and because it's serious, I care about the situation. I'm going to make him prove himself, not to me, but to you. If he does, I'm reserving judgment." He leans to the side and bumps his shoulder against mine. "You deserve nothing less than the absolute best."

I grin at my dad, but my voice is soft. "I love you, Peas."

... ether in He harrumphs and turns his attention back to the ice, and I do the same. In a low voice, he admits, "It wasn't a bad move getting us nice seats. It'll be a point in his favor."

... vo very Laughing, I watch Hendrix take the puck, then zig and zag with a wrist shot at Drake McGinn who easily bats it away. "I'll transfer some points he's racked up with me over to you."

... om the That gets his attention back on me. While I've filled my dad in on my hockey dates with Hendrix have gone—minus the sex details—I haven't thought about how he makes me feel.

... I look I boil it down into something succinct he'll understand. "He's the opposite of Mom."

... ked like "Aah," my dad says, rubbing thoughtfully at his beard. "That means mature, stable, genuine, caring, has a solid work ethic, and doesn't give up easily."

... a sip of "Pretty much."

"What does he think about your mom?" my dad asks curiously.

where Hendrix could've scored major points with my dad if he'd told me a line, run far away from Mandi, but I decide to be honest.

It's not quite "He said there's nothing wrong with me wanting to have some of my relationship back with her."

My dad grunts and turns his attention back to the ice. His expression is sitting impassive, so at least he's not shooting daggers at Hendrix.

Turning "He also told me I didn't have to love her." That gets my dad's eye on me. "He basically affirmed it's okay to have all kinds of fucked-up feelings about her, just as it's okay to try to work through them to do something meaningful."

With a heavy sigh, my dad drapes his arm over my shoulders and leans in a little closer to peer at me. "You know I don't like your mom."

"Understatement," I mutter. It's one of many reasons I've not turned to him for advice on finding the money to help her. He'll tell me to turn my back on her and then will be disappointed in me when I don't.

But this "But I do want you to have whatever in this world makes you happy." Until he motions out toward Hendrix. "So if a pretty boy makes you happy, go for it." He pokes me in the upper chest, just below my shoulder. "If you love your mom in your heart, open it to her. If you need to set boundaries to validate their enforcement." Once again, he turns his attention to the ice. "If you want me to sit down to a meal with you and your mom, ain't that what you want? That's happening."

I bust out laughing and snuggle into him for a second. "I'd need a quick fix."

Just like I'd never ask him to help me find her a way out of this jail cell. My dad doesn't deserve to be weighed down with her shit.

"And if a pretty boy hurts you, I'll kill him," he says gruffly.

"You can tell him that yourself. I'm not about to interfere with your desire to be an overprotective dad."

Chuckling, my dad is silent a moment before nudging me off his lap to sip my beer. I bet he gives Hendrix those exact words tonight after the

The warm-ups end, and I watch as Hendrix skates off the ice. We give up twenty minutes before the game starts. No one is sitting in the seats

of us yet, so I kick up my booted feet. "Okay, I'll give you the rundown

Hendrix—the good and the bad—so you have a head start in figuring out how to best threaten him."

d me to I tell my dad pretty much everything I've learned about Hendrix c
past week. Mostly about his family, and my dad thinks it's cool He
type of afaunt loves Stevie Nicks as much as he does.

By the time the puck drops, I have my dad begrudgingly adm
sion ismight have found someone who could meet his high expectations. I
remind him that I'm not really looking for anyone, although it's beer
es backtwist of fate to have met Hendrix.

oked-up The game is intense. The Titans lost their last game to Nashvil
achievetonight there seems to be an almost palpable ferocity to their play. I
they slam their opponents harder into the glass and scrabble more inte
leans inloose pucks in front of the goal.

By the time the game concludes with their 3–1 win over the Sar
rned toRenegades, I can feel the team's exhaustion. Only once more does He
urn mygaze cut to me, just after the third period buzzer. He was on the bench
final line shift and before exiting to congratulate his teammates, he sho
ppiest."a smile.

you go I give him a double thumbs-up to indicate how happy I am for h
ou wantHis gaze flicks to my dad but doesn't linger.

ies, I'll As planned, we make our way out of the lower level and to an e
players.halfway around the concourse where Hendrix directed us to go. Two
fuckingemployees—an older man dressed in black with a purple vest boast
Titans' logo, an iPad in hand—and another holding lanyards with
ver askpasses attached. We give our names to him, and he locates us easily.

"Take the elevator down to the basement level, and there will be a
m she'sto direct you to the players' family lounge."

Hendrix told me about the family lounge—a place the
organization outfitted to host family members and friends who come to
th yourgames. While its main purpose is a gathering place for those fam
friends who've traveled from out of state, everyone uses it to con
1, and Ibefore and after games. It's furnished with round tables and chairs, as
game. scattered couches and love seats.

ve have I immediately spot Harlow across the room talking to a young
in frontwoman with a curvy figure and even curlier hair. I head that way, my
own onfollowing along.

out how Harlow sees us approach, and her smile widens. She hugs me a
my father before introducing us to Tillie Marshall, Coen's girlfriend. I

over the told me they started dating this summer after Coen bought a property in Hendrix's Coudersport, Pennsylvania, and that Tillie still lives there. While I didn't give exact details, he said that Coen credits Tillie as being the winning person who could get his head out of his ass after his suspension from the team and the decision he'd made to quit hockey for good.

"It's so good to meet you," Tillie says as she shakes my dad's hand. "Hendrix has told Coen all about you and it got passed on to me, and particularly enjoyed the story of how he won ten minutes with you, but I don't seem to remember which time he got you to agree to a date. He won't tell Coen or anyone else what happened in that ten minutes, but here we are."

"I'd like to know what happened in that ten minutes too," I say. "I don't know," Dad rumbles, and we all laugh.

"That's just for me and Hendrix, but let's just say he didn't have to work too hard. Just something he said that resonated."

Harlow loops her arm around my shoulders. "Who would've thought two of us would end up dating hockey players, huh?"

"Oh, please," I say, giving her a tiny nudge to her ribs with my hand. "You could have any man on this planet."

I'm only joking, of course, but it's true, thanks to Harlow's near flawless good looks and the fact she's a successful attorney from a wealthy family. Harlow scoffs but doesn't chastise me. She'll do it later when we're alone, and I love her for it. She always bolstered me through my school years when I had issues with my confidence. Those were the years when my dad just couldn't help me with, but Harlow always made me feel pretty interesting in my own right.

"Are you guys going to Mario's tonight?" Tillie asks.

"I think just about everyone is," Harlow replies.

It's why Hendrix really wanted me and my dad to come to tonight's game because while many of the players will go out after, it's not often most of the team—including significant others—go out together. Most of the SC players have full-time jobs or are mothers, and late nights are a luxury.

Tillie touches my arm. "I've asked Coen to bring me to your bar. I know it's a good time there and I know some of the other guys have been there. I know... maybe that'll be the new after-game hangout."

"Nah," I say with a wave of my hand. "It's too far from the arena to go to. It's easy, but maybe on some off-game nights."

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Hendrixnight you don’t have to work.”

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om theHendrix.” My eyes cut to my dad over that proclamation, but he doesn
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“Regardless, Coen and I will plan something in the next few weeks on a night you don’t have to work.”

“I’m actually switching my shifts to days to open up my nights for Hendrix.” My eyes cut to my dad over that proclamation, but he doesn’t seem fazed by it. I’m guessing he’s figured out that Hendrix is here to stay, by the looks of things, and he’s going to sit back and watch.

CHAPTER 12

Hendrix

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, I should be flying high right now. We beat the Renegades, Stevie came to the game, and I'm surrounded by my best mates and the women who make them happy.

Except I'm feeling hot under the collar. Stevie's dad was nice when we first greeted each other in the players' lounge. I'd put on my best attire after my shower, and we shook hands like men.

"Appreciate the tickets. Great seats," he said.

And that's all he's said.

Even here at Mario's, sipping on his beer, he's cool and aloof with the other players. He'll engage anyone else in conversation and has his head bent toward them where they've been talking motorcycles for the past ten minutes. If it weren't for the difference in hair color, the dudes might look related with the other players, their hair, beards, and tattoos.

I've been thinking of something we might have in common to talk about, but the list is pathetically short. Obviously, Stevie is the common denominator, but that's too easy. I could talk to him about getting the list of all the players' names, but that seems too calculated.

I let my gaze slide over to Stevie, and I can't help the smile that comes over my face. She's dressed so differently from the women she's talking to, sitting in a group with Harlow, Tillie, Gage's girlfriend Jenna, Baden's girlfriend Sophie, and the most notorious of the group, Brienne Norcross, the oldest player on the Pittsburgh Titans.

Some might think she's only out tonight because she's dating our team's goalie, Drake McGinn, but she's actually been friends with Jenna and the other women for longer. In other words, Brienne doesn't sit on a throne on the castle's turret. She likes to hang out with us on occasion, although she'll stay long. She and Drake only ever stay for a drink as they're not really homebodies than anything.

Stevie is the one who sticks out in the group. Not as a sore thumb rather as a creature who owns her style and doesn't care what anyone thinks. She's in her standard biker babe attire—Harley T-shirt, ripped jeans, boots, and a black leather jacket—while the other women are all in jerseys or some other Titans' gear. I make a note to ask Stevie if she'll wear a jersey. I won't automatically get it for her as I'd like to know if she's into wearing sporting gear. She might not be, and because I love her so much, I don't ever want her to think I expect her to dress in a certain way just because I play for them. I know she supports me on the field that's enough.

I consider joining Stevie, which means breaking in on the girl talking to the fans. I don't mind that idea at all. I'm a rebel that way.

First, I hit the restroom, a slight pain in the ass as I'll have to deal with requests for autographs and pictures. It's not a part of my fame that I get as most fans are super nice and respectful, but tonight, it will definitely impede on my time with Stevie, and we don't have a lot of that to begin with.

I beeline toward the bathroom hall, keeping my gaze down to deal with those who might be a little shy to approach. I sure hope that doesn't mean I'm an asshole—I will stop if someone calls my name.

I reach the bathroom without interruption, and other than a brief conversation with some dude at the sinks, I exit quickly. I pass Bear, who is talking to a fan, and he doesn't even make eye contact.

Fuck it... I'm engaging him as soon as he's out and has another hand. In fact, I'll buy him one.

I'm halfway back to our group of tables the restaurant sets up for the game. She's each home game when I'm stopped for an autograph. That turns into pictures and a few more signatures on jerseys with the perpetual Sharkey's fiancée always seems to be floating around. I take another picture and get some regrets. "Sorry, guys... got to get back to my friends."

I extricate myself, only to be brought up short by a woman who is blocking my path. She's statuesque with honey-blond hair in long waves that fall over the front of her shoulders, tight jeans with high-heeled boots, and a cut purple sweater. "Hendrix... hi... how are you?"

That's a weird greeting. Normally, fans don't use my name. It's just me. "I get an autograph?"

They definitely don't ask how I'm doing, which implies a little bit of respect.

mb but familiarity.

thinks. “I’m good,” I reply with a tentative smile. She acts like she might be, heavy-lidded, but I have absolutely no recollection of her.

wearing “Um,” she looks over her shoulder, and I follow her line of sight. She looks like a woman sitting at a table. “I was just wondering if you’d like to join me and my friend for a drink.”

unique When I turn my attention back to her, she’s smiling seductively. Her smile irritates me. If it had just been an honest invitation for a drink, I would have accepted, and I’d be pissed at the intrusion. But the look in her eyes is calculated, and I don’t have the patience for it tonight.

κ, and I Not when I have absolutely no interest in her or her friend.

“Actually, I’m just on my way—”

al with The woman moves fast, steps in so close, I can feel her breath on my face. Her hand presses to my chest and she murmurs, “Let me be your friend and I am wondering if you’d be interested in a threesome with me and my friend. You don’t even have to do the drink... we can leave right now.”

issuade I’m not a prude by any stretch of the imagination, and in another life I’d say yes. But I’m a little put off by the speed of her come-on.

an offer like that happens after a drink, shared conversation, and a bit of time invested in seeing if there’s true mutual interest.

on his I step back to put some room between us, but her hand stays on my chest.

I remove it with my own. “I’m not interested.”

beer in She pouts. “Just one drink.”

“I’m here with my girlfriend.”

us after “Yes, I saw you with her.” Her hand comes back to my chest. “You’re exactly who I would have matched you with. Come on, ditch the little girl who’s a Jett wannabe, and you can have two women tonight—”

ive my “What is wrong with you?” I growl, pushing her hand off me and taking a huge step back.

I come up against someone, but I don’t look. I’m too busy trying to get out of this woman just looked down her nose at Stevie because of how she carried herself. “Why do some women have to do that shit and put other women down? It’s a low-it make you feel better about yourself? Does it validate you in some way?”

The lady’s mouth opens slightly in shock.

ist, *Can* “For your future information, my girlfriend is a million times hotter than you could ever hope to be with your skanky offer of a threesome right now. I’d be interested in you, but mostly because she’s genuine and nice. Granted, she’ll jump on you if you’re not careful.”

barroom brawl to stop it, so she'd surely stomp your ass if she knew what you just offered, but her heart is made of gold."

Her mouth drops open further. "You could've just said no. You ought to have been an asshole."

"No, I guess I didn't have to be, but it was fun."

The woman pivots on her heel and marches away. I turn around, and I apologize to whoever is behind me for stepping on him, only to find it didn't bend he just witnessed the entire exchange.

"Propositions like that happen often?" he asks.

My gaze slides over to the table where the woman returned to her seat and they're both glaring at me. "Not as often as you might think I am, professional hockey player." A thought strikes me, and my head whips around on my way. "You didn't just set that up, did you? To see what I'd do?"

Bear snorts and claps a large hand on my shoulder. "My daughter needs me interfering in her love life. She can handle herself. Like you, she's tough enough to stop a barroom brawl."

"So, you just happened to be there?" I'm still suspicious.

"Just happened to be there," he confirms with a nod. He squeezes my shoulder and turns us back toward our group. "Come on, I'll buy you a beer."

I grin as we walk back. I was completely annoyed by the unnecessary chest exchange, but I couldn't have had better luck that Stevie's dad watching put that woman in her place. Him buying me a beer says a lot.



"Not to worry, Joan. I've been making out with Stevie on my couch for a good ten minutes. When we entered my house, I pulled her here, put her in a straddle over my lap, and kissed her."

"I've never done this with a woman. Just made out—deep, spicy, broken up by tidbits of conversation, finished with breathy kisses that were hot once again."

"I'm sure as hell worked up, my cock hard as a rock not long after she threw her leg over mine. But waiting always makes it better, right?"

Grazing my lips down her neck, I say, "Your dad totally likes me more than you."

Stevie laughs, her arms wrapped around my neck and holding me in place. "I noticed you two seemed chummy. How did that happen?"

“He overheard me putting a seriously deranged woman who was in a threesome in her place.”

Stevie jerks in my arms, pushing her torso back with her hands on my chest. “What?”

I try to pull her back into me, but she holds me at a distance with her arms outstretched. She cocks an eyebrow, and I see jealousy swirling in her eyes. Her cheeks, which have darkened to a deep denim color. I find it adorable, but also hold me back from the process, so I explain quickly. “Some woman approached me as I was coming out of the bathroom. She was very forward and propositioned me for a threesome. I turned it down, and your dad overheard it.”

“Uh-uh,” she says with a shake of her head. “That would not have impressed my dad.”

I don’t know if it would or not, so I’ll have to trust her on that. “He hasn’t mentioned you in the conversation.”

Her head tilts, her expression curious. “What did you say?”

“Enough to make your dad buy me a beer,” I reply evasively.

I expect her to press me for details, but her eyes soften. Stevie licks my lips and brushes her mouth against mine. “Thank you,” she murmurs, “for the beer.” so sweet.

I’m leaning back now. “You don’t even know what I said.”

“You said enough to make my dad like you, so that speaks volume.”

And that is why I wasn’t interested in what that woman at Mario’s was doing and why Stevie continues to intrigue me every fucking day.

She presses her lips back to mine and slides her tongue in my mouth. My hips roll against me causing the most delicious friction, and my hands are on her hips to make sure she doesn’t stop.

Except she scrambles from my lap, down onto the floor where she is between my legs. I start to ask what she’s doing, but her hands go to my zipper button. In seconds, she’s got it popped, the zipper down, and I shift my legs so she can push the material far enough to release my cock.

I let out a stuttering breath and lean back against the cushion, watching her like a hawk.

Stevie takes my hard length into her hand, her skin so warm against mine. She squeezes me, giving a leisurely stroke up, and I groan with my head flopping back, and I stare at the ceiling as I focus on the feelings she’s jacking me. Slowly, a little too gently, her thumb wandering over the

anted teasing me.

Then pure, wet heat envelops me, and I practically choke as my cock shoots up. Stevie is bent over my lap, her hair blocking my view, but I manage to press myself against the back of her throat.

With a stiff “Jesus,” I growl, my hands moving her hair away from her face. She looks up at me, eyes shining with determination and a devilish smile. Her head bobs up and down, my cock held deliciously tight between her tongue and the roof of her mouth. I keep her hair pulled back so I can see her as she sucks me in deeper and deeper.

I can't control the slight thrust of my hips against the suction of her mouth. Her hand strokes me at the base, and my balls tingle. Her tiny moans of pleasure are ultimately what starts my unraveling. My cock seems to grow bigger, harder, and when Stevie makes a slight choking noise, my cock frees itself from the minuscule hold I had on it.

My fingers slide into her hair, and I attempt to pull her off, but she leans in at me, pulling me in deeper.

“Fuck,” I bark out as my hips punch up and I come. It's blistering heat being of pleasure surging through my body, and Stevie swallows all of it. “I love you, God... fuck.”

I'm gasping by the time I'm emptied, my lungs nearly flat from exertion, and all I can do is haul Stevie up my body with my hands under her armpits. I kiss her hard, taste myself on her tongue, and then flop back onto the bed, wrap my arms around her, soaking in how profoundly intimate that moment is. Her felt, and a surge of emotion squeezes my chest.

“You're amazing,” I murmur as I stroke the back of her head.

“That's the post blow job orgasmic bliss speaking,” she chuckles.

“Maybe,” I admit, turning my head to press my lips to her temple. “My jeans doesn't make it any less truthful.”

Stevie snuggles into me, her body language pleased by my company. “I'm sleepy. Let's go to bed.”

I might be replete from what just happened, but I am by no means satisfied. “Yeah... that's not going to work for me.”

She lifts her head, a flicker of worry on her face, as if I'm about to get up. “My her out. I give her an admonishing look before tapping her on the thigh. “There's no way we're sleeping until I have my way with you.”

“Oh,” she says, and I take the fortuitous opening of her mouth

invitation to kiss her.

My head I slide my tongue right in and resume the make-out session that
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I slide my tongue right in and resume the make-out session that started this all.

CHAPTER 13

Stevie

I PUSH UP off the couch and move closer to the TV, my hands balled in fists of stress as the game winds down into its final seconds.

“Get out of the way,” my dad grumbles, and I move sideways so as not to block his view. He’s sitting on the edge of the couch, leaning so far forward that I’m afraid he’ll fall off.

“... and the Eagles goalie, Lindgren, covers the puck with ten seconds to go,” Denise Milano says. She’s the only female sportscaster in the room, and she knows her shit. I learned that from Hendrix one night while he was filling me in on some behind-the-scenes stuff.

“The Titans are probably going to get one more play here,” I hear my partner, Larry Sprung, add. They make a great team, playing off each other, but I never noticed that stuff until Hendrix started teaching me more about the sport.

I start to take a step closer to the TV, but my dad growls and I hold my place. We’re down 4–3 with only eleven seconds left.

“Coach West is calling a time-out. The Titans need one to tie it and then we can push the game into overtime,” Sprung says.

“Looks like McGinn is staying on the bench, and I can only guess at what’s going through his head. Despite the Titans being down 4 to 3, they’ve played one hell of a game,” Milano reports. “Larry, it looks like Coach West is going with Hendrix Bateman as the lone defenseman for these last 10 or-so seconds.”

I hear the agreement in Larry’s voice. “It makes sense. The Titans really use the point, and a tie would do that and give them the chance to win the second point in overtime.”

Nibbling on my nail, I resist the urge to pace as they line up for the offensive zone face-off and await the puck drop. My neck aches from the tension.

Milano's voice is brisk, following the action. "Macinnis wins the fight, chipping the puck to Bateman on the blue line. Bateman moves the puck to Cermak, who hits Nicholson on the weak side. Nicholson shoots and she exclaims and then her voice exhales her tension—"saved by Lindgren, pads." Her energy follows that on the ice. "The puck is loose in front of Cermak and Nicholson are pushing and shoving, Lindgren can't see to locate the puck."

to fists "Come on!" I yell at the TV as the players mash up in front of the goal.

s not to "The Titans are running out of time... There's the buzzer, and the game, ladies and gentlemen. The Titans fall short to the Eagles, 4-3."

orward, "Fuck," I yell in anger, then immediately am suffused with worry about how Hendrix will handle this. Losses are hard enough as it is, and he's not them no easier than any other player, but he was on the ice making the league, ditch effort to score. He's so big on responsibility and doing his part, he was he'll pick apart his performance and blame himself in some way.

enise's "Well," my dad drawls as he stands, grabbing his two empty beer bottles from the table, "that was a hard-fought game."

h other, "Yeah, but the Eagles are at the bottom of our conference." My dad is sullen, and my dad's eyes twinkle at how invested I am in the team now. I'm dating Hendrix. "We should've easily beaten them."

old my "Easy words for a fan sitting in the comfort of her own home," he says, moving into the kitchen.

up and I follow him, nabbing my own two empties. My dad and I usually watch football together every Sunday, but I love that we've now added hockey to the mix. I made tacos tonight, bought Mexican beer, and we cheered for the Titans.

h West My dad rinses his bottles and then mine. I place all four in the recycling bin and then walk him to the door. He loops an arm around my neck and presses me into his chest for a one-armed hug. His lips press down on my head, and his long beard tickles my cheek.

ce for a "Love you," he says as he releases me, then grabs his coat from the closet. I open the door for him. "You still coming out tomorrow night?"

for the "Yup. You sure you got enough coverage for the bar? I can work."

om the He's talking about the fact that the Titans are all coming over to watch. They have an entire day and night off since they're in the middle of their away games called "there and backs." That means the other cities they

ace-off, are close enough for them to fly out that morning and then return hon
puck to the game.

is”—she What started out as Tillie, Coen, Harlow, and Stone making plans
, off his with me and Hendrix at the bar tomorrow night for a few beers an
n front, pool has turned into a good chunk of the team coming. I’ve not adver
eem to anyone that this is happening, but I know once patrons come in a
Titans players there, word will get out.

goal. “I’ve got two extra bartenders and an extra floating waitress,” I rep
at’s the amused by his concern because he can’t stop being a dad, and half a
as he knows I would’ve thought these things out. “I want you to ha
y about with us.”

ie takes “It’s not weird to have your dad hanging out with you?” he ask
at last-steps out onto the porch and zips up his jacket.

I know I wave my hand with a scoff. “It’s so weird, but people will get
you.”

bottles “Smart-ass,” he grumbles and then trots off the steps. I watch as
in his truck and pulls away, giving a tiny toot of his horn in farewell.

voice is After locking up, I head back into the living room and grab my
ow that doodled in it during the game intermissions while my dad and I talk
dad has watched me fill journal after journal over the years, knowin
chides, was memorializing not just feelings but snippets of my life so I’d neve
both good and bad. For years, it’s mostly been good.

7 watch It’s been cathartic to write about my mom and our struggles to
ey into new relationship, but I mostly jot notes about those moments in my l
ard for make me feel warm and right with the world.

I write the date at the top of the page of doodles—the Titans’
7 cle bin sketch of a tattoo I’ve been considering getting on my back, and
ulls me rendering of Hendrix’s name with hearts around it. I snicker as I s
and his opening up to the schoolgirl giddiness I sometimes feel when I thin
him.

e rack. My phone rings, and I lean over to grab it off the coffee tab
stunned to see it’s Hendrix. This is the fourth away game he’s been o
we’ve been seeing each other, and he’s never called me after.

Jerry’s. “Hey,” I say as I connect the call. “How are you doing?”

of three He sighs, his voice fatigued, and I can imagine him running
play in through his sweaty hair. “Pissed that we lost.”

ne after I don't dare try to tell him he played great or that the team fought

I'm sure he doesn't need my analysis nor my attempts to minimize his
to hang feelings, especially if he's blaming himself.

d some All I can do is affirm his emotions. "Totally understandable. You
tised to your soul into your job. I know every loss hurts like hell."

and see Hendrix is silent a moment before saying, "Not going to lie. Just
your voice makes things better."

ly, half "I'm glad you called. I don't even know what you do after the game
nnoyed didn't think you'd ever have time to reach out."

ave fun "I really shouldn't be on the phone," he admits. "I need to go
shower and get on the bus. Just wanted to let you know I was thinking
s as hey you."

A rush of emotion hits me so hard tears sting my eyes. Hendrix
used to off a loss, feeling crappy about it and taking a precious minute just
my voice—I don't know if I've ever been that important to someone
he gets other than my dad, and it fills part of the hole left by my mom leaving
it wasn't about me needing her that hurt the most, but that she clearly
diary. I need my love... the way a child loves a parent.

ed. My Hendrix's call has shown me that I receive value from being needed
g that I boosted by being important to someone else.

r forget "Thank you," I murmur.

"For what?" he asks.

build a "For being you. I'll see you tomorrow night."

ife that "Looking forward to it. Good night, Stevie."

"Good night, Hendrix."

logo, a The call disconnects, and I pull the phone to my chest, holding it
l a 3D the happy thumping of my heart. I replay that short exchange and be
tudy it, makes me so joyful, I know it has to go in my journal.

k about I slide my phone onto the table and open my diary to the page a
doodles.

le. I'm
n since

*December 13, 10 p.m.: Hendrix called after his game in Boston (the
lost 4–3 to the Eagles). I didn't think to ask him exactly where he
standing, but I imagine maybe it was just outside the locker room*

a hand

*couldn't hear any background noise. He was bummed by the loss
knowing him, he probably carries the responsibility on his shoulders*

it hard. *He called to let me know he was thinking of me. He said my voice made him feel better. I know I shouldn't be that enamored by simple words, but they make me feel so valued.*

You put *I wasn't looking to do so, and didn't think it possible, but wow I'm falling for this guy and falling hard.*

hearing *And as is my habit, I flip backward and read my last few entries. Mostly about Hendrix. I went to another home game—this time with —and then after the game, back to Hendrix's place where his foreplay damn intense, I was practically crying for him to fuck me. My skin from the memory of it as I read my recounting.*

coming to hear *The entry before that, when we went to Mario's and that woman him a threesome, and while I don't know exactly what he said, it was to turn my dad into Team Hendrix.*

before, *The man turned down a night of wild sex with two women but something about me appeals more.*

didn't *Another entry was me calling my mom to check in on her. I told listed my car for sale and would be able to pull some money off my card for her. She was incredibly grateful and cried. I memorialized emotions in that phone call, and I'm shocked to realize they're similar Hendrix made me feel tonight.*

The powerful rush of being essential to someone in some way. Granted, I can clearly distinguish that these feelings for Hendrix all come from a positive place, right from the start.

against *With my mom, it's not about trying to heal what's broken between to create something positive enough for me to continue in my quest to cause it relationship with her. Maybe to make up for her abandoning me before*

after my *I close my journal with the pen on the inside and set it on the table through my texts, responding to a few inquiries about my car, significantly less than what I posted it for. I can't afford to come down price too much, but I do let them know it's slightly negotiable.*

hey *My phone rings again, but there's no surge of excitement that it might be Hendrix when my mom's photo appears on the screen.*

as I *There is a quiet, low-key happiness to hear from her, though. "Hi, I and "Stevie," she exclaims, her voice quavering with elation.*

ers. *"What's up?"*

oice “I’ve found the solution to my problem,” she gushes.

uch I sit up straighter on the couch as I’m all about solutions that will
me selling my car or going into debt on my credit card. “What is it?”

w... “Okay... get this... Randy’s cousin knows this guy who’s a fr
journalist, and he’s willing to pay big money for news stories. Like,
story can easily get us out of hot water.”

They’re “So... you’re going to give them a story about the money launder
Harlow ask hesitantly, thinking this is a horrible idea.

was so “No, silly,” she coos into the phone. “I want you to give them a sto
tingles “Me? Why would I have anything of interest?”

offered “Stevie,” my mom admonishes. “Come on. You only happen to be
enough one of the most interesting men in Pittsburgh. One of the Lucky Three.
For a split second, I don’t even comprehend what she’s saying, but
hits me like a massive slap in the face. “No. No way.”

because “Stevie... it’s perfect.”

her I’d “Are you freaking kidding me, Mom? You want me to give a sto
y credit ask that of me? And besides... what could be so interesting they’d p
zed the type of money for it?”

to how “He’s one of three players who survived the crash,” my mo
flippantly. “Don’t tell me he doesn’t have some major trauma from th
anted, I surely he’s mentioned about Coen’s breakdown last year and
from a suspended. I bet he’s got all kinds of great locker room stories.”

“It’s absurd you’d even suggest such a thing. It would ru
relationship with Hendrix—”

1 us but forge a “—he’d never know. It could be an anonymous source.”

3. “I would know,” I snap. “It’s deceitful.”

e. I flip “Stevie,” she cajoles.

offers “Just... no. I’m hanging up.”

1 on the “Stevie,” she says louder. “Just listen to me. Maybe you have infor
that wouldn’t be harmful. It doesn’t even have to be secret. It co
light be something that’s well known on the team but never made it out i
public for whatever reason.”

Mom.” “In a million years, I couldn’t even begin to think of one scenario.”

“Let me just put you in touch with the reporter. You don’t hav
anything if you don’t want to. Just see what he says.”

“No.”

prevent “He can pay you ten thousand in cash for the right story.”

“No,” I repeat acidly. “And don’t bring this up to me again. This is
eelance I’m drawing in the sand, and it’s not going to be crossed. I
a good understand?”

“Stevie... please.”

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“Yes, okay, fine,” she snaps back at me. “I thought you cared for
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“Don’t pull that shit on me. You’ve got no right. Now I’m hang
e dating and—”

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“It was despicable.”

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“I won’t. I promise, and I’m so grateful that you’d even try to hel
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someone who doesn’t always want the best for me.

There’s only one thing I can do at this point, and I need to get thes
feelings out on paper before they eat me up. I grab my journal and fli
next page.

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e to do

“No.”

“He can pay you ten thousand in cash for the right story.”

“No,” I repeat acidly. “And don’t bring this up to me again. This is a line I’m drawing in the sand, and it’s not going to be crossed. Do you understand?”

“Stevie... please.”

“Do you understand?” I bark at her.

“Yes, okay, fine,” she snaps back at me. “I thought you cared for me. I thought you wanted to help and—”

“Don’t pull that shit on me. You’ve got no right. Now I’m hanging up and—”

“Okay, wait, Stevie,” my mom exclaims. “I’m sorry. I’m desperate here, and while I don’t regret putting this option before you, I understand why you’re saying no. I get it... truly.”

“It was despicable.”

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs. “I don’t want to do anything to cause a rift with you and Hendrix. That wasn’t my intention. I’m just grasping at straws.”

“Please don’t ask that of me again, Mom.”

“I won’t. I promise, and I’m so grateful that you’d even try to help me at all.”

When we hang up, my bitter feelings aren’t resolved. I can’t believe she’d try to guilt me into helping her at the expense of ruining my relationship with Hendrix.

It’s so fucking selfish, and the way I feel right now, I truly don’t care if my mom stays in my life. I can’t continue to try to have a relationship with someone who doesn’t always want the best for me.

There’s only one thing I can do at this point, and I need to get these nasty feelings out on paper before they eat me up. I grab my journal and flip to the next page.

CHAPTER 14

Hendrix

I PULL OPEN the glass door to Jerry's, stepping to the side so my Aunt can precede me in. She made an impromptu trip today, at my request. Her plan is to meet Stevie, and it's as simple as that.

I obviously want my parents to meet Stevie, but their jobs aren't as flexible as Rory's. Because she's self-employed as a writer, she can usually just much pick up and move about whenever she wants. A three-and-a-half-hour drive to Pittsburgh is nothing for her.

Of course, I told her about Stevie the day after our first date—which also included a recap of how I broke up with Tracy. Rory is beyond thrilled that I'm not just because she can tell I really dig Stevie, but she loves the fact that she owns a bar and was named after Stevie Nicks. She said it's "cosmic significance can't be ignored," but I just laughed. Rory is ever the hippie, and I admit I do a little for it.

"This place is fabulous," she says as she unbuttons her coat, walking around the bar. As usual, it's mostly bikers, tradesmen, and blue-collar workers. You're not going to find doctors, lawyers, or accountants in this bar tonight, you will find some Titans hockey players.

I help her coat off her shoulders, and she drapes it over her arm. "Thank you," I say. "Stevie is setting up tables for us in the back."

We wind through the patrons, the crowd fairly light, but it's still early.

I see her before she sees me, standing with Harlow and Stone. I glance around and I notice a handful of my teammates, some with girlfriends and some without.

As I get closer to her, Stevie's head turns my way. Her eyes light up and a smile breaks out on her face. I forget all about Rory trailing behind me. I don't think twice about Harlow, Stone, or my other buds. I certainly don't consider that her hulking bear of a father is probably lurking somewhere.

I stride right up to Stevie and kiss the fuck out of her. One hand on the back of her neck, the other arm around her lower back, and I lean back with the force of my mouth on hers.

Vaguely, I hear hooting and some catcalls. Stevie laughs into my ear and I let her up, noting that I very much like the sparkle in her eyes and the flush on her cheeks.

“Well, hello to you too,” she murmurs, and to my surprise, her hand goes into my shirt and she jerks me to her for another kiss.

I want Taking her hands in mine, I press my forehead to hers and whisper, “What chance we can just leave and go to your place?”

aren’t as “God, I wish, but it was your idea to have everyone come out tonight.”

pretty I give a faux groan of frustration and brush my lips against hers for a moment. “There’s someone I want you to meet.”

half-hour Stevie tilts her head. “Oh yeah?”

which also Dropping one of her hands, I turn us toward Rory standing there. She recognizes her immediately from the photos in my house. “Oh my God, in fact she’s you’re Aunt Rory.”

shit that So much for my big introduction. Rory and Stevie end up in a tight embrace as if they’ve been friends forever.

lore her “Hendrix has told me so much about you, but I cannot wait to sit down looking over a beer and learn even more,” Rory says.

for folks. “How long are you staying?” Stevie asks. “Maybe we could do a bar, but tomorrow before I have to start my shift?”

“I’d love that. What does a woman need to do to get a beer, though?”

“Come Stevie laughs, loops her arm through Rory’s. “Come on. I’ll buy you a drink and introduce you to my dad.”

irly. I glance over at the bar top to see John leaning against it with one hand, A quick casually holding a beer.

1 dates, His eyes pinned... appreciatively... on Rory as Stevie leads her away for introductions.

up, and *Oh, hell no.*

me, and I start after them, but a hand comes down on my shoulder. “Hey, they don’t settle a dispute for us.”

around I turn to see Bain and Kirill before me.

“Tell him *Die Hard*’s a Christmas movie,” Kirill says, pointing to the screen. Bain shakes his head in amusement. “It’s not.”

I twist my neck and look back to the bar where John shakes Rory's
"It is," Kirill insists, garnering my attention again.

"It's not the type of Christmas movie that's going to get you laid
mouth,drawls.

And that really gets my attention. "What does *Die Hard* b
Christmas movie have to do with getting laid?"

"This girl," Kirill explains with a smirk. "I asked her out. I thou
suggest we eat at my place, and she asked if we could maybe v
r, "AnyChristmas movie. I said sure. So *Die Hard* is what I'm going to rent."

"Yeah... I'm with Bain on this one," I say, throwing a thumb h
ght." "That is not going to get you laid. Try *It's a Wonderful Life*."

"What's that?" Kirill asks.

I give him a light punch in his shoulder. "My man... you don't des
get laid at this point."

Turning away, I make my way to the bar to see that Stevie's now
God...be seen, and Rory is laughing at something John just said. And..
standing really close to him.

And he's staring down at her with clear interest.

"Fuck," I mutter and then plaster a smile on my face as I reach the

"Oh, Hendrix," Rory says, putting her hand on my arm. "John was
me the funniest story about one of his tattoos that didn't come out q
reakfastway he expected."

"Sure that's a story I'll want to hear at some point, but where's Ste
i?" John lifts his chin toward the storeroom. "She wants to get more

you onethe coolers, so she's grabbing a few cases."

I give him a stern look. "Why didn't she ask me to get them?"

John cocks an eyebrow, his voice hard. "Some reason you think n
girl can't handle it?"

I roll my eyes. "Your little girl could kick the ass of anyone in t
Still doesn't mean I won't always want to help her with shit like that."

I can't tell for sure because of his moustache and beard, but I thi
ndrix... smiles. "Good answer."

I'm momentarily unsure whether I should stay here and babysit I
go after Stevie and help her.

That lasts all of about half a second before I decide Rory's mo
capable, and even though Stevie is too, I'd rather like a few minutes c

hand. time with her.

I bolt for the storage room, just in time to see Stevie hefting two cases of Bud Light, "BainBud Light."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," I admonish as I let the door close behind me. "Can't have you throwing your back out doing that heavy lifting."

She smirks. "Why's that?"

I take the cases from her and set them on the ground. I then jerk my head to watch my arms. "Because I've got plans that will call for much physical exertion later tonight."

"Oh yeah?" Her voice is husky and playful. "Tell me your plans."

"First." I bend my head, kiss just under her ear. "I'm going to pull you out of your clothes."

"I like it. What else?"

"Going to lay you on my bed and spread your legs wide for me."

"Mmm."

I scrape my teeth against her neck. "Then I'm going to lick you until you're screaming and begging me to let you come."

"Jesus, Hendrix," she mutters, giving me a hard push backward. "I won't be able to concentrate all night."

I reach down and shift my swelling cock to the left to give it a little more room. Grinning, I pull her back but only to put my hands on her hips. "Do you need to concentrate?"

"Because... this is another chance for me to get to know your teachers and their wives and girlfriends. I want them to like me."

"They already love you," I say, and that's true. Those who hung out with us at Mario's last week had a great time getting to know her. I had them singing her praises at the next day's practice.

"And I want that to continue. Plus... they're here in my place of business. I want them to have a good time."

"They'll have the best time, I promise." I bend down, brush my teeth against hers. "Now, tell me how much beer you want, and I'll bring it." "You go be a social butterfly."

"Two cases of Bud Light, three cases of Bud, and one case of Miller Ultra."

"Got it," I say, stepping away to grab the two cases I took from her previously. But then I turn back to her. "Your dad."

“What about him?” she asks.
cases of “He, um... well, looks like he’s interested in Rory.”
Stevie crosses her arms over her chest in a clearly defensive p
nd me. “So?”
I can see she’s ready to go full-on protective of her dad as the Be
Ever, so I immediately pivot.
her into I’m not stupid.
xertion “You better give him fair warning... she’s a spitfire.”
Stevie laughs and wags her finger at me. She knows my concern
for Rory and not her dad. “I think they’ll both be fine.”
eel you Maybe.
But I’m keeping an eye on John “Bear” Kisner tonight.



ou until “YOU’RE KIDDING!” STEVIE exclaims, whipping her head from Coen to
confirmation. Of course, that puts us face to face since she’s sitting on
“Now I with her arm around my shoulder. “He wrecked your Porsche?”
le more “Was a big jerk about it too,” I affirm, my eyes cutting over
teammate sitting adjacent to us. Tillie’s next to him, but in a chair.
“Why Stevie would be in a chair too if when she’d walked over, I’d I let
in one, but I pulled her onto my lap and it feels too good to let her go.
mmates me, she’s content to remain in place. Weirdly, the public displays of af
feel right with her. I never did them with Tracy, not because I was a
out with what others thought but because I never felt like spontaneously pull
hem all onto my lap to have her close.
I’ve never done that with any woman, for that matter.
usiness. Harlow cocked an eyebrow at me—she’s wondering, like everyone
how serious we’ve gotten—but the smile that came along with it t
ny lips she’s happy for us. I’m sure she’ll pick at Stevie for the details, if she
; it out. already.
“I thought Hendrix was going to kill me,” Coen says, picking up l
ichelob and taking a drink.
“It wasn’t that you wrecked the car, dude.” I pick up my own bee
om her it toward him. “It’s that you didn’t give a shit you wrecked my car.”
“I gave a shit,” he says quietly. “But it was buried down deep.”

Tillie's hand rests on Coen's shoulder, and she leans her head against his as if to say, "Everyone knew you had demons, babe. I love you despite your posture." "I'm glad you don't have a Porsche," Stevie says with a laugh, and slightly inebriated. "That's some small dick energy there."

"Some small dick what?" I ask, somewhat offended. I loved that car. Stevie waves her hand. "Oh, it's just something my dad and some of the biker buddies say about sports cars." She then parrots her dad by leaning over her voice. "If you want to be a real man, put a Harley between your legs." "I laugh so hard, I choke. "Does he really say that?"

She gives me an impish smile. "Maybe in his younger days, but I never want to get his goat a little, tell him you want a Porsche tattoo and how he reacts."

Twisting us slightly in the chair, I glance back at the end of the bar. Rory sits on a stool and John stands beside her. They're locked in conversation, and I've been watching his hand that sits on her back. About an hour ago, he dumped a bunch of money in the jukebox and bought every Stevie Nicks song on there, and I got a sneaking suspicion that it might be part of a seduction plan. I've considered pulling him aside and telling him to stay away, but what little I've come to know about John Kisner, he goes straight ahead just to spite me.

Stevie's hands come to my face, and she turns my attention back to her. Putting her nose almost to mine, she says, "Leave them alone. Rory is afraid of her." "I know," I grumble. "She's an adult. And your dad's a decent dude." "If you need a distraction, I could kiss you," she suggests.

My arms tighten around her waist. "I definitely need a distraction." Her mouth on mine is divine, and the music from the jukebox fades away, my awareness of my teammates standing all around dim, and I don't give a fuck if my Aunt Rory and John want to sneak off into the storage room for a quickie.

As Stevie pulls back, I hear laughing, and Bain is standing there. "I can't interrupt," Bain says, leaning on a pool stick and grinning at me. "I want to see Stevie come play pool with us?"

"I'd love to," she says, bounding off my lap. "Me too."

Bain shakes his head. "Sorry, dude... I need Stevie as my partner for playing Gage and Liam."

nst him I laugh. Those are two players who haven't been here and don't know how good Stevie is. "Fine. I'll come cheer her on, then."

id she's The game is eight ball and Gage breaks the rack. He's actually a good player, and soon the entire team surrounds the table, watching the action. It's Stevie, though, who everyone cheers for, because while the other two are good, she's pulling off trick shots that amaze and wow. It makes me realize I was pretty lucky to have beaten her when we first played.

gs." Or did she lose on purpose because she wanted to give me ten minutes of her time?

if you I like that possibility a lot, and I'll make sure to ask her later and see if she'll tell me the truth, but she'll make me work for it.

A nudge to my shoulder gets my attention, and I turn to see Harlow where she is to act as the concerned friend while Stevie is otherwise occupied. "Concerned about what?" I ask, keeping my eye on the game and not realizing, importantly, my girl who just jumped the cue ball over another ball to pick up her shot.

t might "The usual," she says with a smirk. "That you'll be nice to her, thinking you won't hurt her, that it won't be just Bear in line to kick your ass if you'd plow me next."

I cut her a glance. "You know damn well you don't need my assurances."

fine." Harlow appraises me. "I totally judge you for the prior woman you were with."

I laugh and shake my head. "And it's who I was dating and how I tried to make it work that got Stevie to give me a chance. She admires me, didn't quit when it got hard."

ive two Harlow's eyes go round. "Really?"

m for a "Really. But you don't need me to tell you that. You know I'm a dude."

"Sorry "I don't, but Stone says you are."

But can "Well, there you go." I fully face her, though so she knows I'm serious. "But truthfully... I really like Stevie. Like, in a way that no other woman ever made me feel. It's the real deal."

Harlow glances around and then leans in to me. "I can attest that we've got Stevie quite giddy herself. She really likes you too."

"And you know this how?" I ask, needing more than just gut instinct.

t know “Because she told me, and I can see how she acts around you. I’
her with every man she’s ever dated, and you’re different. So you bette
a goodit work or—”

on. “Yeah, yeah, yeah... Bear will kick my ass, then you.”

e other “And I’ll have Stone add on a third ass kicking,” she says fiercely.

ikes me I grin at her. “Duly noted.”

Harlow bumps her hip against mine. “But I don’t think I have anyt
hat tenworry about.”

Eyes pinned on Stevie teasing Gage and Liam about something—
tonight.how easily she fits in with my people—I assure Harlow, “No, you don

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“Because she told me, and I can see how she acts around you. I’ve seen her with every man she’s ever dated, and you’re different. So you better make it work or—”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah... Bear will kick my ass, then you.”

“And I’ll have Stone add on a third ass kicking,” she says fiercely.

I grin at her. “Duly noted.”

Harlow bumps her hip against mine. “But I don’t think I have anything to worry about.”

Eyes pinned on Stevie teasing Gage and Liam about something—seeing how easily she fits in with my people—I assure Harlow, “No, you don’t.”

CHAPTER 15

Stevie

I WALK INTO the diner and do a brief glance around as I tug off my goggles. I spot Rory in a booth at the back as she waves to get my attention. She heads my way.

Funnily enough, she looks a little like Stevie Nicks. Long, wavy hair that reaches well past her mid back with long bangs framing her face. She's tall and curvy, dressed in a sort of gypsy-esque flowing dress with a long, black-lace overlay coat. She wears wrist bangles and big hoop earrings.

"Stevie," she exclaims, and I don't need her outstretched arms to know I'm expected to hug her. I got a super tight one last night before she and Hendrix left.

Her surprise visit meant that Hendrix and I didn't stay together last night. While Rory wanted to take an Uber home so he could come to my house, two of us wouldn't hear of it. Of course, Hendrix couldn't drive, so he accompanied her to his place, but we both agreed it was poor form to leave a houseguest alone like that.

I was invited to Hendrix's, but I didn't want him to have to drive the way back home this morning. He had a mid-morning skate, and I didn't want him to be able to sleep in.

So here I am, having spent the night alone, and yet I couldn't be mad because it meant that I got to meet Rory. And tonight, my dad and I are coming over for dinner so they can get to know each other a little better. It was Hendrix's idea, and while my dad grumbled when he suggested it last night, I could tell he was secretly pleased to see the guy I'm interested in take some initiative. No one has ever done that before because my dad has intimidated my prior boyfriends.

"I'm so glad you could do this," Rory says as we release. I take off my coat before sliding into the booth opposite her. "Last night wasn't cool for a deep conversation."

“Oh, I don’t know.” I feel confident in teasing, “Looked like you plenty to talk about with my dad.”

I watch Rory carefully for her reaction. I’m not disappointed when she gives me a conspiratorial grin rather than a shy blush. “Your dad is a fascinating man and I had a fantastic time hanging out with him.”

“He’s the best.”

A waitress approaches, and I turn my coffee cup upright to indicate I love some of what she has in that pot. “Do you ladies know what she’s having?”

I glance at Rory and grab a menu. “Do you? If so, order, and I can give you a blonde out quick.”

When the waitress is gone and I’ve got my coffee doctored up with cream and a little sugar, I say, “I have to tell you... because you’re the only family member I’ve met, but Hendrix is just...”

My words falter, and I glance out the window. Rory patiently waits for me, and I turn back to her. “He’s... amazing. No, wait. That doesn’t do justice. I guess there’s not really one word that could do it. Even my dad said it last night.”

“We raised a good boy,” she agrees.

I lift my eyebrows as I sip my coffee.

She laughs and plays her fingertip along the rim of her own cup. “I can’t give my sister and her husband credit, but I had a hand in it too. And I can’t admit it to my other nieces and nephews, he’s by far my favorite.”

“He talks about you all the time. You had a profound influence growing up, and even now... he just adores you.”

“And he adores you,” she says, and that causes me to blush.

And feel more pleased than I have a right to feel. “Really?”

Rory tips her head to the side. “Can’t you tell, Stevie? You seem like a confident woman. Surely you see it. Feel it.”

“I think so.” I unroll the utensils from my napkin and place it on the table as I collect my thoughts. “But... I’ve got relationship hang-ups, so sometimes it’s hard.”

“Someone cheat on you?” she asks sympathetically.

Laughing, I shake my head. “Actually, not even close. The few romantic relationships I’ve had fizzled more than anything.”

“Why did they fizzle?”

you had “Two reasons. I didn’t feel deeply enough for them, and they can’t handle that I owned a bar, which means I had responsibilities that sometimes took priority over them. I work a lot.”

and is a “Hendrix is proud of what you do, and he’s got his own time management issues, so that shouldn’t be a problem for you two.”

“It’s not at all,” I assure her. “Our time is limited by our careers, so I’ll make the most of what we have.”

you’re “I still feel bad Hendrix insisted on coming back to his place last night.”

I shake my head, holding out a hand. “Don’t. Hendrix and I have no time in the world, and we agreed you should be escorted home.”

“You’re both sweet,” she says softly. “But let’s talk about the reasons your relationships fizzled. You said you didn’t feel deeply enough for them.”

I give her an admonishing look. “Are you asking me to share my feelings about your nephew?”

do him “I am indeed,” she says with a lifted chin.

and likes I snicker and lean forward, hands wrapped around my warm mug. “Therapy early in life and journaling taught me the value of sharing emotions with good communication. “I feel a lot for Hendrix. More than I’ve ever before. I mean, it’s all new and exciting, but there’s something that just feels so Oh, I’llvery old and settled between us. I’m not sure if that makes sense. He’s so while I’m very sure and dependable to me, and yet I lose my breath around him every time, and it’s like I’m holding on to a live wire.”

on him “Well, well, well,” Rory murmurs as she leans back slightly, her eyes pinning onto me. “This might be the real deal.”

“It’s only been a few weeks,” I remind her.

“You can know those things in just a few hours, if you have the right kind of conversations.”

Images of Hendrix dragging me to the storeroom flash before me. “Something about him the night we met hit me hard.”

sometimes I tell her about the pool game—which she already knew about because Hendrix told her—and how he got me to admit right off the bat that I was attracted to him.

serious “And then I asked him why he was with Tracy for so long if things were so bad between them, because my biggest concern at that point was that he was rebounding. And he assured me he was not.”

couldn't "I can attest he would not have rebounded with Tracy. He didn't let me sometimes and half the time, I'm not sure he even liked her much."

I nod in understanding. "He told me he worked hard at the relationship with her. That he didn't want to have regrets when he was gone away, and hearing that meant the world to me. To hear he's the type of person but we doesn't walk when things get hard."

"Because of personal experience?" she asks.

"Right." I know Hendrix didn't tell Rory about my mom. I've not asked him to keep it secret, but I know he'd never share those details. Just as I've never share the personal stuff he confides in me.

"My mom abandoned me when I was two."

"Your dad told me he raised you, but he didn't say anything about your mom."

"That's because he's a morally upright person. My dad despises my mom, but he'll never talk bad about her to someone who doesn't know her personally and has seen the bad things she's done. He believes people should be judged on their merits."

"I already judge your mom for abandoning you," Rory says. "I don't know how a mother could do that."

"That's a conversation we need alcohol for, but suffice it to say she's a mess. She's back in my life, and we're attempting a relationship. But she's not a good woman. She doesn't know how to do the hard work, as evidenced by the fact she threw her arms up when raising a kid got tough. She's sort of gotten herself into a pickle and needs me to bail her out. As such, whatever she says to each other probably won't have much substance to it. It'll be on a tissue paper base and will be easily torn by disappointments she's never dealt with on her own."

"Sounds like you've got everything figured out. You're a smart cookie. I can see that."

"I don't know about that, but I'm trying."

Our breakfast comes and we chat about Rory's life. She still asks surreptitious questions about me, but they're really roundabout ways of learning more about my dad. She likes him, I can tell. I could tell she liked her dad. In fact, I'm pretty sure had Hendrix not whisked her out of the house the evening ended, my dad would've made a move, but I keep that to myself.

"I read one of your books," I say after my plate is clean and my coffee is gone.

...ve her, been refilled. I reach into my tote sitting beside me. “Will you sign me?”

it—his “Oh, sweet girl... of course. I’m honored and flattered.” She takes the book and studies the cover. “My very first one.”

pe who “It was so good. I’ve never read mysteries before, but I got so sucked in.” Rory pulls out a Sharpie from her purse, and I watch as she scribbles something on the first page before handing the book back to me.

him to
I never

Stevie,

I’m so happy to have met you and even happier you’re in Hendrix’s life.

ut your

XOXO,

Rory Valentine

y mom,

ow her “Thank you,” I whisper, pulling the book into my chest. “I’ll treasure this.”

“You keep my boy happy, and I’ll keep you in signed books, okay? Don’t seeleaves the next one at his house for you since I’ll be leaving later today.”

“Oh, you should stay longer.” I twist to put the book in my tote.

7, she’s She waves her hand. “I’ve impeded enough.”

I strong “No way,” I assert. “Please stay.”

the fact “I totally appreciate it, but no... I’m going to head out.” She raises her hand to signal for our waitress, miming she wants the check. When her eyes come over weback to me, she says, “But seriously... I’m thrilled for Hendrix. You’re sitting on an absolutely lovely and just what he needs.”

sure to I frown at her. “What exactly does he need?”

“You,” she replies.

ookie, I I grin. “But why? He seems to have everything. He’s got an amazing life without me.”

The waitress arrives, hands Rory the check, and I pull out my wallet. “This is my treat,” Rory says.

ays of “But—”

my dad “You can buy our next breakfast, and I’ve no doubt there will be a lot of it as theBut you asked why Hendrix needs you?”

elf. I nod, slipping my wallet back into my purse.

offee’s “Because you’re exactly what he’s been searching for, and trust me, he’ll be back for more.”

in it for he's been looking."

"What does that mean?" I ask, thinking it's all far too vague to have any significance.

"What do you know about professional athletes?"

"I ponder, then shrug. "They're wealthy?"

"Yes, and most of them are young... straight out of college or even younger. Thrown into the limelight with lots of money, loads of adoration that pump up their egos, and scores of women just waiting to get in their pants."

I wince. "That's not making me feel good."

"And it shouldn't, if you were interested in Hendrix a few years ago. Trust me... that boy had his fancy sports cars and went through women like a hot knife through butter."

I hold up my hand. "I can imagine."

Rory laughs. "Sorry. Anyway, that's not who he is now. He's been trying to settle down, and that's why he was trying so hard with Tracy. He's looking for a girl to find his life partner."

"Which is all the more reason I'm easily confused as to why he's interested in me. Tracy and I—from what little I've heard—are like night and day."

"You two have nothing in common," Rory affirms. "She wanted Hendrix for a hand for his money and his fame. Moreover, she wanted all of his attention and adoration. If his eyes weren't on her at all times, she felt slighted. If he didn't spend every minute of his free time with her, she was put out. She demanded everything and gave nothing in return. I see none of that in you, and on that, you're a million times prettier."

I don't know about that. I may not know much about Hendrix's dating life or girlfriend, but I saw her that first night, and she's gorgeous. She's confident enough to know that Hendrix is attracted to me.

And Rory has affirmed for me that Hendrix likes more than just my physical appearance.

Pulling out her wallet, Rory slides free a fifty-dollar bill and sets it on the table. It's far more than the bill and a generous tip, but she pushes it to the side, showing her intention to leave it all.

"When it all boils down," Rory says, reaching across the table and taking my hand, "I trust in Hendrix because I see the way he looks at you, and it's not just for your looks."

he talks to you, and the happiness he exudes either when you're around him or even when he's talking about you. No need to analyze a damn thing... you're just him."

Her words pack a punch and rather than fortify me, they make me more uneasy. "But... we've only been seeing each other a little over two weeks or even less. What does that have to do with anything?" She doesn't let me argue, instead sliding out of the booth. I grab my coat and tote and do the same as they do. Rory's hands come to my shoulders, her eyes locking with mine. "Just me on this... you're it for him, and if you let yourself have a little freedom, accept something good, you'll realize he's it for you."

I'm unwilling to agree with her vocally because, in the back of my mind, I know that mothers leave little daughters behind, so it would be a hell of a lot easier for a man to do that to a grown woman.

I'm not ready to let go of those fears just yet, so instead I smile at her and hope you're right."

Rory pulls me into a hard hug and then we walk out of the dining room. More hugs, farewells and promises to stay in touch, and she walks away. He's the block to her car, and I head in the opposite direction.

Just as I'm in my car and putting on my seat belt, my phone rings. I pull it out of my bag, I see it's my mom. I'm feeling so good after that time with Rory, my tone is cheerful when I answer. "Hi, Mom."

"Stevie." The hair stands up on the back of my neck because my mom's voice didn't come out as a pained sob.

"What's wrong?" I demand.

"Um... I'm... at... your... house..." My mom's staccato burst of words gives way to weeping.

"Mom," I yell into the phone as I crank my car.

She seems more in control, although she's still crying. "I'm so sorry. I didn't know where to go. They dumped me here."

"Who dumped you there? What's wrong with you?"

"They roughed me up a bit... wanted to send a message. I'm blind and I don't know what to do."

My stomach pitches. "I'm about ten minutes away. There's a key taped to the underside of the first rocking chair. Get inside the house, and I'll be taking you soon."

"Okay," she says tremulously. "Okay... I can do that."

ound or "I'll be right there."

re it for She doesn't respond, and I listen hard, but I think she's hung up.

I hope that's what she's done. She said she was bleeding, and I don't know what that means she has a busted lip or a knife wound to her stomach.

eks." I consider calling 9-1-1, but no... she would have said if it was an answer, threatening. I'm almost positive.

the same. Calling 9-1-1 will bring the police along with an ambulance, a doctor, and a paramedic. I trust they could get my mom in a world of trouble. It's best to wait and assess the situation.

With the car in gear, I check my mirror and pull onto the street, confident in my mind, I'm making the right decision.

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I consider calling 9-1-1, but no... she would have said if it was life-threatening. I’m almost positive.

Calling 9-1-1 will bring the police along with an ambulance, and that could get my mom in a world of trouble. It’s best to wait and assess the situation.

With the car in gear, I check my mirror and pull onto the street, hopeful I’m making the right decision.

CHAPTER 16

Stevie

I PULL IN front of my house rather than around to the back alley where the garage is. My mom's car isn't here, but she said someone dumped her car. I look around cautiously as I exit my vehicle.

Scurrying up the porch steps, I slip my key into the lock and push through the door. I turn, flip the dead bolt, and do a quick perusal of the street through the glass. I don't see anything suspicious.

"Mom," I yell out as I turn around but immediately see her sitting at the kitchen table with a rag pressed against her eye.

I drop my bag and rush toward her. Squatting at her chair, I almost see the blank look in her eyes. Reaching up, I pull the rag gently away and look as I take in the rest of her face.

She's been hit more than a few times. One cheekbone is swollen and bruised, both eyes are already turning purple, and blood is crusted around both nostrils.

"Is it that bad?" she mumbles, giving a wry smile that shows me her teeth are coated in blood.

"Who did this to you?" I ask, raising a trembling hand to touch her forehead but I pull it back, afraid I'll hurt her.

"Don't know their names. Never saw them. They jumped me outside the grocery store, threw me in their car. One guy was in the back seat, beat me. They didn't want to take me back to the grocery store, so they asked me where I wanted to be dropped off. I gave them your address."

I'm appalled and pissed they—whoever the fuck *they* are—know my address, but I'll worry about that later.

"They said far worse would happen if I don't come up with the money. They said—"

My hand goes to her shoulder, but I don't squeeze because I'm guessing she's taken more than just punches to her face. "Okay, we'll talk about this later."

that, but first, I need to take you to the hospital.”

“No. They’ll call the police, and that’s a sure way to get me killed.”

“Mom... you’re really hurt.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “I know. Just... patch me up as best you can.”

She shifts in the chair and winces from the movement.

“Mom... did they...”

Blinking back tears, she shakes her head. “No... they didn’t touch me here my way. Just their fists, but I’m going to have bruises all over.”

Sighing, I straighten up and hold out my hand. “Okay... no hospital, and I’ll call the police. But I need to go upstairs and get some medical supplies. I don’t know if you should be walking up the stairs.”

My mom nods and then dips her head to stare blankly at the table.

I shoot up the stairs and into the bathroom to rummage through the things in my pantry for what I need.

Back downstairs, I attend to my mom’s injuries, first cleaning away the blood as gently as I can from her nose. The inside of her cheeks have been shredded by her teeth from a punch or slap, which I’m betting is the same as that bruised her cheekbone, and I have her rinse with warm salt water.

There’s nothing to bandage, but I pull a bag of frozen peas from the freezer and crush them up until the bag is malleable, and have her hold it to her forehead.

“Move it around after a few minutes,” I instruct. Bruises are blood vessels under the skin.

She shakes her head. “No. Nothing’s broken or bleeding. I can tell.”

“I’ll make some tea.”

I put on a kettle, content to sit in silence watching it rather than ask my mother for more details. She’s content to keep the peas on her face and sit at the table.

When I have the chamomile brewed for her, she sets the peas down and curls her hand around the warm cup.

“Why did you have them bring you here?” I ask as I take the chair.

“I don’t know,” she says, her hands trembling as she holds the warm cup. “I knew I needed help, and I was scared.”

“What did they say about the money?”

“Just that this was a taste if we don’t pay up, but honestly, Stevie’s eyes fill with tears again. “I think they’ll kill us. Ten thousand dollars.”

anything to these people—which is why we thought we could get away with it—but I got a bad feeling that either we pay the money or we die.”

I rest my elbows on the table, bury my face in my hands, and squeeze my eyes shut to prevent the torrent of tears threatening to break free. The world becomes far too real, and now I’m truly frightened.

Sighing, my hands fall away and I ask my mom, “When is the money due?”

“Two weeks.”

“I can get two thousand right now off my credit card. Will they think that?”

“As payment in full?” she asks with a mirthless laugh. “Stevie.. . . I think they’d rather kill us. It would send a nice message to the little minions.”

I push out of my chair and pace the kitchen. “I’ve got my car for sale, but no one wants to pay what it’s worth. I can lower the price, but it’s been maybe another three thousand.”

At the sink, I lean on my hands to steady myself while staring at the backyard. I hadn’t realized how gray and overcast it was today. I’d felt nervous, and joyful at breakfast and didn’t even notice the dreary weather. Now I feel it in my bones.

“You could meet with that reporter,” my mom says, and my entire body tenses. “He said he’d pay ten thousand for some inside scoop on the Titans.”

It was just over a week and a half ago my mom presented me with the option, and I shut her down swiftly. I was furious, and my first and only response was no.

And yet... I don’t say that now.

Turning to face her, I ask, “What exactly does that mean... scoop on the Titans?”

She shrugs, then winces in pain, which squeezes my gut. “I don’t know. He didn’t seem skeezy or anything. I think he just wants more of a peek at the players.”

I keep quiet as I’d never trust my mother’s definition of skeezy. She got beat up by goons for stealing money from a money launderer.

“Mom,” I say as I move back to the table and sit down. I rest one hand on the table and lean toward her. “I really care for Hendrix. I can’t do anything about it, but it isn’t him.”

ay with “I’m not asking you to. But maybe just talk to the reporter and see what he wants. You don’t have to commit to anything. And he did say he’ll freeze my sources, so no one would ever know it was you.”

his has Again, I maintain my silence. Hendrix told me things that no one knows, but those are secrets I’d never give up, even at the risk of my moneylife.

Still, maybe I know something so benign that the reporter would be interested in it but that wouldn’t blow back on me. Maybe I’ve seen enough of the last few weeks that would suffice.

If that reporter pays the money that will get my mom out of trouble, I can do so without being discovered, it could all work out.

Even as I think about it, deep in my gut, I know it’s wrong. So wrong I’m nauseated, but I find myself saying, “I’ll meet with the reporter and that’s all I’ll commit to. Tell him I’m not giving him any information and get I’ll hear what he has to say.”

My mom straightens, smiles, and then moans in pain. She presses her hand to the side of her face, rising from her chair. She moves to the sink and spits blood. I rush over to help her, preparing more salt water for her to spit with.

When she’s done, she turns to me. “It means the world that you’re helping me. I wish I could take even a little credit for what an amazing woman you’ve turned into, but that all goes to your dad. I wish I could have been more for you.”

“You’re here now,” I say, testing the truth of those words. It should be enough for me, but I still can’t help but want more. “Mom... you promise once this is over, you won’t do anything illegal again.”

She shakes her head, looks me in the eye, and says, “My crime done over, I promise.”

t know.

ersonal



she just RANDY COMES AND picks up my mom. She tells him I’m going to talk to the reporter, which pleases him.

After they leave, I grimace at the time. I should be heading to the bar to work a solo shift, but it’s a Thursday and shouldn’t be overly crowded during the day.

But my journal sitting on the coffee table calls to me. I can actually protect saying, “You need to purge some of that shit before you leave.”

And it’s right.

I had a beautiful morning with Rory but my mom poisoned it. When my mom’s so very grateful my mom wasn’t hurt worse, and now I’ve got a prescription, all kinds of noxious thoughts continue to race through my head.

I walk into the living room, grab the journal, and bring it to the dining table. I open up to the next page, quickly uncap the pen, and start scribble a messy outpouring of pain.

and I

December 17, 10:25 a.m.:

I hate you, Mom.

Not really.

But I despise you sometimes. Not just for leaving me when I was a little, but for leaving me over and over and over again now that I’m an adult. You show up, acting like you want to be my mom. You’re present. Then you do something that no mother should ever do, and you’re gone again.

Please, please, just be someone who I can like. Stop putting me in untenable situations. Just for once, can you put me first?

I read over it, analyze my feelings, and consider it complete. I can’t think of anything else to say right now.

I then tear out the sheet.

Grabbing a lighter from a drawer, I walk outside and set the paper on fire. I place it on the sidewalk and watch it burn to ash, freeing myself from dark thoughts. It’s what I did when I was a kid—with the help of my dad lighting the paper on fire—to learn to let those things go.

When I’m back in the house, I sit down at the table again and start a new journal entry.

December 17, 10:32 a.m.: Hendrix is coming to dinner tonight. So excited about it that I know today will drag by.

I tap the pen against my chin and glance at my watch. I have more time than I could write for hours about Hendrix and what he might represent in my future, but I can’t be late for work.

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CHAPTER 17

Hendrix

I PULL UP to the back alley of Stevie's house, smiling to see her dad is there. I park behind his truck, the bed loaded with several boxes.

Stevie's still at work, and we're both three hours earlier than we scheduled to arrive to start dinner. John and I did some secret planning night at the bar. I'd waited for Stevie to go to the bathroom and then I shot.

I approached John, who looked irritated I'd dare trespass on his conversation with Rory. I didn't have time to give him shit about it, I was looking back at where Stevie had just disappeared into the restroom. "I have an idea," I said quickly, "but I need your help to pull it off."

The man listened, asked only one question, and then said he was in.

I exit out of my vehicle and approach Stevie's father. I slap my hands together and rub them gleefully. "Ready for some breaking and entering?"

John snorts and slaps at one of the boxes in the back of his truck. "I bought more stuff."

"You don't even know what we have to work with, and yet you're here?"

"Can you have too many fucking Christmas lights?" he growls.

I shrug. "Suppose not. Let's do this."

For the next three hours, we bust ass and decorate the hell out of Stevie's house. When I had asked her last week why she didn't have a tree, she simply said she didn't have the time. She made some half-commitment that she would put it up last week, but it never happened because my girl is too busy with running her business and then making time for me, I decided the best thing I could do was bring the Christmas decorations directly to her.

John knew she had the basics she'd bought her first year in this neighborhood including an artificial tree with lights and decorations, a wreath for the door,

door, and some garland for the staircase. All that was tucked away in the garage, and we got it up without a hitch. We also used the lights John had to decorate the outside of the house, along with the bushes. He manhandled the ladder and the staple gun, and I fed him string after string until we got the angle and joint covered in multicolored baubles.

Just as we're putting away the ladder and storing the cardboard boxes in the garage, Stevie texts that she's on her way.

already "That gives us about five minutes," I say to her dad as we wait inside. "Let's get a beer and wait for her on the front porch."

in she's He grunts his assent and with brews in hand, we each take a folding chair. It's getting dark outside, so all the lights glow, and our world is fucking amazing. It's cold as hell, but we're both sweaty from the effort.

Besides, we don't want to miss Stevie's reaction.

on his "Thank you for doing this," John says as we keep our eyes trained on the street in the direction his daughter will be driving.

"I have "You did fifty percent of it," I reply.

"The idea was yours, so thank you."

l. "Sure thing."

7 hands We sit in silence and wait. John Kisner isn't an easy man to talk to, according to Rory, he is, as she went on and on about him last night, but I'm more than a little intimidating coming from the perspective of his daughter's boyfriend.

bought Still, I take the jab. "I want to get a tattoo, and I'd really like for you to do it."

John's head turns my way, and he studies me a moment. "What were you thinking?"

Stevie's I hold out my arm, point to my biceps with the hand holding my beer. "Porsche logo... right here."

hearted Despite his face being covered in hair, I can actually see his lip curl in disgust, and I have to fight not to laugh. "You've got to be fucking kidding me."

s cheer "No, sir. It's my favorite car. Used to have one, as a matter of fact, but it got wrecked."

house, John scoffs in disdain. "Stevie will kick you to the curb if you get a pussy tattoo."

re front The struggle to keep a straight face is almost too much to bear. "I

in her wrong with a Porsche? I know it's no Harley between your legs, bought signifies you're a real man, but it's legit."

ned the John's brow furrows, his eyes glinting hard. "Are you serious?"

at every My smile breaks free. "Nah... not about the Porsche, but I do tattoo."

oxes in "Fuck off," John mutters.

"All joking aside... I do want a tattoo. I want to get the names of the Titans who died on the plane." I point to my ribs. "Right here."

I didn't think it possible, but John's expression softens to a tender look. "I didn't know he possessed. Yeah, sure... I'd be honored to do that. Let's look it up."

exertion. To my surprise, John pulls his phone out, and we coordinate schedules.

d down "All right," I say, finishing the entry. "Week after next. December 1st, 10 a.m."

"Bring breakfast," he says as he tucks his phone away.

"Doughnuts?"

"Works for me," he says and then nods. "Here she comes."

o. Well, John stands and I follow suit. We walk to the porch steps and wait. Stevie's car slows down the closer she gets. Her normal path would be a right, then a left at the next intersection, then another left to access the alley behind the block of houses. Instead, she stops in the street and rolls down the window.

Her jaw hangs open as she takes in the lights all over her house. "Where are you? God, you two! Did you do all this?"

I put my arm around John's shoulders, knowing it probably irritates her. "Auntie, your dad helped me."

He shrugs off my arm. "It was his idea, but I did most of the hard work." Stevie smiles, and even from this distance, I see her eyes dampen with emotion. "I guess I better cook you two a real dinner, huh?"

, before "We'll meet you inside," I say, and she rolls up her window, driving away. I nudge her dad with my elbow. "We made her cry."

get that "That is something to be proud of," he acknowledges.

"Come on... let's go drink another beer while she waits on us here. What's foot... like kings deserve to be treated."

which Except when we get inside, we don't sit back and let Stevie serve
join her in the kitchen and she directs us on how to help.

Stevie pulls out fresh ingredients from the fridge for us to put t
want a individual flatbread pizzas, and I hold up the bag of thawed peas I find
counter. "Are you putting this crap on the pizzas? Because if so, I'm
here."

Stevie looks over her shoulder at me. "Oh, no... I left that out earl
forgot to put it back. You can just toss them."

"Hurt yourself?" John guesses as I dump them in the garbage.

"Um... yeah, hit my knee on the stair banister coming down.
quicker than making up an ice pack."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah... fine. How's work been going?"

I frown at Stevie because something in her tone doesn't sit right w
She seems tired, but there's a tension about her. Did she just cha
subject from peas to John's work a little too quickly?

Maybe not. She slips into easy conversation with her dad about on
workers who's apparently quite young and keeps hitting on him.

"You need to fire her," Stevie says.

"You're just saying that because you don't like her," John say
behindslices pepperoni. I've been put on onion duty, which means I'm low
wn her the totem pole.

"It's true. I don't like her, and that's because she's my age and
'Oh my provocatively for the sole purpose of getting your attention."

"Unfortunately, she's a damn good artist," John laments with a
es him. "But I'm going to have a talk with her and tell her to cool it. I don't ne
shit in my workplace."

"Say the word and I'll talk to her," Stevie says with an evil laugh.

And yeah... she seems fine.

"That won't happen." John turns his attention to me. "Rory get off

"Yeah... we had lunch, and she left after that." I blink at the tea
ng past the onion.

"She coming back anytime soon?" he asks.

Stevie and I exchange a look punctuated by matching smirks.
nd and stupid. "Nah... didn't say when she'd be able to."

"You should've just asked for her phone number, if you're so inter

us. WeStevie teases.

“I got her phone number,” John retorts, and Stevie and I exchange
togethereyebrows at this revelation.

l on the Stevie shrugs, and I return to cutting onions. John’s interested, but
1 out offigure out if he’s playing hard to get, or if he doesn’t know how to

Rory. Regardless, I find it hilarious he seems a little off-balance.

lier and “You talk to your mom lately?” John asks Stevie.

Talk about a change of subject.

“What?” Stevie exclaims as her body jolts. “Why would you ask th

It was And there it is again. She’s tense about something, and that sure
was a trigger.

John must sense it, too, as he stops slicing and glowers at his da

“It’s just you usually see her every week or so and talk to her a time
with me.more than that. You haven’t said much about her lately, and I was wo
nge theif she disappeared on you. It’s her thing after all.”

I keep my head down. While I’m very aware of Stevie’s history v
e of hismom, this discussion with her dad is rooted in hard feelings on his s
burgeoning feelings on hers.

Stevie doesn’t come back swinging with any defense of her
s as heInstead, she moves back to the fridge. “I’ve been busy, but yeah... we
man onbriefly today.”

Now John’s eyes shift to me, and I can read his expression. It sa
dressesand clear: *Are you sensing something’s wrong here?*

Yeah... I sense it. But I can tell Stevie’s wound tight, and I can a
shrug.this subject is not something she wants to linger on.

eed that I give a very minute shake of my head. *Don’t go there, John.*

He lifts his chin in acknowledgment. *I’m staying away.*

“Your dad’s going to do that tattoo for me,” I say, changing the
again.

okay?” Stevie spins from the fridge, a smile on her face. “Really?”

rs from John answers the question. “Yup. Apparently, he wants a Porsche
his biceps.”

Her head whips back my way in disbelief, and I wink at her. “He’
I playto do all the names.”

rested,” Eyes softening with sentimentality, she sighs. “It will be beautiful.
“I did a tattoo once on this woman who wanted the names of

exes,” John says as he finishes up the pepperoni. “She said it was a raised could remember what to stay away from. And about four months later she showed up with another name to add. Then six months after that, I can’t name.”

I laugh as I shake my head. “Some people never learn, I guess.”

John chuckles, and I think it’s the first time I’ve actually heard him. “She still comes to me. Her list is up to fourteen names or something.”

We all laugh, and that sets the tone for the rest of the evening. I say, “I’ve never hung out with the parent of a romantic partner before, but as hell while John seems antisocial on the outside, to my surprise, we share laughs throughout dinner. Whatever was bothering Stevie earlier, it’s disappeared.

After we clean the kitchen, John makes a quick exit, which I know is for our benefit. He’s pretty much monopolized our evening, but I’m totally fine by me. Decorating Stevie’s house was an epic gift, and I’ve done it with her before. It’s the type of forced bonding that’s going to make me like her.

Hugging her dad at the door, Stevie says, “Thank you for being the best mom a child could ever hope to have.”

“Yeah,” he returns gruffly, squeezing her close, “because you were a hard kid to raise.”

The sarcasm in his voice indicates she was pretty much an angel. She figured that out. She might have the tough biker, rocker-chick image, but she also tells Stevie’s soft inside and out.

Except when she has that baseball bat ready to knock heads.

Bolting the lock, Stevie moves right into me. Her arms go around my neck, and she kisses me before turning to look at the Christmas tree. “I can’t believe you and my dad did all this.”

I tip my head to follow her gaze.

“I would have never put it up,” she admits, snuggling into me. “All I know now I’m wondering why the hell I wouldn’t have made time for it. It’s so magical it is.”

It is magical. I’ve always loved Christmas.

“Come here,” I say as I lead her to the couch. I pull her down with me, curling us together so we’re facing the tree. “Next year, we’ll put up the tree together at Thanksgiving when we both have some time.”

so she “Next year, huh?” she murmurs as her fingertips stroke my arm.
ter, sheyou think we should figure out next week first?”

another “Nah. I already have next week figured out. And the week after th
the week after that, right on up to this time next year. Is that cool with

I lift my head and bend over her. She cranes her neck to look back
n do so. “Yeah... I’m cool with that.”

With a bit of a stretch, I’m able to brush my lips over hers. “I w
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a lot offuture figured out, just like I have.

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“Next year, huh?” she murmurs as her fingertips stroke my arm. “Don’t you think we should figure out next week first?”

“Nah. I already have next week figured out. And the week after that, and the week after that, right on up to this time next year. Is that cool with you?”

I lift my head and bend over her. She cranes her neck to look back at me. “Yeah... I’m cool with that.”

With a bit of a stretch, I’m able to brush my lips over hers. “I wish you could come home with me for Christmas.”

“We’ll plan better next year,” she promises, and that means she’s got the future figured out, just like I have.

Jerry’s Bar has always been open on Christmas Day to serve those who don’t have any place else to go. Stevie’s working that day as she doesn’t want to ask her staff to do it. It sucks, because it’s my favorite holiday and I want to spend it with her, but I can’t miss out on my family either. My girlfriend is nontraditional in many ways, and it just may mean she serves beer on Christmas Day. We’ll figure a way to work around that.

CHAPTER 18

Stevie

MY HANDS ARE sweating so bad, my phone slips free as I try to put it in my purse. I lean over in my car, grab it from the floorboard, and take a deep breath. “It’s just a meeting. Nothing more.”

I take another breath, let it out.

I do that three more times, and when it doesn’t help, I mutter, “Fuck.”

After tossing my phone in my purse, I wipe my hands on my jeans and exit my car.

The small coffee shop is in an area of Pittsburgh I’m familiar with. I went to high school not far from here. When I step inside, I search the room and immediately see the reporter, Carmine Betta. I recognize him only because he’s with my mother, and I’m stunned to see her here.

They’re sitting at a back table that seats four, and my mom waves with a big smile. My stomach pitches, and I almost turn and march right out the door, but Carmine stands from his chair and beckons me toward them. With leaden feet, I wind through tables only half-filled with patrons as we’re past the morning rush.

“Ms. Kisner,” he says, sticking out a hand as my mom stays behind. “Carmine Betta.”

He hands me a business card, and I glance at it before shoving it in my purse.

“Hi,” I say, shaking his hand and then wincing that I didn’t wipe my sweaty palms once more. He doesn’t seem to notice, or if he does, he’s too much of a gentleman to point it out.

And for that matter, the guy doesn’t seem like a sleazy tabloid reporter, although I’ve never met one before. He’s well dressed, although casual. Dark jeans, a white button-up shirt, brown corduroy jacket, and a green cashmere-looking scarf. He wears rimless bifocals, and his dark wavy hair is liberally sprinkled with gray. I’d peg him in his late fifties.

“Please... have a seat. Can I get you a coffee or something?”

“No, I’m good.” I sit down and turn to look at my mom. “What’s going on here?”

My tone is a little brittle, and she pulls back slightly. Heavy makeup covers her bruising well, although I can still see the swelling in her cheek. I wonder if Carmine knows the sordid details as to why my mom needs the money.

The reporter sits and pulls his own coffee closer. He crosses one leg over the other. “Thank you for meeting me. I understand you’re dating Hendrix Bateman.”

Shit. What did my mother and Randy tell this guy? It never occurred to me to ask what she said.

I don’t dare look at her because I don’t want this guy to know that I’m unsure of myself. “I want to first say that I’m not agreeing to an interview about any Titans player or the organization at this time. Everything here is off the record, or whatever you call it.”

Carmine holds up his hands in mock surrender. “Of course. This is just a meeting to see if you have something worthwhile and what our terms would be.”

“Terms? I understand you’d pay ten thousand for a story.”

“For an exclusive story chock-full of interesting information that no one else knows,” he clarifies as his hands drop.

“I don’t have that for you.”

Carmine smiles knowingly. “Of course you do. The question is whether you’re willing to give it up. If it makes you feel better, I protect my sources at all costs. That means I wouldn’t give up your name, even if a judge ordered me to do so upon threat of going to jail. In other words, I’d go to jail if I’d give you up.”

“What does that matter?” I ask bitterly. “If the story you want is an exclusive about Hendrix Bateman, it would be obvious the story was about me.”

“So, you are dating Hendrix?” he asks. When I don’t confirm it, he shrugs and drops the question off. “It’s no matter. That’s information I could verify if I wanted. But let’s discuss whether you have something worthwhile.”

“What exactly are you looking for?” I ask hesitantly, and I hate myself for even putting that question out there. It makes me officially complicit.

betraying Hendrix and/or his friends.

are you “Something the public doesn’t know, but it’s fine if others do. Most
something that’s known within the organization but has been kept in
makeup reasons.”

cheek. I I don’t say anything, but Hendrix has told me all kinds of
eds this especially how hard last year was after the crash. Not only on him, C
and Coen as the Lucky Three, but on everyone trying to rebuild
eg overimmense pressure that came with it.

Hendrix “Oooh,” my mom gushes, tapping her hand on the table. “Tell him
Stone proposing to Harlow.”

irred to “Mom,” I exclaim in horror as I whip around to face her. “Stop this
is private and personal.” I turn to Carmine. “You cannot report that
hat I’m can’t—”

terview “Relax,” Carmine says. “You said everything was off the record.”

re is off “And my mom only knows that because I told her. She doesn’t know
be true, so she’s no good as a source.” I turn to her. “And please do
s just anything else, or I’m out of here.”

is would “Fine,” my mom says and mimes that she’s zipping her lips. Then
immediately breaks it. “Look... try to think of something you could
overheard at the bar one night when the team was there. Something
no one people might know so you wouldn’t be an obvious source.”

Carmine leans forward. “Like I said... you don’t have to be the only
to know it. Just the only one who’s willing to tell.”

whether A thought strikes me. “Everything I say is off the record, right?”

urces at “Absolutely,” Carmine says.

ordered “Okay, for example—but I’m not giving you permission to use this
before year someone was in an accident and wrecked the car of a teammate
there were some issues arising from that. Something like this?”

a juicy I feel comfortable divulging that because Hendrix told me an a
as from report was filed, so it’s public record.

“Yes, exactly like that,” Carmine says with excitement, his eyes sparkling
waves with something I can’t quite define. “If you give me details of what happened
easily—”

“Wait a minute,” I say, studying him for a long moment. Deep
myself eyes, I see something salacious. And suddenly, despite the fact even
licit in about him to this point has seemed very professional, I get an uneasy feeling

Add to that I'm absolutely heartsick over even sitting here, content likely this harebrained scheme.

side for "Honey," my mom says, because I'm sure she's reading my doubt set of my shoulders. She grips my arm. "This is the only way to ensure things, get the money." She tightens her hold and leans in to whisper so Camden, can't hear. "The only way to save my life."

and the My chest feels like someone kicked it in with a steel-toed boot. T of emotions twists my stomach—guilt over what I'd be doing to H n about anger at my mom for putting me in this position, and confusion on how help her and still maintain my integrity.

at. That And then it hits me.

at. You It's so very simple. I can't keep my morals and principles intact this.

Absolute regret almost releases a sob from my throat, but I push it down. Grabbing my purse, I stand up so quickly, my chair topples and I don't add look down at my mom. "I'm sorry. I can't do this. You're asking me to trust with a man I care for, and I can't do it."

then she "Even at my expense?" she asks. "I could be hurt... killed."

would've "I'll find another way," I mutter, stepping back from her and righting other chair. "I'm sorry."

I spin and rush out of the coffee shop, coming to a stop as soon as the cold air hits my lungs. I bend over, gasping as my entire body lurches, wondering if I've just made the right decision. I try to take in a deep breath, feeling I'm on the edge of a panic attack.

Never had one before, but it's like I'm balancing a stack of plates on my last fingertip and they're about to come crashing down.

ite, and "How could you do this, Stevie?"

I spin around to find my mom has followed me out. I straighten and accidently up my spine when I see the anger in her eyes. I hear it in her tone. "I'm sorry, but you can't ask me to compromise myself. I'll figure out something else."

markling "You've had two weeks already," she snaps.

ppened "I'll see about taking out a business loan or something."

"That will take too long."

o in his A wave of fury crashes through me. "God damn it, Mom. This is my problem, it's yours. You've done nothing throughout my life to give me a reason to help you, and yet here I am trying. How dare you even act o-

replating by my inability to pull ten thousand dollars out of thin air?"

She steps in close to me, her expression softened with tears filling her eyes. "I may not have been a good mom, but I'm still your mother. I'm here I can bleed. And I may not have been there before, but I'm here now. I'm trying to help you. I take in a breath and let it out. "Yes... I know. But I have my limits. I know what I'm willing to do for you, and that reporter is a hard limit."

She rushes. "Ungrateful brat," she hisses at me, and I'm so stunned by this outburst, I turn about from teary-eyed guilt trip that I step back. "You wonder why I can't help you? It's because of that very reason. You were a little monster, always vamping and pulling on me. You and your sisters... sniffing little brats always demanding of my time."

If I do "Stop it," I whisper.

"You know it's true. If you were a better kid, maybe I would have let you stay around." She steps in closer to me, lips peeled back in a rage. "You're useless, Stevie. Absolutely a waste of space."

How do I break? Many people might be destroyed by the backlash she just handed me. My father built me of sterner stuff. Years of therapy, journaling, and role model has prepared me for this, the day when I have to confront my mother and her failings—again.

In my heart of hearts, I know she's absolutely wrong about me. The strength of my spine isn't bent by her hateful barrage. There's even a small voice inside me that pities her.

But I am hurt because I'd thought maybe we could have some kind of relationship. All my hopes were just ground to dust, and I feel like I'm choking on it.

I'm not a glutton for punishment, however, and I know it's time to pivot and step around my mom, heading to the edge of the sidewalk.

"Don't you walk away from me," she calls out.

I ignore her, look left, then right, grateful to the traffic gods that I'm not on a busy street. "I'm sorry, opening. I push my hand into my purse to grab my keys as I jog across the street."

"You unappreciative bitch!" she yells, and that actually makes me feel better as I reach my car.

Not my *I'm unappreciative?* The irony is too much.

Me any I don't even look over at her as I get in, start the engine, and proceed through the backed-up traffic when there's a break.

I drive straight to my dad's tattoo shop.

ing her
m your
ying.”



mits on

I ENTER THROUGH the front door rather than the bar. I'd planned on taking a day off because I wasn't sure how this morning's meeting would go.

abrupt
y I left?

made the right call. I'm a little shaky now that the adrenaline is wearing off.

whining

One of his artists, Samuel, is at the reception desk, reading a magazine.

vays so

He looks up and smiles. "Hey, Stevie. Looking for your dad?"

"Yeah. He in with a customer?"

Samuel shakes his head. "Just finished up. He's in the break room."

re stuck
'You're

"Thanks." I head to the back, passing by the various workstations

of which are filled. The shop is open from early morning to midnight.

artists all work different shifts.

me, but
a good

I push open the break room door, my eyes immediately locking onto

my dad who's leaning against the sink counter. His arms are folded, and he's

listening to one of his employees.

ont my
he growls.

It takes him a nanosecond to know something's wrong. "Everybody's

re. The
a place

he growls.

Chairs are pushed back, and there's a mad scramble past me. When the

door shuts, my dad asks, "What's wrong?"

type of
ke I'm

Just minutes ago, I felt strong. I'd held my ground, saved my

self, stood up to a toxic mother. Now that I'm in my daddy's presence and

feel the love and concern in his eyes, not to mention he knows me so well,

he just knows something's wrong—I lose my shit.

walk. I
my stomach.

I start crying. Rivers pour down my cheeks, and I bend in half, hunched

over my stomach.

re's an
ross the

"Jesus fuck," my dad grumbles, and then I'm in his embrace. He

holds me back and forth, his voice gentle with affirmations. "It's all right,

Carrots. Whatever this is, I've got your back."

e laugh

I shake my head, wrapping my arms around his waist and burying my

face in his chest. And I just cry.

ull into

"Did that asshole do something to you?" he snarls.

That actually makes me laugh, and I turn my head to the side. "No,

it's not Hendrix. He's perfect, and you know he's not an asshole."

"Then it's your mom." His words are confident and without hesitation.

He knows.

“It’s awful, Dad.” I tip my head back to look at him. “Think of the thing and just know it’s worse than that.”

“She’s probably got you embroiled in some scheme or drama,” I say quietly.

I blink in surprise, pulling all the way out of his embrace.

“You don’t think I know that woman?” my dad grumbles. “Jesus, I watched her walk away from the most precious angel in the world. I know she’s got a few screws loose.”

My gaze falls away in shame that I let myself go down that rabbit hole with her.

“Want to tell me about it?” he asks.

“Um…” My eyes slide up to meet his. “I don’t think so. I have to get myself. It’s over.”

“Over?”

“As in I can’t have a relationship with her. At all. The why of it is important.”

My dad accepts that and doesn’t push. He knows if I need to get it out of my chest, he’s there for me.

My rock.

“All right. If you’re good, I’m good.”

“I’m good,” I say, taking stock of my feelings. I’m actually at ease knowing that I tried with my mom, and that my dad—as always—has my back.

“Want to come hang out with me while I do a back piece?” he says.

“Sure,” I say with a smile. I’ve got nothing else to do until it’s time to head to the arena. Brienne Norcross invited me to join her and the other ladies I met through Harlow at Mario’s last week.

I’m really excited about it—not just seeing a game from the owner’s box but to hang out with Harlow. Our adult lives have been so busy the last few years, her with opening her own law firm and me with the bar, there hasn’t been much free time to socialize. The fact that we’re both dating professional players means we can at least see each other when they play at home.

After the game, Hendrix and I are going out. I want to take him to the Duquesne Incline, and then we’ll stay at his place for convenience.

Then hopefully, by the time Hendrix and I wreck each other in bed

over any remaining funk my mom has caused and tomorrow will be
the worst brighter day.

he says

Stevie.
I'd, so I

hit hole

iddled it

it isn't

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Titans

up the

ly, I'll be

over any remaining funk my mom has caused and tomorrow will be a much brighter day.

CHAPTER 19

Hendrix

HAVING A NAKED Stevie in my arms is, without a doubt, the best thing in the world. The Titans won tonight against the super-competitive W Rebels, and afterward, Stevie took me to the Duquesne Incline. In ten years I've been playing for the Titans, I've never been up the funicular, which boasts one of the best views of any city in the world.

It was magical being with someone I've grown to care deeply about. Fluffy snowflakes lazily drifted around us as we huddled together on the observation deck overlooking the Pittsburgh skyline. All the buildings were lit, casting sparkles on the confluence of the three rivers. I laughed and Stevie produced a tiny metal flask filled with bourbon from which we drank while we talked.

About the game, about life, about my neighbor who makes it his job to straighten all the garbage cans on our street for collection day, and about Stevie's bartender who got the hiccups today for four straight hours.

But as magical as all that was—hanging out with a beautiful, funny, and engaging woman—nothing is better than when she's naked and writhing in my arms.

We've been in my bed for a while now—on our sides, facing each other—kissing and touching, laughing, and then getting serious when something feels oh so fucking good.

My hand slides down her back, over her ass, and in between her legs where my fingers play at the wetness I find there. Our mouths are open and tongues dueling, and her hand strokes my cock.

I let my lips feather across her chin and along her jawline before sinking my teeth on her neck. "You are so fucking hot. Just when I think I've reached the height of hotness, you surpass it."

Stevie's laugh is husky as her hand squeezes me roughly, and the sound of her stopping the guttural sound that rumbles from my chest. She pulls back

me slightly, bends her head, and looks between our bodies. I follow her hand and watch as her hand slides up my dick where she glides her thumb over my head, gathering the bead of pre-cum she coaxed free.

She just stares at it a minute, and I wonder if she's considering putting her mouth on me. Stevie is fucking amazing at oral, but then again, so am I, so we are well matched. If that's what she wants to do, I'd happily flop back and let her have her way with me. Probably pull her around into a missionary position and have my way with her.

To my utter shock, and in a move that makes my dick harder than it's ever been, Stevie takes the wetness and runs it over her lower lip.

I groan as I stare at my essence shining on her mouth. She wiggles closer to me, hand still stroking my erection, and whispers, "Kiss me."

Christ, that's so fucking hot, and without hesitation, I slam my mouth onto hers with my hand going behind her head to hold her there. I taste myself, and it makes me hunger to taste more of her.

I roll to my back and haul Stevie up my body so suddenly, she lets out a tiny yip of surprise. Scooting down a bit on the mattress to make room for her ass hard. "Want you to ride my face, baby."

"Hendrix," she gasps as my hands move to her hips in an attempt to get her into position. She grabs hold of my headboard, stiff-arming it so she can get into place, and shakes her head. "I can't. That's too much."

"You sure as fuck can. Going to get you off, and then you're going to ride my cock."

I feel her muscles relax. She doesn't fight me as I pull her into place. I'm stalled in my quest when her hand comes to my jaw, gripping slightly to get my attention.

Looking up past her gorgeous body with those fantastic tits, I find her legs staring at me intently. "I've never had this before."

My chest feels filled with helium it becomes so light. I release my hand from her hip and take her hand in mine, pressing a kiss to the palm. "What's so good about this?"

"Such intensity. It's always so electric between us. Sometimes you're so good, it's so exquisite, I'm almost afraid I can't handle it."

I smile and take her hand, pressing it between her legs where I want her to rub herself. Her eyes flutter closed, and she moans.

"I feel the same, Stevie. No one has ever turned me inside out the way you do, and nothing has ever felt as good as when I'm coming deep inside you."

er gazeyou. It keeps getting better and better, right?”

ver the Her eyes open and lock with mine. “Right. Better and better.”

“Which means we pay attention to that. We respect it, and we d
ting herthis shit go. We hold on tight.”

m I, so Her hand turns, abandoning her clit so her fingers curl around mi
nto mysqueezes. “We hold tight.”

a sixty- I grab her hips again and give a rough squeeze. “Be a good girl n
get on my face.”

I think



gles in

MY HAND RUNS down Stevie’s back with a featherlight pressure. She’
mouth on top of me and hasn’t moved since she collapsed minutes ag
I taste wringing orgasms out of us both.

She was fucking glorious, riding me with abandon. Amazingly
gives a especially since I’d just gotten her off with my mouth.

1, I slap “Are you alive?” I ask her.

Stevie mumbles. “I’m not sure. I think I was definitely transporte
t to get alternate dimension. Maybe I’m back. Who knows?”

ie locks Chuckling, I wrap my arms around her and press a kiss to the top
; to ride hand comes to press against my chest where my heart beats at a stea
once again.

ace, but “Now is the time to tell me what’s been bothering you,” I say, b
ghtly to our mellow.

ind her She jerks in my arms, pulling her head back to look at me. Her e
wrong?” filled with both surprise and wariness. “What makes you think some

hold on I lean in and kiss the tip of her nose. “How could you not understa
; that?” I would know when something is wrong? You and I have spent a
ir touch intimate time together—both in and out of this bed. We’ve had dozer
dozens of conversations. You’re a work of art, Stevie, so I study you.

rant her your facial expressions and your posture. I memorize it all. I’m so
he way interested in everything about you that it’s more than obvious to m
something is off.”

inside The wariness dissipates, and her eyes soften. “I don’t know wha

did to deserve a friend like you, but when I figure it out, I'm going to make sure payment is rendered."

"My lips quirk and an eyebrow lifts. "Friends? Do friends do explosive orgasms to each other?"

She smirks. "My friend does. His name is Hendrix Bateman, and he's my best lover I've ever had, shatters me with pleasure, and then puts me together so very easily because he observes and notices every little thing about me and knows when something is wrong. Every woman should be lucky as to have a friend like that."

Putting my fingers under her chin, I make sure I've got her attention. "Okay, friend... tell me what's wrong."

Stevie shrugs and her gaze drifts to where her fingertips run around the center of my chest. "I really don't want to discuss the specifics."

"Don't need the specifics. Tell me how you're feeling." Her eyes are strong, and I see the question: *Are you for real?* "Lay it on me. I am ready to absorb all the feelings."

Stevie smiles sadly and lets out a heavy sigh. "It's the same story of abandonment. I've been let down. Fragile trust has been broken. Loyalty I expected wasn't there. A chance at a relationship—maybe even love—just burned to ashes."

Not hard to figure out the source of her angst. "Your mom?"

"Yeah. I just don't..." She goes silent, and I let her collect her thoughts.

Her voice is clogged with emotion. "I don't think my mom has the capacity to give me anything at all. Not even the barest hint of care."

"I'm sorry, baby." I gather her in close, hug her tight. "I know it hurts."

Her breath fans across my chest. "What should I do?"

I think a moment, running through everything I know about Stevie and her troubled past with her mom. I don't know the circumstances that led to this, but I hear the torment in her voice that she's been hurt... yet again.

She's asking if she should try harder. She's asking me because she values what we share the same principled values of perseverance and effort. Hell, I only went out with me because I worked hard at a failing relationship. I fucking watched Tracy, despite me knowing damn well she wasn't the one for me.

"I think it's time for you to let her go," I finally conclude. "It's time for you to stop caring about what might be."

"Yeah," she says softly. "I think you might be right."

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CHAPTER 20

Stevie

“THIS IS DEFINITELY on the opposite side of the tracks from where I murmur in awe as we drive past Brienne Norcross’s mansion. It’s lit with white lights and wreaths trimmed with silver bows in every window, bushes drenched in sparkling strings of bulbs. It might be the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

Hendrix finds a spot a block down, and we walk to the house arm-in-arm, bundled against the cold. It’s time to make merry with the team and celebrate Christmas, Titans’ style.

Hendrix got back in the early-morning hours from an away game in Vegas, so he spent today catching up on sleep, doing laundry, and paying bills. That means I haven’t seen him in a day and a half, and it’s felt like a month. I don’t ever want to unlink my arm from his.

Yes, it’s been a whirlwind romance, but there’s nothing flighty about my feelings for Hendrix. They are deeper and more grounded than anything I’ve ever felt for another human, except for my father.

I feel it in return. Hendrix is a man who isn’t afraid to be open about his emotions, and he’ll say what’s on his mind.

The only problem with us growing closer is that my fear of abandonment sometimes flares. The more I feel for him, the more I know how hurt I’ll be if he leaves me. It’s times like these I have to be logical because deep down in my gut, I know he’s not that type. He’s looking for a solid, committed relationship, and I’m ready to give it to him.

But if a mom can leave her little girl, then...

“... to get your dad a gift.”

“What?” I say, glancing over at Hendrix and realizing I zoned out during my intrusive thoughts.

“Is it appropriate for me to get your dad a gift for Christmas?” He looks at me, and I nod. “I don’t want to overstep.” He takes our arms as we approach the grand porch and grabs my hand. “I don’t

make it weird for him, and I don't expect anything back, but I wanted him a ten-pack of Titans' tickets."

"My dad would love that," I assure him. "And he'll totally be v
out, wondering if he should have gotten you a gift, which he won't. F
good about stuff like that, but if it helps, he really does like you."

Hendrix laughs and squeezes my hand. "That's good enough for m

We trot up the porch and step into Brienne's house. We're ab
live," I minutes late, and the party is in full swing. The first five minutes, w
up with around, my jaw hanging open at the grandeur of the place.
all the chandeliers, high-end art, beautifully carved furniture. Stunning si
magical grace every room, and the trim molding has intricate patterns hand
into the wood.

in arm, At one point, Hendrix actually puts his fingers under my chin to
celebrate my mouth closed.

I laugh and whisper, "Never in my life did I think I'd date a profe
ame in hockey player, and now here I am surrounded by them, in the home of
paying the richest women in the world."

t like a "But your favorite part of all that is dating me, right?" Hendrix ask

"By far," I say with a firm nod.

out my "Good."

ng I've Hendrix and I grab drinks from a bar and check out the food stati
up throughout the house. We decide to eat after we mingle.

out his It's funny, because I know some of the tighter bonds run right dc
lines on which the guys play. Hendrix is on the second line with
onment Macinnis, Liam Nicholson, Darius Cermak, and Camden Poe, and tha
'll be if he usually pals around with in off-hours.

lown in But tonight, we seem to be congregated around the female bonds
mitted team.

I've been invited in and made one of them. Brienne hosted us al
owner's box for the game, and there's apparently a monthly lun
together they want me to join with them. I'm standing with Brienne, I
, lost in Tillie, Jenna, and Sophie.

And with these women, so go their men—Drake, Stone, Coen, Ga
unlinks Baden. Three players and two coaches, all the lines blurred as we're g
want to in friendship and Christmas cheer.

"There's the man of the hour," Gage says, and we all turn to see

to give West walking toward us, holding hands with his girlfriend, Ava. I have to meet either of them, although the other ladies clearly know her as the weirdo in for hugs while Coach West shakes hands with everyone.

He's not He reaches us, and Hendrix introduces me. "Coach... this is my girlfriend, Stevie."

Stevie. We shake and he says, "It's great to meet you, Stevie."

Coach West "It's really great to meet you, Coach West."

Coach West "Cannon," he says sternly, then grins. "At least when we're at Crystal parties."

I'm pulled over to the ladies and introduced to Ava, then the men get together and eventually decide to get some food.

Hendrix and I fill our plates, refresh our drinks, and tuck ourselves into a corner with Tillie and Coen.

"We're thinking of coming to your bar after tomorrow's game," Hendrix says.

"Oh, that would be awesome. I'll reserve you a table."

"Tired of the crowd at Mario's," Coen says, and Hendrix nods. "It's great and all. The fans are amazing, but it's also just..."

"Overwhelming," Hendrix supplies. "Sure, if we were single guys wanting to party under the accolades of the masses, Mario's is the place to be."

Coen takes up where Hendrix leaves off. "But since we have Foster's smoking-hot women taking up a hundred percent of our attention, we're not really into that atmosphere at Jerry's. More laid back."

Tillie and I exchange a glance, and she snorts. "You guys are whipped." "I am," Hendrix admits, leaning over and kissing me softly. And my heart melts over his naked admission in front of his teammate. Not that all in baring his feelings.

"Good thing I'm whipped too," I murmur.

"God, you two are sickly sweet," Coen mutters in disgust.

Hendrix shakes his head. "Oh, no you don't, dude. We had to talk endlessly about Tillie when you came back to the team. Suck it up."

"Well," Coen says slyly, hooking his arm around Tillie's shoulder and drawing her in, "you'll be hearing lots more. I've finally convinced Coach West to move to Pittsburgh."

e yet to “What?” I exclaim with delight. “That’s awesome.”

y move I’d talked to Tillie about her long-distance dilemma with Coen, and she’d been causing quite a bit of heartache living apart. It’s hard enough having a relationship with someone who travels so much, but then add on living in a house that’s an hour and a half away.

Tillie’s smile is like sunshine. “I found someone to help me teach my classes, and I’ll coordinate my schedule for the longer road trips to go to Christmas Coudersport.”

“I thought this was inevitable.” Hendrix laughs.

en filter “Fuck, I hoped it was,” Coen says, and my heart trips on Tillie’s plans to. Like Hendrix, Coen lays it out there when it comes to his woman. The difference is that Coen was closed off before, and this is strange behavior for him. I obviously didn’t know Hendrix before we met, but I’ve known him long enough through being with him and talking to his Aunt Rory to know that Tillie’s always been open with his feelings.

After we finish eating, we mingle some more until everyone is crowded together in the grand foyer. While the house is massive, the foyer is the best place to accommodate everyone as the rooms to the left and right have wide entrances. There’s a grand staircase that rises up from the foyer and divides into the left and right in sweeping arcs. Once everyone is gathered in the place to Brienne Norcross walks up about five steps so everyone can see her.

She turns, clasps her hands, and beams a smile. “Our first Christmas party.” She looks around, letting that sink in. It’s not the first Christmas party the Norcross family has thrown for the Titans, but she means this Christmas party for this brand-new group. “I have to be honest... when I stepped over this team, I was scared shitless.”

I just... That produces quite a few chuckles. “I didn’t think I had what it took to put this team back together. Adam was the one who knew hockey inside and out. I barely understood what icing was. I knew I had to rely on the ones our father taught both Adam and me, and that was to work hard until the job done.

o listen “But hard work only goes so far if you don’t have good people working with you. So I made sure to surround myself with the best. A lot of the people here and we’re all standing here is because of Callum Derringer and his very smart choices—in all of you—to help build a superb team.”

A huge round of applause erupts, and I lean over to look at the

manager. He lifts an acknowledging hand but looks almost embarrassed and it's Brienne scans the crowd. "Where's Cannon West?"

aving a He's actually standing to the left of Hendrix, so when he raises his right hand, Brienne's attention comes our way, and her eyes glitter with bemusement.

"Now, we didn't have a great start with our first head coach." Manchester laughs because the first coach, Matt Keller, was a hot mess, and pretty much everybody hated him. Hendrix told me Keller made a horrible comment about Jenna's scars, and Gage went apeshit. Keller was fired within months of that happening, and it makes me respect Brienne all the more.

behalf. She continues. "Coach West was the last piece of the puzzle we needed to become a championship team. And I think our record this season speaks for itself. We have twenty-three wins, eight losses, and fifty-three points, which is second in our division, and only three points separates us from first." Now his approval reverberates through the foyer, and Brienne grins as she rubs her hands to quiet down.

alled to "Just one more thing... I want to use this gathering to announce our first goal, which is that I have formed the Adam Norcross Charitable Foundation, and its first goal will be to aid dependents of professional athletes who have either died or become incapacitated and can't play anymore. This is a global charity that will cover all professional and semiprofessional sports. We're all together because of how the plane crash left widows and children behind. It's incredibly hard... the struggle to figure out how to navigate life alone when a family member is ripped away. I want to take a moment to introduce Danica, the first whose husband Mitch was our second-line left-winger and was on the plane I took. Danica, come up here."

My head whips to look at Hendrix. He's on the second line now and makes a sound when the plane went down. He stares at me, eyes dark with sorrow, and whispers, "He was a good man. They have a son, Travis."

ie thing "Oh no. Poor kid."

you get "Yeah," he murmurs, eyes going back to Brienne. "I'll introduce Danica. You'll really like her."

working My arm slips around his waist as we watch a petite young woman with long brown hair walk up the stairs to stand beside Brienne. She looks like my husband ten months ago, and I can't even begin to imagine her pain.

smiles confidently at the crowd.

general Brienne slips her arm around Danica's waist. She reciprocates, and

d. clear they're good friends. "So, Danica and I are in a small support group formed for those who lost loved ones on the plane. I watched her struggle with her hand, after Mitch died, not just with her own grief and that of her son, Trae, but how to go on as a single mom without a source of income. And she's just another example of the many women—and men, because there are plenty of male athletes—who have to pick up the pieces and figure out how to navigate life after loss. I'm proud to announce that Danica will be the namesake of this new charity named after my brother."

There's applause, subdued due to the nature of the announcement. You can feel the emotion in the room.

"I would love for each of the players who have not met Danica to reintroduce yourself. You're going to see a lot of her as I'll be throwing a ton of weight into helping raise money whether you like it or not. A roar of smiles, and someone from the back yells, "We like it!"

"Okay, everyone," Brienne says to the crowd. "Eat more food, drink responsibly, and leave your keys at the door if you're drinking. I'll call Uber, and you can pick up your cars tomorrow. Thank you all for Mitch's death tonight."

Brienne and Danica walk down the stairs, and the crowd disperses. Someone calls out, "Wait up."

I recognize Stone's voice, and next thing I know, he's trotting up the stairs so everyone can see him. I glance over at Harlow, easy to spot because of her bright red hair. She looks utterly confused to see him up there. But I know what he's doing. I've been waiting for it.

"You all know I used to be a grumpy son of a bitch and didn't particularly care for any of you." Everyone laughs at the jab he takes at himself, and I've gotten to know Stone through Harlow the last several months, and I know it, but according to Harlow, he had a massive chip on his shoulder when he came to the team. "But there was this sexy redhead who lives in the room across the hall from me who gradually coaxed me out of my shell. He is Harlow, and you all know her. You also know that I love her to the core of my soul."

Stone reaches into his pocket, and before he can even pull out the box, everyone is chattering with exclamations of delight and surprise.

Hendrix leans down and whispers, "Did you know this was happening?" My gaze pins on Harlow, her mouth wide open in shock. "Sort of."

t group he was going to do it soon, but not exactly when or how. Look at
struggle think her eyes might bug out of her head.”

vis, but “Harlow,” Stone says, and I turn my attention back to him. In his
just one the black velvet box is open and the diamond ring twinkles. “I’ve been
professional to think how to do this for longer than you would believe. I finally decided
how to do it here... in front of my teammates, not because we play hockey to
director but because they’re part of my family. They’re part of your family
want them to share in my joy as I ask you to marry me and be my wife
ent, but my Christmas dreams come true, Harlow, and say yes.”

Stone lopes down the steps, and the crowd parts so there’s
niche between him and Harlow. He takes her hand, dropping to one knee
the full sparkle in Harlow’s eyes, and mine sting in response.

it.” She Hendrix’s arm comes around my waist, and he squeezes.

Stone slides the ring onto Harlow’s finger without receiving a
lick more answer. She barely looks at the ring, instead jerking him up with her hand
you on his shirt collar and slamming her mouth to his.

coming “I take it that’s a yes.” Hendrix chuckles.

Stone picks Harlow up and spins her around, his face buried in her
s when If there’s a single person in this house not swooning right now, the
must be made of Pennsylvania coal.

up the For the next hour, Hendrix and I separate. I go immediately to Harlow
to locate see the ring up close, along with most of the other females in the hall
to there. meet Danica and more of the players, and then I end up in a discussion

Callum Derringer about my bar. He’d heard about it and wants to come
particularly it out. Apparently, a little-known fact about him is that his dad was a
self. I’ve and Callum owns a Harley. We made loose plans for him to come
and never meet my dad and maybe go on a ride together.

holder I’m looking around for Hendrix, but he finds me first. His hand
rested just my hips, and he presses into my back and puts his mouth near my ear
to name something to show you.”

to depths “What?” I ask, but he has my hand and pulls me down a hallway
music room. A handful of guests mingle about.

the ring In the corner sits a beautiful ebony piano, and Hendrix leads me there.
He draws both of us down onto the bench seat and angles us toward
“What?” other.

I knew I cock an eyebrow at him. “What are you doing? I know you do

her... Ipiano, and you know I don't as we've already had the 'do you pl
musical instruments' conversation."

s hand, Hendrix grins and points upward. Hanging from a chandelier righ
n tryingour heads is a sprig of mistletoe bound with red velvet ribbon. "Thou
ided tocould make out."

ogether I laugh and give him a playful push, but he grabs my wrists and p
s, and Ito him. His lips are featherlight, a mere brush before pulling slightly t
e. Makewas thinking..."

"That's good, because my brain is mush when you kiss me."

no one Hendrix laughs. "I was thinking of staying here Christmas E
: Tearsheading home the morning of Christmas Day. But I didn't want to
you'd want me to stay with you. So I thought—"

"Yes!" I exclaim, leaning in and kissing him back. I have to
formalChristmas Day, so Hendrix planned to go home Christmas Eve since
ands ata long drive, but I like this idea a lot better. "I'm cooking dinner for
my dad, and I'd love for you to be there."

Hendrix grins and kisses me hard. "It's a date, then."

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piano, and you know I don't as we've already had the 'do you play any musical instruments' conversation."

Hendrix grins and points upward. Hanging from a chandelier right above our heads is a sprig of mistletoe bound with red velvet ribbon. "Thought we could make out."

I laugh and give him a playful push, but he grabs my wrists and pulls me to him. His lips are featherlight, a mere brush before pulling slightly back. "I was thinking..."

"That's good, because my brain is mush when you kiss me."

Hendrix laughs. "I was thinking of staying here Christmas Eve and heading home the morning of Christmas Day. But I didn't want to assume you'd want me to stay with you. So I thought—"

"Yes!" I exclaim, leaning in and kissing him back. I have to work Christmas Day, so Hendrix planned to go home Christmas Eve since it's not a long drive, but I like this idea a lot better. "I'm cooking dinner for me and my dad, and I'd love for you to be there."

Hendrix grins and kisses me hard. "It's a date, then."

CHAPTER 21

Hendrix

STEVIE LEANS AGAINST the door, smiling at me in a way that has me want to pounce on her. Her dad just left after a nice Christmas Eve meal. Simple—ham, au gratin potatoes, and a green bean casserole that I paid for because I fucking hate green beans.

Dessert more than made up for it as Stevie made a German chocolate cake, done solely for my benefit because she knows it's my favorite mentioned in passing during our first date, and she remembered. It's delicious, and my belly is full.

So is my heart.

Being able to spend Christmas Eve with her is special in a way that I don't fully understand. My family was gracious when I told them I would be in tonight, but they weren't surprised. I've been keeping them in the loop, and they're all coming to a game in mid-January so they can meet me.

"I think it's safe to say your present to my dad was a hit," Stevie says as she pushes off the door.

"Yeah... his grunt and chin lift hit me right here," I say, thumping my chest with my fist.

Stevie bursts out laughing because he did a little more than that. It's a little effusive, but he was shocked, and when he said, "Thank you," I could tell he truly meant it.

But then he said, "Don't expect anything from me. I don't give presents to anyone except Stevie."

"Duly noted," I replied.

I swoop in on her, wrap my arms around her waist, and ask, "Can we exchange our gifts now?"

"We were supposed to get gifts for each other?"

I lean in for a hard kiss. "Smart-ass. You saw me put one under the tree for you when I got here."

“Doesn’t mean I got you one,” she replies tartly.

“I already snooped. There’s something under the tree with my name on it.” I release my hold and push her toward the kitchen. “Get the egg nog, get the bourbon.”

We mix drinks and Stevie sprinkles nutmeg on top. She puts on Christmas music via her Wi-Fi speakers, and Burl Ives sings about a jolly Christmas. Stevie turns off the two lamps in the living room so the only light is from the Christmas tree.

“Sit,” I order her as I place my drink on the coffee table. “I’ll be on hand with the presents.”

By the time I’ve turned back to her, she’s curled up on the end of the couch closest to the tree. She looks magical sitting in the glow of the multicolored lights. Her hair is pulled back except for a few locks that

It was fallen free, and it makes her look fresh and young. Tonight, Stevie’s wearing green leggings printed with tiny candy canes and an off-the-shoulder sweater. With a pair of white fuzzy socks on her feet, she looks comfortable, like she might be ready to read a book or perhaps join in a deep discussion.

Stevie She looks fuckable, too, but that’s actually not at the top of my mind right now. I just want to be in this Christmas space with her.

I pull out the two presents. The one to me is a box wrapped in white paper, cross-tied with a satin bow. It’s about nine inches long and about six inches wide and light as a feather.

The tag says To Hendrix, From Stevie.

The other gift is mine to her, and I suck at wrapping so she gets it with a Christmas design on it and tape holding the top closed.

I give it to her with a sheepish smile. “Sorry my present isn’t as present as yours.”

“That’s definitely not why I’m screwing you, Hendrix,” she says with a wink.

I bust out laughing and lower myself right beside her on the couch, turning the red box over in my hands. I shake it but hear nothing.

Setting it on my lap, I nod toward her gift bag. “You first.”

“Okay,” she says gleefully and rips into the tape. I watch her expectantly as she pulls out two velvet jewelry boxes.

I tap the slightly smaller box. “Open that one first.”

“Is it the best?” she asks, her eyes sparkling with mischief.

“It’s the most expensive,” I assure her.

“You don’t have to spend—”

I lean over and kiss her to shut her up. “I’ll buy you whatever the classic want, so zip it, woman.”

Stevie gives me a chastising look but flips open the box. She gasps, her hand covering her mouth. “Hendrix... those are... magnificent.”

They really are. Diamond stud earrings, a little more than a carat each. Her eyes drift from the box to me, her hand going to my cheek. “I know what to say.”

“Thank you is sufficient.”

She leans over and kisses me softly. “Thank you,” she breathes into my ear. “You treat me far too good.”

I take the box from her and nod to the other. “Open that one. It’s the best.”

While the diamonds are gorgeous and clearly indicate I’m serious, they don’t have the personal touch I wanted.

Stevie lifts the lid, and her face splits in a wide grin. “Oh my God, look at that,” she exclaims, pulling from the velvet a new charm to wear on the necklace I gave her with the nine-ball pendant.

She holds it up to examine—it’s a small hockey puck, no bigger than a dime, and a friend of a friend painted the Titans’ logo on it. “To wear with your nine ball.”

“Here... hold it,” she says as she thrusts the charm at me. She turns her back and unlatches the necklace that I’ve never seen her without since the day I gave it to her.

I hand the charm back, and she threads the silver links through the charm. When she puts it back on, she lifts it out to see the nine ball and the charm together.

“It’s us,” she murmurs. Her eyes lift to mine, shining with some emotion, can’t quite name, but it seems like something big has shifted between us. “I love it so much.”

“Maybe that can be our nicknames, the way you and your dad are called Carrots. We’ll be Nine Ball and Puck.”

Stevie laughs and then picks up the present on my lap, pushing it into my hand. “Open yours,” she says.

Smiling, I start to pull at the ribbon.

“It’s not expensive or anything,” she advises.

My gaze lifts, and I cock an eyebrow at her. “Yeah... well aware that I don’t make the type of money I do. Don’t need to point it out.”

“Sorry,” she mutters with a lopsided grin. “It’s just... those earrings.” Chuckling, I turn my attention back to the box. Doesn’t feel like anything in it at all.

More than intrigued, I give up trying to savor the experience and I don’t touch the paper. Unveiled is a white box and when I lift the lid, I frown at the folded paper inside.

I lift my head, eyebrows drawn inward as I look at Stevie. “You get into my piece of paper.”

Her eyes twinkle with amusement, and her lips curve upward. “It’s the any piece of paper.” She nods back down at it.

Removing it from the box, I unfold it and at first only see a bunch of words written in neat cursive in blue ink. But then I see my name among the words, see the date at the top—December 2—and I realize it’s her journal entry after our very first date.

I’ve seen her journal sitting in various places around her house—leaves it where she’s done her writing, and I’ve never once touched it. She teased her plenty about reading it, but teasing is all it’s been.

That journal is more than just her keeping her thoughts memorializing good and bad times. It’s an accounting of her life. We reach our deepest, innermost thoughts, all of which are entitled to privacy.

But here in my hand... it’s her private thoughts after our first date, written then without any intention of ever showing another human being. I realize what a gift this is.

I’m getting Stevie laid bare before me.

My eyes bore into hers. “You sure?”

Stevie snuggles into the corner of the couch, pulling her legs in close to her. “I’m sure.”

I tune her out and concentrate on what she had to say.

re Peas

December 2: I just had the most incredible date with a guy who is as well, he’s not real. He just can’t be. No man on this earth can be as hot as he is and not be completely unaware of it. Hendrix didn’t

the women looking at him as we walked through the restaurant or
way the waitress kept flirting. He didn't see it because he was look
at me. Absolutely focused on me. It was our first date. He had no i
if I was even interesting. And he sure as hell didn't know if I
going to put out—

My head jerks up, and I grin at her. "Oh, you totally would have pu
your dad hadn't been there."

She smiles, and my attention goes back to the journal entry.

—but when he committed to taking me out on a date, he commi
to me. A woman he knew nothing about, but from the start, he wa
it 100%. He'll never know what that means to me. I'm not talk
about as a woman, because yes, it's nice he focused on me
ignored the legions of adoring women.

I can't help but snort. She's embellishing, but I understand wha
saying.

*I learned things about him tonight that will have me pining to
where this goes. Hendrix does nothing in half measures. When
wants something, he goes for it. He understands the value
perseverance in the face of the unknown with the hope of good thi
on the other side. It's that optimism that charmed me. That look in
eyes—candlelight flickering in his irises over dinner—ensnared
I've known this man for one day, and my secret is that I've alre
started falling so hard for him that I think I'll be destroyed if
doesn't go the distance. He's the first man I've ever met who I beli
I could give my entire heart to. Hendrix is a man built for a woma
love for eternity.*

Her words end, and my entire body buzzes with awareness. Stevie
still, her knee touching my thigh as my eyes run back through the l
lines.

*He's the first man I've ever met who I believe I could give
entire heart to. Hendrix is a man built for a woman to love
eternity.*

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Ever so slowly, my eyes slide from the journal page to Stevie watching me intently.

“You knew,” I say, dumbfounded that she could see so far into the especially after she’d been so difficult to agree to go out with me.

She nods. “Yeah... I knew after that first dinner.”

it out if I toss the journal page onto the table and pull Stevie into my arms go around my neck, and mine loop around her waist to hold her me. “I thought it took a while for me to grow on you.”

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Her laugh is gentle and tinkles with amusement. “Well, it was dinner. I think we were there for a little over two hours.”

“And has it all come to fruition?” I ask tentatively.

“Yeah,” she whispers, leaning her face closer. “You’re an incredible person to love, Hendrix. It all played out just how I thought it would.”

at she’s Christ... I can’t even describe the sensations warring within me over hearing that. The elation is so intense, I feel like my heart is about to explode out of my chest. At the same time, a blanket of peace settles over me like something has “clicked” into place. Like perhaps something important was missing, and now that hole has been filled.

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My hands go to Stevie’s face, and I stare her in the eye. “Okay... it’s a big deal. I’ve never done this before, and I don’t want to mess it up.”

Her hands circle my wrists. “You won’t.”

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I kiss her, slow and deep, savoring the taste of her. When I open my eyes I find hers swimming with stormy emotion. “I love you, Stevie. You’re my first, and you’ll be my last.”

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Her forehead tips forward and rests against mine. “You’re my first and my only.”

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I turn my head, bring my mouth to hers. While exchanging these kisses makes my chest swell with the most indescribable feeling, something new is swelling now, and the need to be inside her is almost panic-inducing.

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Like if I don’t join with her right this very moment, the words we’ve exchanged won’t be sealed.

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for

I slide a hand up the back of her sweater, palming the soft skin on her back. Pulling from the depth of the kiss so my lips hover against her neck, I suggest, “How about you put those diamond earrings on and take off your clothes so I can see them sparkle while I fuck you?”

who is I feel the smile on her mouth against mine, and she laughs. “Really
“I never joke about fucking you,” I say seriously and lift her from
couch to head toward her bedroom.

future, “The earrings,” she says, reaching an arm out.

“Fuck the earrings. I’ll have you model them for me next round.”

Stevie giggles, and it’s music to my ears. With Dolly Parton
ap. Her “Winter Wonderland” in the background, I make love to Stevie. I
snug to making love just because we said the words. Both of us already felt
there’s a languid quality to it, no rush to orgasm.

a long Without doubt, this feels more profound, a richer experience. I thrust
her slowly, and she undulates beneath my body.

Supporting myself on one elbow, I take her hand and entwine my
ly easy with hers. Pressing our hands into the mattress above her head, I bend
to rub my nose along hers.

my body When I lift my head, I find Stevie staring at me with such ferocity
bout to actually sparks the beginning of my orgasm. I rock into her, grind
ver me, pelvis downward, and Stevie’s legs circle my hips.

my life I can tell by her hitched breathing that she’s on the edge, and her
flutter closed.

this is a “Hey... Nine Ball,” I growl as I press very deep into her. “Let
those pretty eyes.”

They pop open, bleary with passion, and I can tell she’s lost. Wide
ly eyes, but not with me.

I’m my The slow boil intensifies as we stare at each other.

“Hendrix,” she whispers, and her body stiffens for a moment before
first too, cries out. “Oh, fuck... I’m coming.”

Jesus, I hadn’t realized how close I actually was, but those words
e words my body needs and I let go, driving in deep. I gather her close, pump
; else is against her, and ride the wave of euphoria until we’re both depleted.

I collapse onto Stevie’s body, my pulse hammering so hard I feel like
we just run a marathon, despite that being about the slowest, most languid fuck
life. That tells me most of the strain to my heart wasn’t physical
of her emotional.

hers, I Stevie turns and brushes her lips against my jaw, and her fingers
all your through my hair. “You alive?”

“Barely.”

“?” “That was intense,” she murmurs.
“Yeah.” I roll off her to my back and then pull her onto my chest.
She snuggles in and sighs with contentment. “Best Christmas eve
says sleepily.
I tighten my hold on her. “Agreed. Best Christmas ever.”
I know I won’t forget it for as long as I live.
You never forget the first time you fall in love.
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“That was intense,” she murmurs.

“Yeah.” I roll off her to my back and then pull her onto my chest.

She snuggles in and sighs with contentment. “Best Christmas ever,” she says sleepily.

I tighten my hold on her. “Agreed. Best Christmas ever.”

I know I won’t forget it for as long as I live.

You never forget the first time you fall in love.

CHAPTER 22

Stevie

I OFTEN WONDER if my house were burning down, would the smell of smoke wake me up? I hope never to find out, but the aroma of bacon absolutely brings me out of slumber.

Rolling over to find Hendrix gone, I'm lucid enough to piece together what must be cooking breakfast.

I exit the bed and drag his T-shirt from the floor and over my head. Because the floor in this old house can be chilly, I pull on a pair of socks. I use the restroom, brush my teeth, and pad toward the kitchen.

As I come out of the hallway, the sight of him at my stove makes my heart trip. Not because he's only in his boxer briefs or that ninety percent of his fabulous body is on display, but because he's an integral part of my life now. Standing there cooking us Christmas breakfast, he looks like he belongs.

I finger the diamond earrings in my lobes. After our first round of lovemaking, Hendrix insisted I put on the earrings and then he settled back in front of the Christmas tree. He made me ride him so he could see the diamonds sparkle. God, I love his weirdness, but also, it was hot.

Moving up behind him, I say, "Merry Christmas."

I press into his back, my hands at his waist, and rest my cheek against his warm skin between his shoulder blades.

Hendrix turns, moves us away from the stove, and wraps me in a blanket. "Good morning." His mouth comes down on mine for a gentle kiss. When he pulls back, his eyes are teasing. "Did you tell me you loved me last night or was I dreaming?"

"Not a dream," I assure him. "I do, in fact, love you."

Grinning, he kisses me again. His palm cups my ass, and he gives it a squeeze. "I love you, too, and I would love you more if you cooked things that I'm decent at bacon, but my eggs tend to be inedible."

“Oh, I know.” I laugh as I pull free of his embrace. “Now that we’ve laid out our feelings, I think I can be honest with you when I say I should be the primary cook in this relationship.”

Hendrix slaps me on the ass with a smile as I move to the stove and flip over the bacon. It still has a few minutes to go.

Hendrix makes me a cup of coffee with the perfect amount of cream and sugar. He hands it over and leans a hip against the counter. “I need to get on the interstate road as soon as we eat.”

I sip my coffee, moan slightly over how good it is, and put the cup down so I can flip bacon. “I know. I hate it, but I know.”

“But then I’ll be back for the home game Saturday and won’t have time to cook for six days, so we’ll do lots of shacking up then.”

I laugh and move to the cupboard for a plate. I layer paper towels over the preparation for the bacon, to soak up the grease.

Hendrix’s phone is on the counter nearest me, and it dings with an incoming text. I grab and hand it over to him and move back to the stove. He doesn’t spare it a glance but crosses his arms while holding it.

“So, I was thinking,” he says tentatively, his tone pulling my attention. “Would you mind if I moved some clothes and stuff here?”

Whoa... that’s big. I turn to face him, tongs in hand. “You’d want to move here rather than me bringing stuff to your place? Your place is so much nicer.”

His phone chimes again with an incoming text, but it’s ignored. “I know about that.” Hendrix looks around my house with a soft smile. “It’s a home. It’s cozy and lived in.”

“It was built in 1969 and has paneled walls,” I reply dryly. “And drafty floors.”

Three successive dings hit Hendrix’s phone, and it’s enough to distract him from his gaze away from me.

I unload the bacon from the pan onto the paper towel-lined plate. “I can answer your question, of course I don’t mind you leaving stuff here. I’ll spend every night with you when you’re in town, but I’ll happily go home to my place if you’d rather. As long as we’re together, and I just realized we’re moving fast. Throw a few *I love you*’s around, and we’re practically moving in together.”

I laugh but he doesn’t laugh back, and I turn to face him, realizing

I've laid been quiet while I've been chattering. "What's wrong?"

He be the His gaze is still pinned on his phone, but he asks in a cold voice, "I know Carmine Betta?"

and take My blood turns to ice, and fear wells inside me.

"I can see that you do," he grits out as his gaze lifts to mine.

I am and "It's not what you think," I blurt out, throwing the tongs on the counter and turning off the stove. I don't even know what he's looking at, but his glacial stare and the flat set to his mouth tells me it's not good.

I p down "Oh really," he drawls sarcastically. "Because I think you talk like a reporter by that name who's written a very long article about the Titans."

I e a road He turns the phone my way, and I can see the title, *Insider Says Woes Are Pervasive*.

I wels in "No, Hendrix," I exclaim as his head dips to read more of the article. "I didn't."

I vith an "You did, Stevie," he grits out as his eyes race over the words. "You can't get this information in here only you know."

"What?" My head spins. I told that reporter nothing—except maybe I blabbed about Stone and Harlow. But that's moot. They're engaged.

Hendrix's phone rings, and he answers it. After listening a moment, he says, "Yeah... I just read it."

I o much I'm stunned to inaction and can only helplessly take in the disarray.

Hendrix's expression when his eyes meet mine. He sighs after listening to whomever is on the other end of the line. "I don't know. I'll call you later."

'This is He hangs up and walks back to my bedroom. I use the opportunity to pick up my iPad in the living room, pulling up Chrome and googling the article. My stomach churns as I start to read:

I brag his *As most sports fanatics know, the Pittsburgh Titans hockey team was obliterated in a devastating plane crash earlier this year. What you might not know is the lengths the team, and owner Brienne Norcross, will undertake to keep the organization flush with cash. Players who weren't on the plane when it went down, dubbed "The Lucky Three," are spiraling out of control—car crashes, punching fans in bars, and one player even leading his girlfriend on, only to dump her and hook up with a stranger within hours. I've got all the dirty details of the Titans' imminent demise below.*

...no,” Isister. You told me about all those horrible things your mom did to you. I know how hurt you were when the trust was broken. I know she’s been processing you for months, and I actually was pained when you figured it out. I know what?”

Tears pool in my eyes, and I can only shake my head.

“You’re only looking out for yourself.”

“That’s not true,” I insist.

“If it wasn’t true, you’d have never gone to meet a reporter. There was a betrayal... just making that decision to go. So anything you means nothing to me, Stevie. Absolutely nothing. And all your talk of me... God, I’m a fucking idiot for believing it. I feel sorry for you because you don’t know how to love. Like mother, like daughter.”

If he’d slapped me in the face, it couldn’t have hurt more. I stumbled the force of his words sapping every bit of my energy.

Hendrix turns for the door. I’m numb, physically weak, but I manage to say, “You said you loved me. You told me what we have is special and we had to hold tight to it.”

It means nothing to him. Hendrix walks out, shutting the door behind him, and I feel like my world has ended.

I don’t know how long I stand there in complete shock, but eventually, I drop onto the couch. I stare at the tree for what seems like an eternity, eventually, I pick up the iPad.

I attempt to read the article, but it’s so painful. It’s filled with stories, yes, other people might know, but also facts only I’d know. I start a several times, interrupted by bouts of tears that obscure my vision when I try to breathe through the pain seizing my chest.

The worst are the pieces about Hendrix... intimate details about his death, Rachel’s death and how being the pallbearer for his best friend’s funeral was one of the hardest things he’s ever done.

I lean back on the couch and stare at the ceiling, trying to will a flood of tears away.

How in the hell did Betta get that information when I didn’t...

Bolting straight up, I’m hit with the truth of how this came to be. I jump off the couch and run to my bedroom.

I make a beeline for the tall dresser where I laid my journal just two days ago. I’d written in it the morning after the Titans’ Christmas party and

u, and I lines before I darted off to work. I'd already pulled the page out to n using Hendrix the day before and had even wrapped it and put it under the tr
But you But no... the journal's gone.

That's where I left it, right?

It's what I remember—I was sitting in bed. Hendrix had already the arena. The journal was on my bedside table, and I wrote a few line I got up and set it on the dresser.

at right Just to make sure, I tear my house apart. I yank open drawers, you say pull back bedcovers. I look under my bathroom sink, behind furniture I loving all my kitchen cupboards.

because When realization sets in that it's truly gone, the next logical concl that someone stole it—and there's only one person it could be.

le back, My mother.

She knows where my spare key is and she took it, gave it to C nage to Betta, and he wrote that article using all the private words I'd recorded and that diary.

He pulled out information to use against the Titans in a salacious quietly without my permission.

And oh God... all the personal details I'd put in there not only ab tually I feelings for Hendrix but embarrassing information about our sex I ity, and written a lot about the things he did to me, and my face flames w realization someone has read that stuff.

uff that A snarl rips free of my throat as I locate my phone. I call Hendrix : nd stop tell him what happened.

ile I try He answers on the second ring, but before I can say a word, h "Don't contact me again."

is sister I'm stunned when the line goes dead. I start to call him back b ral was decide against it. He's so mad right now, I need to let him cool off. In send him a text that simply says, *I'm so sorry. It wasn't me, but I'll ex sh bout you call me back. I love you.*

I know he's driving, but he has talk-to-text. Maybe he'll mess back, but I can't waste time gazing at my screen. I hurry and dress, s I push moment to throw fish food in Shenanigan's bowl. "Merry Christmas, b

As I'm headed for the door, my phone dings, and I pull it out vo days pocket. It's from Hendrix. *I don't want an explanation. It won't matt d a few minute you met with a reporter was the minute our relationship was d*

gift to *I won't ever move past that, so please leave me alone.*

ee. Agony swells and rolls through me in a debilitating wave. Is he serious? He won't even let me tell him the entire story?

But on the flip side, he has a point. I did know when I walked into the coffee shop that I was choosing loyalty to my mom over Hendrix. Even then my staunch position I was only going to listen to what the reporter had merely meeting with him was an absolute stab in Hendrix's back.

He has every right to cut me out and not want to hear a damn word, and in because there is no true excuse.

My feet are leaden as I grab my coat and head out the door. It's a serious matter as far as Hendrix is concerned, but I need to have my mom talk to me in the face and tell me why she did it. I also want my journal back.

The drive to the house my mom shares with Randy takes no time. There's hardly anyone out as most are tucked away celebrating Christmas with their loved ones.

Another intense jab of pain hits me square in the chest that I'll never share with Hendrix. He's on his way to his parents' house, where I'm sure he will relay to them how awful I am. They'll hate me the way he does.

I pull into the driveway and see my mom's car, but not Randy's. My heart is on a low simmer as I make my way up the porch steps and knock on the door.

I wait, and no one comes.

so I can I knock more. Then I bang on it.

There's no sound from inside, and the curtains on the front window are closed.

"You looking for Mandi?" a voice calls out.

Turning, I see an elderly woman walking a tiny dog dressed in a Christmas sweater. I trot down the steps. "Yeah... I am. Do you know where she is?"

"St. Lucia," the woman says. "Left yesterday. Apparently came into town with money and was all excited about taking an impromptu trip to a nearby island."

It's just one punch after another, and I actually bend over slightly from stomach twists. "She came into money?" I ask in disbelief.

The old woman shrugs. "Said it was an inheritance. Ten thousand dollars. Personally, I told her she should put it in savings, but she said she needed it."

romantic getaway with her honey.”

“Oh God,” I mutter, turning away from the woman as I realize even my mom told me about being in trouble was probably a lie. Or more to that wasn’t a lie, and she has no intention of returning from St. Lucia. Even with money laundering thugs would search for her there.

“You okay?” the woman calls to me as I walk like a zombie to my room. Am I okay? I don’t know because right now, I’m just... nothing. Everything in my life has been blown apart. I woke up this morning with such joy and hope driving my every step. And now I’ve been used, and doesn’t stand worst of all, abandoned.

Not by my mother—that I cannot be shocked by.

But Hendrix left me. When the going got tough, the man who I relied on at all would work himself to exhaustion to accomplish something left with a backward glance. He cut me out of his life so swiftly, I can’t believe how much of a hardship for him. The pain is so bad, I attempt to stuff it away. I never have to tell myself over and over again I’m better off without him.

I get in my car, crank it, and put it in drive. My eyes are dry as I stare aimlessly through the mostly abandoned streets until I find myself in my father’s house.

I’m not halfway up the steps before the door opens. He takes one look at my face and without knowing a single fact, somehow he knows the story. He meets me at the door, pulling me into his arms. “I’m either your mother or Hendrix. Which is it?”

“Neither,” I murmur, because truthfully, I’ve somehow managed to keep the pain so deep just so I can breathe, I can’t even find the energy to talk about it.

“Come on inside,” he says, arm around my shoulders. “I’ll make you breakfast and you can tell me all about it.”

“Not right now.”

My dad’s arm falls away, the concern in his expression increasing. I never refuse to talk about my feelings with him.

“I’m tired. Mind if I lie down for a bit?”

“Of course not,” he says, looking very unsure of himself.

“Wake me up in an hour. I have to go open the bar.”

“Carrots,” he says gently. “You don’t have to open the bar. Take a nap. If you want to sleep and be left alone, I’ve got you.”

I shake my head. “No... I just need a bit of time alone. But I want
rythingthe bar. There will be people expecting it, and I don’t want to let
aybe itdown.”

I doubt He studies me a moment, and I can almost see him warring with v
to let me be a grown woman who makes her own decisions or to lock
car. my bedroom and force me to stay here.

blank. Finally, he lifts his chin toward the staircase. At the top and to th
ig withmy childhood bedroom. “I’ll come get you in an hour.”

vilified, “Thanks, Peas,” I say with a half-smile and turn away from my
trudge up the stairs, away from the worry in his eyes.

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I shake my head. “No... I just need a bit of time alone. But I want to open the bar. There will be people expecting it, and I don’t want to let anyone down.”

He studies me a moment, and I can almost see him warring with whether to let me be a grown woman who makes her own decisions or to lock me in my bedroom and force me to stay here.

Finally, he lifts his chin toward the staircase. At the top and to the left is my childhood bedroom. “I’ll come get you in an hour.”

“Thanks, Peas,” I say with a half-smile and turn away from my dad to trudge up the stairs, away from the worry in his eyes.

CHAPTER 23

Hendrix

SITTING AT MY parents' kitchen counter in the gloomy predawn hour, I reread the article again. I don't read it because I've nearly memorized it; it came out yesterday morning.

Instead, I go down to the comments and reverse filter them to the most recent.

It should be a balm reading them because almost universally, the fuckers have pissed. The reporter, Carmine Betta, has been called out for trying to sensationalize individuals who have been traumatized by the crack epidemic, and for hurting the very people busting their asses for this city.

But some of those commenters, while in the course of defending the cops named in the article, have called for Stevie's head.

Well, not hers specifically, but for whoever the "source" is, which has not been revealed. She wasn't named in the article, and Carmine merely referred to her as "an unimpeachable source." He didn't even identify if it was a man or woman who gave him the information, but obviously, I know.

There have been a slew of follow-up articles and even local news reports commenting on it, wondering who was so deep in the organization that she could give up that level of information. I know if word ever got out that it was Stevie, she'd be retaliated against. I'm sure her bar would be vanishing, and possibly her customers driven off over the furor this has caused.

As angry as I was... am... I don't want that to happen to her. I don't want anything other than to forget about Stevie.

Christ... I rub at my breastbone and figure I must be having a heart attack. That shit hurts, but admittedly only when I think about her.

"You're up early," my mom says as she enters. She doesn't turn on the overhead light but rather flips on the one over the stove to illuminate the coffee pot right next to it.

"Couldn't sleep." I shut off my screen and set my phone down. "V

you up so early?"

"Because you couldn't sleep," she says, smiling over her shoulder.

I can't help but smile in return. She's one of those moms who when her kid is in pain. I watched her grieve Rachel's death, which ultimate horror for a parent, but I also know it hurts her when I hurt.

I had no choice but to tell my mom, dad, and Rory what happened. Parents don't know Stevie other than what I've told them. They were pull up quiet on the subject, only giving me their support and assurances since it feelings were valid.

Rory wasn't quite as nice. She refused to believe Stevie gave up information, and we got into an argument.

"You had one lousy breakfast with her, and suddenly you know he fans are moral compass?" I groused.

"I'm a good judge of character," she said.

"She admitted to me that she met with the reporter. Wake up, F sh and snapped.

anyone Her eyes flashed with the fires of hell, and she pointed a finger

"Don't you talk to me like that, Hendrix Bateman. I get you're upset, 1 hasn't doesn't give you the right to invalidate my opinion."

referred Duly chastised, I apologized, but I refused to engage in s a man discussion.

anchors It's been an absolute shit show since I got that first text from yesterday morning when he sent me the article. The rest of the team at they texting and then Coen called me. As team captain, he wanted to fig t it was what was going on and keep us united. I didn't tell him anything that f dalized, as I was busy packing my shit to get the hell away from Stevie, but him back in the car.

Truly, I I told him the truth, that Stevie was the source, and Coen was s

"You're kidding?"

a heart That's been the response from a lot of the players. Well, at least t who have met her. Like Rory, they're having a hard time believing it.

on the Bain, in particular, told me via text, *Not Stevie. No way.*

late the I got a lot of that too.

My standard response: *She admitted talking to the reporter.*

Why are I threw her further under the bus because I didn't tell anyone that s

denied giving up that information. I think I want everyone to be as mad at me as I am so I can ignore my guilt over not letting her explain.

knows It's silent as my mom brews coffee and slides a cup before me. "Is she going to head back?"

"Yeah... got a lot of stuff to do."

ed. My She takes the seat next to me, her coffee sitting before her. "Will you be pretty Stevie when you return?"

hat my My eyebrows draw in so fast, I'm surprised they don't fuse. "Why do I do that?"

all that She shrugs. "I don't know. Maybe to hear what she has to say. You're not interested at all?"

r entire "Nope," I reply.

Well, maybe I'm a little interested.

Interested to know how I had so badly misjudged her. How I can capture my heart and then destroy it just as quickly.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

at me. "I'm sorry this happened to you, honey," she says, reaching over to touch my shoulder. "I never wanted you to have a broken heart, but I'm not sure you fell in love."

further "Don't worry about not being sorry," I tell her, leaning over to touch her cheek. "I'm carrying enough regret for both of us."

n Bain In fact, I'm swearing off women.

started Well, not all women. Maybe I'll just stick to the ones who are out-threesomes with no strings attached.

irst call

I called



tunned. I'M ALMOST BACK to Pittsburgh when Stone calls. He texted yesterday to let me know how I was. My reply was short. *Dealing.*

he ones He called last night, and I ignored it. I was absolutely avoiding him. Harlow is such close friends with Stevie, and I didn't want to have to defend her.

But I can't hide from him forever, so now I need to suck it up and deal.

"Hey, man, what's up?"

she also "Just checking in, buddy. Harlow and I are worried about you."

"I'm fine."

d at her There's dead silence.

 "I swear, I'm fine," I repeat.

o. "You Stone sighs. "Then I'm going to have to figure out what the fuck is
with you because no one should be fine after finding out the girl
dating blabbed to a reporter about intimate details."

you see We were more than just dating, but I don't share that with him.
want to intensify his worry.

r would "What do you want me to say?" I ask in a brittle voice. "That I'm
Hurt?"

r're not "All of the above."

 "Okay, fine... yes. All of the above. She fucking betrayed me
didn't see it coming."

 Stone utters a low curse. "I'm really sorry, man. Harlow has been
let herto talk to Stevie, but she won't return her calls."

 "Don't," I say harshly. "Don't get involved. I just... I want to m
and forget this. The Titans' organization and all the players are ur
: to rubsaying 'no comment,' and our media department says it will die dow
ot sorryno one engages."

 That's right... I spent part of my Christmas talking to our media a
kiss heron how best to handle the allegations in the article.

 Some of it was true.

 Some of it had a hint of truth.

o offer Some of it was twisted and looked nothing like the truth.

 The one that bothered me the most wasn't that there was infor
about Rachel and how I felt about her death—because I'm not ashamed
grieved—but rather the misrepresentation of my relationship with Tra
Stevie.

vanting Tracy wasn't named, thank fuck, nor was Stevie, but the picture pr
was that I dumped Tracy because I saw Stevie and wanted to hook u
m since her. It was such a gross distortion of what really happened, and ye
:ar him taintd my memories of that night.

 The question is, did Stevie report what happened accurately a
answer, reporter twisted it, or did she twist it herself to make it juicier?

 "Look, Stone," I say wearily. "Please just tell Harlow to let it go.
to move on, and I'm sure Stevie does too."

 Which I know isn't exactly true. I received several texts from l

night—even after I asked her not to contact me—asking for just five minutes to explain things.

is wrong I haven't responded nor do I intend to do so.

he was "I'll let it go," Stone says, but then warns, "Harlow is a different person. I can't control her, and she's friends with Stevie. She's going to want to talk to me. I don't sure she's okay."

I don't argue because damn it all to hell, I want Stevie to be okay. I'm pissed? much as I despise her, I don't want her hurt. I just want to move on and leave this behind me.

"That's fine, but I don't want to know anything about what happened, and I about. I'm not kidding when I say I'm done with this whole fiasco. I want to concentrate on hockey and get my life back."

is trying "Sounds like a good plan." I hear the truth in his words, and it alleviates some of the residual guilt I've had about not hearing Stevie out. I love on "I'll see you at practice tomorrow."

ited in "Yeah... see you later."

n when As I drive into the city, my mind sifts through the last month, focusing on all the conversations I've had with Stevie. I especially reflect on the conversation the attorney had in bed after orgasms had us mellow and open to each other.

Not a fucking hint that she was playing me.

And what exactly did she get out of it? Was she paid?

Admittedly, she looked stunned when I showed her the article, and her denial was immediate, but then she admitted to meeting with the reporter. Information "Fuck," I curse out loud, tired of being so conflicted.

ed that I I need to move on, exactly like I just told Stone I was ready to do.

acy and When I pull into my garage, I shut off the car and pick up my phone. I flip to the text chain I have with Stevie, which has been completely on my mind since yesterday morning after I stormed out of her house. I count up with messages from her—seven total—and they're all the same.

t it has Begging for five minutes of my time to explain.

It reminds me of how I just wanted ten minutes of her time to talk to me and then she date.

Should I reciprocate or let it go?

I want Without allowing myself to have this conversation in my head, remembering what I told Stone, I type back. *I'm not interested in what you have to say to me.* I hit her last

minutes *I'm moving on. You should too.*

My thumb goes to hit the Send icon but stalls, hovering with indecision. This will make the break.

matter. I It will be clean.

to make It will be final.

It should be an easy decision, as angry as I am.

too. As I close my eyes and focus on the memory of her expression and she showed her the article.

Pure fucking guilt. She knew she'd wronged me.

hey talk I get exactly what I need... another surge of hot fury, and my want to descends on the screen.

There's no doubt in my mind Stevie will see it immediately, and that enough, the pulsing dots indicate she's writing back.

Stevie out. I hold my breath, wondering what she'll throw my way.

I'm not prepared for how short her response is.

Two letters.

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I'm not prepared for how short her response is.

Two letters.

OK.

CHAPTER 24

Stevie

“LOAD IT UP,” my dad says, settling down on the bar stool and nodding at the pizza I just placed there. “Can I get a beer?”

“No,” I say as I pull his preferred condiments out and set them before the pizza along with some napkins. “But you can have some water.”

My dad grunts. “At least a Dr. Pepper.”

“Water,” I insist, turning for the back cooler to grab a bottle. I throw it at him, and he glares at me. I doctor up his pizza just the way he likes it—salt, red pepper flakes, and Texas Pete.

It’s surprising the number of these little pizzas I sell. They’re real big enough to feed one grown man, and they’re dirt cheap for me through a wholesaler, but I can sell them for \$7.50 and they take thirteen minutes to cook. It’s a good profit margin. Not as good as alcohol, but food keeps people drinking, so it’s worth it to offer it on the menu.

Glancing down at the man and woman at the other end—new customers I don’t know but who wandered in for a drink—I lean my forearm on the bar and snag a piece of my dad’s pizza.

He doesn’t say anything and we eat quietly, my eyes sometimes cutting to the TV on the wall beside the pool tables. I normally have it set to a sports event or sports news channel, but I turned on *Men in Black* a bit ago. I have zero interest in sports these days.

“You working New Year’s Eve?” my dad asks.

I drag my eyes from Will Smith’s character trying to get comfortable in his little egg seat to take the MIB test. “Yeah. I’ve got one other bar to go to and that should be enough. I don’t anticipate a huge crowd.”

At least not the sizes that were overwhelming us when the Titar came out here. Those days are over, and it’s back to just my regulars.

“You going to come by?” I ask.

He lifts a shoulder. “These days, I’d much rather lounge in my room for a true crime documentary binge.”

“That does sound heavenly,” I agree with a laugh that actually sounds genuine. Mirth has been hard to come by the last few days, so maybe it shows I’m moving on.

Not like I have a choice. Hendrix told me to leave him alone, so he’s going in all my glory... leaving him alone and finding humor in life just kidding at without him.

The door to the bar opens, and I glance that way. I can’t decide if I’m happy or anxious about seeing Harlow walk in.

She glances around, locates me, and beelines to the bar. Her expression is exactly as I’d imagined it would be—pissed.

Harlow takes the stool next to my dad after giving him a kiss on his cheek, nabs a slice of his pizza, and then turns to glare at me. “I can’t believe you’ve not returned a single call or text. Forcing me to come down here to confront you and eat this swill.”

“Swill? Really? Could you be any more dramatic?” I drawl.

My dad takes offense. “That’s my swill you’re eating.”

“Sorry,” Harlow replies with a bat of her eyelashes. “I’ll pay for the pizza, but then turns back to me. “I’ll have a beer.”

My dad chokes with shock, and my eyes bug out of my head. I request. Harlow is a recovering alcoholic and doesn’t drink at all.

“No fucking way,” I snarl, slapping my hands on the bar before he can say anything. “You’re crazy?”

“I don’t know,” she quips, picking a piece of pepperoni off her slice and popping it in her mouth. She chews thoughtfully, swallows, and then glances at me again. “Am I crazy? You wouldn’t know since you don’t return my calls or texts. What if I was having a crisis?”

“I would have answered,” I mutter, turning to the cooler again to grab a bottle of water. “But you were reaching out about Hendrix, and I don’t want to talk about him.”

Placing the drink before her, I take a bite of my pizza. With my stomach full, I can’t be coerced into vomiting my feelings.

Harlow’s a sneaky one, though, so she turns to my dad. “Okay, but you’ve lied to me up on everything.”

My head whips his way to see if he’ll be a loyal father, but that question

recliner answered when he blabs everything. “Short story is this... her mom
up a horrible sob story about owing ten thousand dollars to some cr
sounds who were going to either rough her up good or kill her if she didn’t p
be that asked Stevie for the money, even though she doesn’t have it. Sho
bruised and bloodied to Stevie’s house one day. Her mom found a
re I am who would pay ten grand for the right story, and Stevie went to see w
st fine meant. She didn’t feel right going, didn’t want to go, but her mom’s l
in danger, so she went. Ultimately, she backed away almost as soon
e if I’m met the guy. Refused to give him any info.”

“But how did he know—”

ssion is My dad holds up his hand to quiet her. “Mandi stole Stevie’s diary
her house, the journal where Stevie, as you know, records her whole li
is furry of stuff in there, and the reporter had a field day with it.”

believe Harlow’s head turns my way, her eyes filled with empathy. “Oh, h
here to I’m so sorry. She... she... used you in a horrible way. That wasn
burden to help her out of trouble.”

A bark of colorless laughter erupts. “There was no trouble. It was
I think. She took the money and went to St. Lucia. She’s not respon
it.” Shemy calls.”

Harlow’s jaw drops, and her head flips back and forth from me
at her dad, then back again. “She faked it all?”

“She didn’t fake the bruises and blood. I treated those injuries mys
r. “Are maybe Randy slapped her around to make the ruse look good. Or ma
really did owe the money. I don’t know what’s true anymore.”

ice and “Regardless if it’s true or not,” my dad continues, “she took the
flares at she got for selling Stevie’s diary and went on a fucking vacation.”

ay calls “That bitch,” Harlow screeches, and the two customers at the enc
bar look our way. She waves a hand and says, “Sorry.” She then turn
grab her and whispers, “I want to kill your mother.”

i’t want “Take a number,” my dad growls. “I get first crack.”

“No one is killing anyone,” I say with every bit of the fatigue I fe
mouth done, and I’m moving on. I suggest you two get over it too.”

“But Hendrix,” Harlow exclaims. “You have to tell him what hap
.. catch He—”

“No,” I cut her off harshly, and she blinks at me in surprise. “I trie
question him to listen so I could tell him the entire story. I begged for five

in a few minutes of his time, and he wouldn't give it to me. He told me to leave them alone, so I'm abiding by that. It cut me to my core, Harlow, so Hendrix says. She can't get the privilege of knowing there was more. He can suffer the consequences of upthinking I betrayed him."

Reporter: "Stevie," Harlow draws in a soft, almost cooing voice. "Don't worry about that. Hendrix is hurt and he lashed out. But you know he's a good guy. His life was know—"

As she says: "Fuck him," my dad snarls, and Harlow jumps. "Fuck that bastard. I couldn't give my girl five minutes."

I love my dad.

My dad says: "Harlow," I say, a little more gently. "I love you, you know that, right? Lots of love." She nods.

"I'm asking you as someone who I know loves me back, you can't tell me anything about him. He told me I was just like my mother." Harlow blanches at my spitefulness. "He aimed low, and he struck hard, then he abandoned me without a backward glance. He's the one like my mother, not me, so it's not a setup, nothing. You understand?"

My dad says: Harlow nods mutely.

I take a deep breath and set my half-eaten pizza slice down because I'm not hungry anymore. "I have to do some organizing in the back. Thanks for checking on me."

My dad says: I look to my dad, and I don't have to say a word. He knows what maybe she'll do. "I'll watch the bar for you while you... organize."

Spinning on my foot, I walk slowly, shoulders back, to the storeroom. I'm not in a hurry to escape Harlow. As long as she can only see my back, she can't see my face as tears start streaming down, and she will never know how broken I remain.

My dad says: My dad does, though. It's not the first time I've needed alone time to collect myself, and it won't be the last, I'm sure.

Inside the storeroom, I dash my tears away with my shirtsleeve and a rag. "It's a mess of beer around for better efficiency."

After about five minutes, the door opens. I don't need to glance back because I know it's my dad.

"She's gone," he says. "I filled her in on some of the other details, and she promised she won't approach Hendrix with it, and she said she'll keep the same promise from Stone."

ive him Of course, because she'll share this with Stone, and I suppose I can
ix doesher for that.

pain of I pick up the last case and place it on the stack. "That was nice o
check on me, though."

be like "Yeah... Harlow's always that one friend you can count on," he
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what you want."

rd who "Not what I want," I mutter as I face him. "Fuck men."

My dad stares at me, stroking the end of his beard thoughtfully
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ght?" shit. I've been waiting your whole life to see you mature into the
woman I knew you could be, and I'm so proud."

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I put a hand on my hip. "You want me to be open to finding love a
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"It always is," I say as I move by him, giving his chest a pat on t
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Of course, because she'll share this with Stone, and I suppose I can't fault her for that.

I pick up the last case and place it on the stack. "That was nice of her to check on me, though."

"Yeah... Harlow's always that one friend you can count on," he muses. "And she's not necessarily wrong about telling Hendrix the truth, if that's what you want."

"Not what I want," I mutter as I face him. "Fuck men."

My dad stares at me, stroking the end of his beard thoughtfully. "You know... I like this new person you've become. Cold. Hard. Don't take any shit. I've been waiting your whole life to see you mature into the type of woman I knew you could be, and I'm so proud."

I'm stunned to my core, and my jaw drops. "Really?"

"No, not fucking really," he snaps with an eye roll. "I don't want you to close yourself off like that. I want you to be open to finding love again. It might not be Hendrix, but it can be someone."

I put a hand on my hip. "You want me to be open to finding love again?"

"Yeah... what father wouldn't?"

"The type who himself never bothered," I point out.

"That's different," he grumbles.

"It always is," I say as I move by him, giving his chest a pat on the way out the door. "And I love you, anyway."

CHAPTER 25

Hendrix

TRUDGING INTO THE locker room, I know I should be happy we got t tonight, but there's no joy. This general feeling of pissiness isn't going and I know I have to do something soon. My teammates are getting tired

Maybe I just need to fuck someone and that will get me past Maybe the woman from Mario's who offered the threesome will be tonight.

I see Stone, Bain, and Coen huddled and talking in front of their c They break apart when I approach.

I move to mine three down, sitting on the bench to unlace my skate

"Anyway," Coen says, continuing whatever conversation he had on, loudly enough that I can hear it, "the Porsche dealership call offered me a good deal on a new one. I politely informed them crash was good enough."

Stone and Bain laugh, and I grit my teeth, yanking off one skate. (someone's getting some laughs from the article that laid out the story of wrecking my car.

"We're thinking of doing New Year's Eve at Jerry's Bar," Coen says I turn to look their way. He's ignoring me, but it's Stone he's talking "You and Harlow want to join?"

"Yeah... that sounds fun," Stone says.

"What in the actual fuck?" I snarl, pulling off my other skate and from the bench. "You think it's cool to talk about that article like it's deal?" I ask Coen.

Then I spin on Stone. "And you're going to hang out at her bar?"

"Well, she's Harlow's friend," Stone says.

"She's a fucking traitor to this team," I grit out.

"She's not," Stone says.

And he says it with such conviction, for a moment, I have to work

I'm in an alternate reality.

"She is," I say in a low rumble.

"She's not," he replies. "And I know this for a fact, but unfortunately forbidden from telling you how I know."

My brow furrows, and I squint at him. "What in the hell are you about?"

Stone mimes zipping his lips shut and tossing the key.

For the life of me, I can't figure out why they're all fucking with me, especially since they know I'm suffering. Are they trying to get the best of it, or are they just trying to kick me in the ass?

Stevie. "Whatever," I mutter, giving him my back. I don't want to be there anyway.

"I'm not prevented," Coen says, and I slowly face him. "I know Stone knows because he told me, and he wasn't prohibited from telling me just from telling you. I could pass on to you the knowledge. It's like that, and I'm all about spreading it."

My head hurts, and I rub at my temple. "I don't understand a damn thing about that's happening."

"Just say the magic words." Coen's eyes twinkle with mischief underneath, a burning need to release the secret he holds. "Ask for it, and I'll give it to you, but you got to say *please*."

"Please tell me what the fuck you're talking about," I grouse, taking a few steps toward him.

Stone backs away, and Bain turns to his cubby to undress, but they're both listening.

"Stevie didn't talk to that reporter," Coen says simply.

I sigh with frustration. "She did. She admitted it."

"She met with him, but she didn't give him anything. Her mom did."

For a moment, that knowledge makes a difference. It means Stevie told me the truth... that it wasn't her.

But I come crashing back down just as quickly. "It doesn't matter. It's all pivot to my cubby. "Stevie still met with him. She considered doing it, and she's a betrayer all the same."

"She had no choice," Coen says.

I whip back around, hands balled into fists. "She absolutely had no choice."

“Okay, fine... she had a choice not to do it, but it wasn’t a good choice. She thought her mom was in danger, so she was just checking all the possibilities. She was scared and grasping.”

“No,” I say, shaking my head. “She never said a word about that to me.”
“Did you give her a chance to?” Coen retorts, but he knows I have already said no. “No, she never said a word about that to me.”
“Did you give her a chance to?” Coen retorts, but he knows I have already said no. “No, she never said a word about that to me.”

I stand there, indecisive. These three knuckleheads clearly orchestrated this to draw me in. Stone must’ve found out something from Harlow. I’m assuming he heard it straight from Stevie. He was forbidden—I’m assuming by Stevie—from telling me anything.

So he told Coen and now Coen stands with the key to the heart of the story. Whatever happened, it changed how they feel about Stevie, but I know what didn’t love her.

Not the way I did.

“Fine,” Coen says, throwing up his hands. “If you don’t want to know, he angles away, moving to his cubby. That’s for the best.”

I start to turn, but he says, “Fuck it... you’re hearing it anyway.”

He walks up to me, toe to toe. “Here’s the quick version. Stevie told her that she was in trouble for stealing from some guys who were laundering money. Ten thousand dollars.”

“What?” I choke out. “Are you serious?”

Coen ignores the question. “Her mom put a lot of pressure on Stevie to get the money for her, and Stevie didn’t have it. She took out a loan on her credit card and put her car up for sale.”

The room almost spins on me as I try to comprehend this. Stevie never said a word about any of this, but then again, she’d never have asked for help. I guarantee she didn’t ask her dad either. Not for her mom’s benefit.

“It wasn’t enough money, and one day, Mandi showed up at Stevie’s house bloodied and bruised. She said it was a warning that worse things would happen if she didn’t get the money.”

“Jesus.” I feel like I’m in a bad dream.

“It scared Stevie bad, and she agreed to meet with the reporter who supposedly was going to pay ten thousand dollars for a story. Apparently her mom had tried to get her to meet with this guy awhile back, but she refused. Now she was terrified they’d kill her mom and didn’t see any other way out. She went there to listen to what he had to say, and she admittedly

choice. know what she was going to do. But ultimately, she wasn't willing to go out you, even to save her own mother, so she left."

"So, Stevie had told her mom everything, and her mom told me." reporter?" I ask, dumbfounded.

"No. Stevie wouldn't share that stuff with her mom," Coen draws out in a tone that says I'm an idiot. "But she put it in some diary, and her mother found it. Stevie didn't realize it was even gone until after you showed up, who article."

"Fuck," I mutter, taking two steps back and sitting down hard on the bench. What a web Stevie was caught in, and knowing all of this now about the just... I can't be mad.

In fact, I feel quite sick.

She was scared and desperate, but ultimately, she chose me over her mother.

"Fuck," I curse louder.

Stevie only wanted five minutes of my time, and this is the story she was going to tell me. It would have made all the difference in the world.

Instead, I gave her up without a second thought.

Just like her mother did all those years ago.

Coen's hand comes down on my shoulder. "One more thing you should know. Her mom made it all up, or at least, that's what it looks like. Stevie went to confront her and was told by a neighbor she went to Stone on her presumably with the money she was paid for that journal."

My head snaps back to look at him. "Are you serious?"

"That's what Harlow said," says Stone, finally able to join me in discussion now that someone else spilled the secret. "Sorry... Stevie's not fit."

Harlow promise not to say anything to you, and well... my loyalty is to Stevie's Harlow, dude."

"Forgiven," I say, especially since he managed to get the information to me, anyway, in a slick workaroud. "I'm going to strangle Stevie's mother."

"Apparently, John has first dibs," Stone says.

"And the diary?" I ask, because I know how important that damn diary was to her. It's what made her Christmas gift to me so special, because she refused. much she cherishes the words inside.

Coen shrugs. "No clue where it is, but she doesn't have it."

My blood boils, and the anger I had for Stevie is now directed at Coen.

to betray mother, but there's still plenty for myself. I didn't give her the benefit of doubt, and I should have.

old the Now I've got my work cut out for me because I know Stevie well enough to know she's not going to let me back in. I've hurt her on the same levels in a way her mother once did.

m stole Abandonment is abandonment.

her the The only saving grace is that she once gave her mom a second chance. I'm hoping she'll give me the same.

on the It starts as soon as I get a shower.
ow... I



ver her I'D BE LYING if I said I wasn't nervous. I wipe my hands on my jeans as I walk to the front door to Jerry's. It's close to midnight, the witching hour for the bar. The place isn't packed, but every stool at the bar is taken, every table is occupied, and every pool table has an active game going.

she was I have no clue if Stevie's here. She wasn't at her house, or at least she didn't answer and the lights were all out. She could be avoiding me, though. Probably avoiding me.

need to I walk in and scan for her left and right. One bartender pours a drink for me, but no Stevie.

Lucia, A hand closes on my shoulder, and I turn. A beefy biker I've met before holds his other hand out. "Great game tonight, Hendrix."

in the we ended—and pump the handshake. "Thanks, man. Is Stevie working here?"
e made He lifts up slightly out of his stool and looks around. "Yeah... she is with somewhere. Your first beer's on me."

ation to "Thanks," I say, although I have no clue if I'll be staying long enough to drink it.

m." By the time I make it to the far end of the bar, I've found her, cornered in the back of the storage room with a bar towel over her shoulder.

thing is She freezes when she sees me, her expression going slack.

of how "Hey," I say as I move toward her, my voice gentle because I know she's wounded. "I was hoping we could talk."

I at her I give her a smile... one that's apologetic, and with hope, she might be as charming the way she once did.

t of the “Get the fuck out of my bar,” she says in a voice so ice-cold a shiv
up my spine. “Get out and don’t come back.”

enough “Stevie,” I implore, but she brushes by me and heads behind t
vel thatclosing the flip top so I can’t follow. I grab onto the edge and call af
“Come on, Stevie... talk to me.”

I’m ignored as she moves farther away. I follow her along the c
shot, sobrushing past customers on their stools.

“Stevie.” I have to raise my voice to be heard above the jukebox. “
the same thing you asked of me... five minutes.”

She doesn’t even look at me, instead grabbing an empty from the
and putting it in a rack to be washed. She grabs a clean mug, move:
tap, and pours. I follow her there, nudging in between two guys to ge
; I open to her. “I know what happened, Stevie.”

bikers. To her credit, she keeps her eyes on the beer, but I see her spine sti
e filled, “I’ll stay here until you talk to me. Follow you up and down the
night if I have to. You’ll have to get your bat out to make me leave.”

ast she She closes her eyes for a moment, and when she opens them,
ough. arctic. She sets the beer down, barely glances at me but addresses the
either side. “Gary... Chris... I don’t want this customer in my bar. W
ft beer, escort him out?”

In a nanosecond, both my arms are in vise grips, and I’m being c
: before toward the door. “What the fuck?” I snarl, and because they aren’t ex
it, I manage to rip free.

ne how I bolt for the bar again where Stevie stands, watching impassively
;?” it,” I blurt out. She doesn’t say a word, and the men are back, grabb
e’s here arms again. “Now I know how you felt when I wouldn’t let you
fucking sucks, and all I can say is I’m sorry I hurt you.”

ough to Once again, I’m dragged backward, and my attempts to get f
impossible now. No one attempts to intercede, and more than one
ling out customers looks like they hope I’ll fight so I’ll get my ass kicked. It
makes me proud of them for sticking up for her, even if that near
tossed out.

w she’s I’m pushed through the door not so nicely, and I stumble but ma
right myself. I huff out a breath of frustration and look back to th
ght find consider making another attempt, and realize I can’t afford to get inju
the ice.

er runs “That went well,” I mutter to myself as I turn for the street. I’ll
come up with a plan B, which probably involves stalking her at her home
he bar, The door opens, a burst of music from the jukebox—“Spoon
ter her. Soundgarden—and I’m stunned to see John walking out. I was so focused
Stevie I didn’t even see her dad in there.

outside, I brace myself because I’m sure if there’s one person who will try
my ass, it’s him. No doubt in my mind John knows the full story as
Asking would have held nothing back from him.

“You sure fucked things up,” he says.

bar top “Trying to make it right,” I point out. “Will you help me?”

s to the “Nah. Just wanted to come out here and gloat over how you fucked
t closer up.”

I don’t buy that for a second. The man likes me. Or he used to like
ffen. and he wants his daughter happy.

bar all But he won’t affirmatively help, so an idea strikes. “I’m ready for
do my memorial tattoo.”

they’re “That appointment was yesterday, and I canceled it.”

men to I’d assumed as much. I obviously didn’t bother to show up. Pull
Will you wallet out of my back pocket, I wave it at him. “I’m ready now. I’ve
credit card in here with no limit. You name the price, and I’ll pay it.”

dragged Christ, it’s going to cost me a fortune to buy time with her dad
pecting know if anyone can break through to her, it’s him. To get him to do
need a lot of time to convince him to help me.

r. “I get “Any amount?” he asks.

ing my I swallow hard. “Any amount.”

talk. It “Ten grand,” he says without hesitation.

I wince. “Ten grand?”

ree are “Yeah... I’m going to buy Stevie’s diary back from that dou
of thereporter. That’s the amount he paid to get it from Mandi.”

kind of Well, damn... there’s nothing in this lifetime that John Kisner w
is I get do that will make me like him more.

“Ten thousand,” I agree on the price, sweeping my arm to his tattoo
nage to next door. “But I’ll get the diary back for her. I’ll track that son of
e door, down tomorrow morning.”

ired off John grunts and turns toward his shop, digging into his pocket for
Once inside and at his workstation, he points to the chair. “Do yo

have to what you want for the design?"

use. "No design," I say, having already thought about it. "Just the
ian" by along my ribs, in cursive."

used on He hands me a pad of paper and a pen. "Write them down neatly s
read them."

to kick I do as he asks, and he gets everything ready. You think it would
; Stevi to remember the names of forty-two people, but it's not at all. Every
one was a friend to me, an integral part of an organization that is an ex
family.

"Done," I say as I return the notepad.

l things He glances down, his brow furrowing. "Why's Stevie's name on th
I thought you said it was for the people who died on the plane."

ike me, "It's a list to honor the people I've lost and grieved for," I reply.

He merely grunts again, and I don't know if that was a good
you to "Take your shirt off."

I do and settle back onto the chair. He reclines it, preps my sk
readies his tattoo gun. As he snaps on gloves, he says, "I'm sorry abo
ing mysister."

e got a "Thank you."

"I'm not writing Stevie's name with this list of other people, thoug
d, but I Elation surges through me. That means he wants me to get her ba
) that, I you'll help?"

"Sorry, man. Nothing to help. Stevie makes her own decisions."

"You could at least put in a good word on my behalf," I mutter.

"Maybe," he says, and I'll have to be happy with that. "But for w
worth... I think you both made mistakes and they're both forgivable.
going to have a hell of a time getting Stevie to see that."

ichebag "Yeah." The dejection sits heavy. "I know. She's lumping me in v
mom. We both abandoned her."

ill ever "You've narrowed it down to the real problem," he says as he turns
gun. "Now settle in... I'm going to make this hurt more than normal fi
o shop you did to her."

a bitch "I'd expect no less," I reply and grit my teeth. This is going to su
it's my penance.

keys.

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names,

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CHAPTER 26

Stevie

GLANCING AT MY watch as I exit Target, I calculate that I've got some journal before I need to open the bar. One of my bartenders is sick, working a double today.

I woke up early this morning with the insatiable need to put feelings about Hendrix and my mother, and I couldn't do it because I don't have my journal. That douchebag Carmine Betta does.

I ran to Target, the closest store that would have something sufficient. It took me only a few minutes of browsing the stationery aisle before I found one on a vinyl-covered notebook laden with flowers, which is so not my style. I chose it because it has a strap and locking mechanism that, although it can easily be broken open, is symbolic of the private nature of the things I write.

I splurged on a set of new gel-ink pens, and I intend to write over my first cup of coffee and a bowl of oatmeal.

Just before I reach my car, my phone rings.

The name Olivia Parnell flashes, and my heart skips a beat.

"Hello?"

"Stevie?"

"Yes, hi. How are you?"

"I'm fine, thank you. Your mom is back. I saw her this morning getting the newspaper."

I suck in a deep breath and then release it slowly. "Thank you so much for letting me know. I appreciate it."

The little old lady walking her dog last week when I went to confirm if my mom came through. I went to my mom's day before yesterday, perhaps she'd returned, but there was no answer. Not sure if it was a coincidence the same woman was walking her dog or if she's a nosy neighbor who came out to talk to me, but I left her my contact information and told her to call if my mom reappeared.

My new journal forgotten, I toss the bag in my back seat and buckle up. As I drive to her house, anger bubbles as I think of all the things I need to get off my chest. I'm so angry, I might just start at the beginning with what she abandoned me, but on the off chance she doesn't want to hear any more, I might need to start at the end.

Stealing my diary and giving my private words away.

I understand that my mom is too self-absorbed to even care about how this has affected me. Not only was my privacy violated, but her actions have set me into motion the destruction of my relationship with Hendrix.

The only man I've ever loved.

Granted, I'm not thinking too kindly of him these days after he's been so very callous to me. Hendrix is complicated—not only am I suffering from anger over the way he tossed me aside, I'm grieving the loss of love.

It was a new love, the words spoken but a few times between us. However, it was the start of something I had faith in. I truly thought I was settling in for my forever, and my heart is crushed in a way that doesn't feel like it can ever be healed.

I push those thoughts away, bringing my mom to the forefront. I'm lucky enough, she'll have a sliver of conscience and will listen to me because I need to walk away with three things accomplished.

I need her to understand that she hurt me in a way that no true friend would ever do to a child. From that, she should know she's not my friend anymore. She's nothing to me.

Next, I want the truth. Was this all a setup or was she really in trouble?

Lastly, I want to know where my journal is and how to get it back.

After that, I'm walking away for good, and she'll be effectively cutting me out of my life.

My phone rings, and it's my dad. I answer, tapping the speaker phone button. My car is too old for Bluetooth.

"You're never going to guess where I'm going?" I ask as soon as the phone is connected.

"Your mother's? Because I know damn well you aren't going to see Hendrix."

I ignore that. "Her neighbor called. She's back."

"Swing by and pick me up," he says.

"Nope. It's out of my way."

“Stevie,” he warns.

“I’m doing this right now. Plus... this is my fight, not yours.”

“Maybe so, but I’m starting to understand your mother has a little of it, I crazy in her, and I don’t know that asshole she’s with. I’d feel better with you.”

“And I love you for it, but no. I’m five minutes away from her.”

He curses under his breath but then sighs. “Fine. Call me as soon as you leave and given that I know what you’re going to say won’t take long means I expect a call in about fifteen minutes. No longer, do you hear?”

I hear him and promise to call. My hands grip the steering wheel as I was sobbing the time I pull into her driveway, they’re cramped. They ache as I dig my fingers deep into them.

With resolve, I exit my car and lock it as she doesn’t live in this neighborhood. There’s not an ounce of uncertainty or fear within me. I was supremely confident in my quest, and I have zero mommy issues and I can best her stemming from her initial abandonment. In fact, that shit is so far in the past it’s irrelevant.

My legs are strong as I climb the porch steps, my spine a rod of iron. I don’t bother with the doorbell but bang on the door with my fist.

It swings open, and my mom stands there sporting a very nice t-shirt. She doesn’t seem surprised to see me, and I can tell by her expression she knew this was inevitable. She almost seems to brace.

“How could you?” I demand.

Three little words. I’d planned on saying so much more, and yet that’s the only thing that comes out.

Instantly, my mom’s eyes fill with tears, and they spill down her cheeks.

“Oh, Stevie... I’m so sorry.” She steps across the threshold, opens her arms as if to beckon me into a hug. I scramble backward to avoid the contact. She glares at her. Her arms drop, but the tears continue. “It was Randy. He said we’d never do it.”

“Made you do what?” I ask because I want the truth.

“Made me ask you for the money.”

“Were you ever in any trouble?” I demand.

“Yes. That part was real.” She ducks her head and looks chagrined. She wrings her hands. “It’s just... it wasn’t ten thousand dollars. We only had about three, but they were very serious about getting it.”

“So you were beat up? That was real?”

Her gaze can't hold mine, and she looks away. “Sort of. They did bat-shit Randy a message and roughed him up.”

if I was “And your injuries?” I press, because that's specifically what I need to meet with the reporter.

She doesn't respond but nibbles on her fingernail nervously.

as you “Mom,” I snap to get her attention.

ng, that “Randy did it,” she blurts out.

” “To make me think you were in danger,” I say in disgust. I considered that.

I shake “Not quite,” she says softly, her fingers grazing over her cheek although it's no longer bruised. “He was mad I couldn't get the money from the best you. We got into an argument. He gets angry really easy... I think he's on steroids he takes, but he slapped me around. Then he told me to use my influence to coerce you into helping.”

he past “Jesus, you two are unbelievable,” I say, throwing up my hands. “You stole my diary, got the money, paid your debt, and went on a vacation to St. Lucia with the remainder, ruining my relationship with Hendrix in the aftermath?”

an. She My mom wails, sobs wracking her body, but I quickly learn it's not because she knew regret for what she did to me.

“It was awful,” she cries, rubbing her hands over her face. “I know Randy cheating on me there with some floozy, so I left and came back because my heart is broken—”

There's no controlling it. My hand launches out, and I slap her face on the cheeks. I immediately gasp and step backward, curling the offending hand over my arm's chest where I cover it with my other. I've never hit another person in my life. It stops my mom's tirade, and she covers her red cheek with her hand. Her expression is wary.

I was going to ask her if she knew how much she hurt me, but I know. It's clear she doesn't care.

“I want my diary back,” I say coldly.

“I don't have it.” Her tone is standoffish, her tears gone.

l as she “Did you give it to Carmine?” I ask. I have no clue if she really owed information to him or just turned it over, but I need to make sure she never sees it. I throw it away.

“Yes. He has it.”

I nod, knowing I have my work cut out for me. I’ll be paying him tomorrow, but for now, I need to get to work. I don’t feel the need to proceed further. It would be a waste of breath.

“Do you forgive me?” my mother asks.

“No,” I reply and turn on my heel. I move down the porch steps and I reach the bottom, I look back at her. “Don’t ever contact me again this moment, we are finished. I won’t think about you from this point forward.”

Probably not quite accurate as I can’t control what thoughts pop in my head, but I won’t obsess over her anymore. I sure as hell will never cry over what could’ve been between us.

“Stevie,” she exclaims as I walk to my car. “Please don’t cut me out of your life.”

I ignore her and make a hasty getaway. As soon as I’m a few blocks away, I call my dad.

After I recount everything that transpired, he asks, “You okay?”

“In some ways,” I admit. “I’m glad to know the truth. I’m glad she’s not from my life.”

“But she still hurt you,” he says knowingly. “And I guarantee she’ll apologize.”

A laugh bubbles up and spills out. “No, she didn’t apologize. My weirdly, I’m not sure she really did hurt me all that much. I don’t know if I had high enough expectations of her that she could fail them. I’m more than anything, especially since she gave away my journal.”

“You’re more hurt by Hendrix,” he says.

I ignore it. It’s true, but I don’t want to discuss it. “The good news is confirmed that Carmine Betta has my journal, and I’m going to get it tomorrow.”

“Hmm,” is all my dad says, and I wait for him to offer to get it for me. At the very least want to come with me to provide some muscle.

He does neither. I guess he’s really going to let me handle all this myself. It is fine. I’m nothing if not self-sufficient.

“Want me to bring lunch over today?” he asks.

“Sure. I’ll see you later.”

He hangs up, and I drive straight to my bar. I glance back longingly

Target bag that holds my new journal and pens. I won't be able to
open it until tomorrow, given I'll be working the late shift too. My feet
ache just thinking about being on them that long, but that's the price of
being self-employed. You have to do whatever it takes to get the job done.

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Target bag that holds my new journal and pens. I won't be able to crack it open until tomorrow, given I'll be working the late shift too. My feet already hurt just thinking about being on them that long, but that's the price of being self-employed. You have to do whatever it takes to get the job done.

CHAPTER 27

Hendrix

I'M NOT HAPPY about the loss to the Columbus Hawks. With home advantage, we should have stomped our challenger as they're struggling with injuries this season. Instead, they had one of those perfect games, which were very imperfect. It happens.

We got our asses kicked 3–0, and everyone's in a shitty mood. The good thing about it is no one's expecting me to go out for beers after. I don't usually go out after a loss, preferring to head home and lick our wounds in private, but the guys have rallied around my love life to cheer me on in my quest to win Stevie back. I thought for sure there would be an invitation to get together and brainstorm over drinks.

Perhaps even an offer to storm Jerry's Bar for me to make my stand.

Although I'd love them for the offer, I'd decline. I have other things to do tonight.

I'm meeting Carmine Betta, and there's no telling what's going to happen.

I had thought about finding the journalist and kicking his ass. Not a good idea. An article... I get being a public figure means things will be written about me. Not even for the slanted reporting.

I'm enraged that he took Stevie's journal and used her private information without permission. He violated her, and I want to make him pay with interest.

But cooler heads prevailed, namely one John Kisner who, as a favor for me working on my very painful rib tattoo last night, told me the best way to get my ass back was with the promise of something he can't pass up.

It was easy enough to get Betta's phone number, and he returned my call within five minutes of me leaving a voicemail.

"Mr. Bateman... is this call on the record?" he asked, assuming I was calling about the article.

"It's not, but I'd like to meet."

The man couldn't contain his excitement. "Will you give me a quote?"

"On one condition," I said. "I want the journal back."

There was dead silence, and I waited for him to parcel out how he needed to keep it.

I pressed him hard. "That journal is important to Stevie Kisner. She's been journaling her whole life. You're not just holding a few facts about the Titans, you're holding a chunk of her memories. She deserves to have it back."

There was a very long pause before he said, "If you give me a quote I can use, I'll give you the journal."

I had to control my anger because he acted like it was his property. We were not. It was stolen, and he had no right to it. I could go to the police, but the way will be quicker and honestly... more fun.

We made plans to meet tonight after the game at an independent shop about two blocks from the arena where I've been before. I'll identify him from his picture that accompanied the article.

He stands from a back corner booth and I walk that way. His hands are out and I'm loath to shake it, but I'm playing nice until that journal is in my possession.

"It's an honor to meet you," Carmine says, pumping my hand. "Sorry about the game tonight. Want me to get you a coffee or anything?"

"I'm good, man. Thanks for meeting me."

Carmine laughs and motions toward the booth. "Like I'd pass up an interview with Hendrix Bateman."

"This isn't an interview," I say, making sure he's clear as we both walk in.

"But I get a quote from you," he presses.

"Yeah... I'll give you a quote. But I want the journal."

"Quote first," he says, pulling a handheld recorder out of his shirt and placing it on the table.

"Journal first. And I'll remind you that it's stolen property. I could easily call the police. I could call the newspaper and threaten a defamation lawsuit. I could pull your scrawny ass out of this booth and stomp it for you did to her. But I'm willing to give you an on-the-record quote if you hand over the fucking journal."

te I can “Fine,” he grumbles and reaches into an olive-green canvas satchel beside him. He pulls out Stevie’s brown leather journal missing the page he gave to me, predicting we would fall in love.

adly he I itch to lunge across the table for it, but I wait for him to offer it

He lets it go without hesitation. When it’s firmly in my grasp, a voice. She’s giddiness hits me that I’ve recovered this for Stevie, but it’s quashed without the push of the red button on the recorder. “This is Carmine Betta, a December 30. I’m with Hendrix Bateman of the Pittsburgh Titans, and on the record. Hendrix... you’ve promised a quote regarding the article recorded was released last Friday. What was your reaction?”

Keeping the journal firm in my hand, I lean forward so the recorder can hear my reply. It’s no problem picking up my voice. “My reaction? Well, I guess I’m a bit shocked that you’d use stolen personal property with private information I had no permission to use—”

Carmine makes a grab for the recorder to turn it off. My hand flies out, easily grabbing him by the wrist, and I hold it tight as I continue. “However you want to go, aside, I’d like to say formally, on the record and on behalf of the Pittsburgh Steelers organization, the inaccuracies you reported and the exploitative statements in my applied doesn’t touch a single person you wrote about. They’re all good people—including me—and the fans of Pittsburgh know that. I think you’ve done hard work, clear by the number of comments denouncing your attempt to discredit the team. You’re nothing but a wannabe journalist, and I expect the only reason you’re here right now is that the *National Enquirer* didn’t want you.”

I release Carmine’s wrist, and he slumps back in his seat, mouth hanging open in shock. I reach down, turn off the recorder, and slide out of the booth. “I have my permission to print that word for word.”

He won’t, though.

I head out of the coffee shop and back to the players’ parking lot. I have my journal in my pocket.

Next stop... Jerry’s Bar.



I just as

information

or what

you just

TAKING A DEEP breath, I tuck the journal inside my coat and zip it up. The coat’s style has a fitted waist so the book won’t slide out.

It would be so easy to walk in and flash the journal at Stevie, be the

I sitting and have her forgive me. But I need her to hear me without the age she dazzling her.

Opening the door, I'm not surprised to find the usual crew of looking bikers. My eyes go to the very end of the bar where John usually wave of and I'm oddly comforted that he's there. He made it clear he wasn't going when he help me, but he's full of shit. He already has, just by the advice he give and it's show to handle the reporter.

My gaze slides behind the bar and lands on Stevie, looking so much like that first night I met her. Looking so rocker chick, but I know how sweet she is under the dark eye makeup, nose piercing, and sexy tattoos.

Just as I'm aware that it's important I play this right. This isn't normally shot, and John warned me it might take awhile before Stevie thaws. I know you even have to start over from square one.

But I want this done.

I want her forgiveness for the way I treated her, and I want her to love me again.

Not sure how she knows I'm standing here, but Stevie goes for an intense conversation with a customer sitting next to her dad to help her get through the good stiffening. She turns her head slowly and locks eyes with me.

Once again, they're blank, and I can't tell if she's pissed or indifferent to me.

Quickly, I move to the end of the bar near John. If she's going to throw me out again, hopefully he won't jump to do her bidding. I hope to give me a fighting chance.

Her eyes follow me warily.

"I'd like to talk to you," I say.

She's a smart-ass and cups her hand behind her ear. "Sorry... can't hear you." She points at the jukebox and shrugs.

Then she turns on her heel and walks down the length of the bar, checking for people who need refills.

I swivel to John, and he lifts one shoulder.

Can't hear me, huh?

Knowing at any moment Stevie can sic her guard dogs on me, I pivot my head toward the jukebox. Without hesitation, I pull the cord from the wall. The music cuts off and it goes silent. All active conversations die just as quickly, and everyone turns my way.

Stevie stares at me with round eyes, full of shock.

it prize Finally... an emotion.

The two bruisers who bounced me last night are in their same tough-Stevie merely looks at them, jerks her chin my way, and gives the silently sits, to throw me out.

going to “Free drinks the rest of the night!” I yell, and the two men hal gave onprocess of rising from their stools. “The entire bar can drink on my rest of the night if you let me have five minutes with your beautiful likeowner.”

reet she Stevie’s jaw drops, and there’s some conversation between Ga Chris. John ducks his head, and I can see his shoulders quaking with lny only as I move back his way.

I might “No,” Stevie says, taking the towel over her shoulder and slap down on the bar top. “I don’t have to give you my time.”

“Give him five minutes, Stevie,” someone calls out from the back. ove medo double shots all night long and make you lots of money.”

More laughter, then a woman hollers, “It’s only five minutes. Gi rom anhim.”

er body Stevie rolls her eyes, huffs, and walks toward me. She stops, keep counter between us, and places her hands on her hips. “Fine. Say w ent. need to say.”

o order “I heard what your mother did... how she conned you into think pe he’ll was in danger and—”

“So what?” Stevie demands angrily. “Now you know the tru you’re here to tell me you forgive me for going to the reporter in t place?”

r’t hear “No,” I say softly, shaking my head. “I’m here to beg you to forg for the way I treated you. You tried to tell me the truth, and I wouldn’ he bar, and I’m so very sorry. I let you down when I should have protect That’s why I need to talk to you.”

It’s a stunning revelation, and I can tell she didn’t expect it. I can a it’s not making a huge difference to her.

vot and She shakes her head, as if shaking off my request for atonement. e outlet, say I forgive you, how could I ever trust you? You told me you work versonerelationships. That you don’t give up easily, and I believed you. And first problem that arose, you walked out on me. You didn’t even be try.”

I wince internally, because that is the absolute truth. It was such a painful spot on my part. “The only thing I can say in my defense is that I’ve never been hurt like that before. So I’ve never been hurt like that before. I’m young, and I don’t have that type of experience when it comes to loving someone and being hurt by them. I handled it badly, and you’ll never know how to regret it.”

“I’m wondering,” she muses, “would you be here saying these words if you didn’t know the truth of what my mother did? Would you even forgive me had you never known my motives for going to that meeting?”

I could lie to her. I could tell her emphatically I would have come and her reasons wouldn’t matter.

But I’m not a liar.

“We’ll see,” she says. “I honestly don’t know. I’d like to think once my temper cooled, I would’ve thought about things more deeply. Realized that you wouldn’t intentionally try to hurt me. I think I would have figured out there was something to the story.”

She glances away, rubs at the back of her neck. Not the greatest apology, but it’s the sincerest one. I hold my breath, wondering what she’ll do next.

I’ve got nothing else to offer. I’ve admitted my wrongdoing, and I’ve asked for forgiveness.

When she lifts her gaze, I don’t like the sadness I see. I know her name, and before she says it. “I’m sorry, Hendrix. But I had someone who loved me the first time and walked out because things were too hard. I gave her a chance, and you know what I found out?”

I don’t answer. It’s rhetorical.

“People don’t change. I don’t have it in me to go through it again.”

Christ, that’s a gut punch, and it’s an effort not to curl in on myself, squeezing my chest. I glance at John who actually has empathy for me and also tells me.

Nodding in understanding, I unzip my jacket and pull out the journal. “Let’s sit on the bar. John blinks in surprise that I completed my mission, and she just stares at it a long moment before bringing her gaze back to mine. I give her an understanding nod. She’s not ready yet to let me back out to try again and again until I get her to budge.

“Keep a tab open, and I’ll send money over to pay it off.”

failure I spare one more glance at John who, surprisingly, claps a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. That's a message for Stevie and nothing else. Stevie. I turn away and head out of the bar. A few of the guys call out that name and move by.

much I Out on the sidewalk, I zip my jacket and shove my hands in my pockets. It's fucking cold tonight, and this jacket is too light, but I've parked a few blocks down.

er have I'm barely a few steps away from Jerry's when the door opens and I'm stupid when I hear Stevie call out, "Wait."

Spinning around, my heart pounding, I see her there looking around uncertain but clutching her journal to her chest. "How did you get this?"

I ignore the question because it's of no importance right now. "I'll get it back for you to earn any brownie points."

ooled, I Stevie glances down at it. "No, you wouldn't do that." Her eyes aren't ever finally, I see a glimmer of something soft. "Thank you. A lot of distance more things have happened in the last few days, but now that I've cut my mind and gotten this back, two of the three major things have been taken care of."

answer, I take it as a good sign she's talking, and I step toward her. "You can't because mom out?"

he asked She nods. "I went to her house and confronted her. She admitted it from the start. I found out she needed money, but not ten thousand dollars. I answer played upon my wanting a relationship with her and used it to get me involved in some things I wasn't proud of."

second I fucking can't help myself. One more step, and she's within reach. My hand goes to the side of her neck, and I almost dance with joy that she doesn't pull away. "You did nothing wrong, Stevie."

"Even entertaining her scheme was wrong," she says, her tone full of pain and loathing. "Going to meet that reporter was wrong."

he in his "No... none of that was ultimately hurtful to anything but my ego." "I'm really sorry—"

al. I set I take a chance she won't knee me in the balls, and I kiss her to seal the deal. Stevie words. When I pull back, I whisper, "You already apologized. It's my turn. Tell me I accept it. Okay?"

in. I'll Her eyes drop from mine and she nods.

"Any chance you'll accept my apology?" I ask.

Taking a deep breath, she tips her head up at me and hugs me.

l to my exasperation. "I suppose I have to after you got my journal back."

Relief courses through me because she's teasing.

nks as I Somewhat.

"The journal has nothing to do with it." I punctuate that with a
nto the squeeze to her neck. "I fucked up big-time, Stevie. It was absolutely w
I only me not to listen to the entire story. I owed you that. Hell, I promised
the type of guy who would give it my all, and I failed you."

s. I jolt "You said all that in the bar."

"Apparently, I need to say it again because you haven't told m
g very forgive me. You haven't told me you still love me the way I love you.
?" "You still love me?" she asks.

I didn't "I never stopped," I assure her. "I might have a lot of learning to d
it comes to falling in love, but I know it can't be turned on and of
lift and switch."

ressing "No, it doesn't turn off."

om out That's a damn good sign, so I go for exactly what I want. "Ple
e of." you've forgiven me and we can start over. Please say you still love me

ut your Stevie steps into me. While clutching her journal to her chest w
hand, she wraps the other around my waist. "I love you. And I forgive
it was a My knees almost buckle I'm so weak with relief, but I lock m
d. They around her.

e to do "But I don't want to start over," she says. I jerk back, frownin
grins. "I want to pick up where we left off."

ch. My "Jesus fuck, Stevie... don't scare me like that." I let out a nervous
hat she then take her face in my hands. My mouth descends onto hers, and I c
within the kiss that everything has been set right between us. I pr
of self-forehead to hers. "I swear to God... I'll never not fight for us again. I'
fail you."

' "I believe you."

"But in the future, if you get into a jam, I need you to come to
top her help. That's what I'm here for."

turn to "Okay," she whispers.

We stay like that for a while, holding on to each other, and I hav
felt such completeness in my life.

The bar door opens, a burst of music indicating someone plug
ffs out jukebox back in. "Everything good out here?"

It's John, but neither of us moves.

"Yeah, Peas... all good," Stevie says and then twists her head to her dad. "Actually, we're still working out some stuff. It would be good if we could go somewhere to talk."

John's eyebrow arches skeptically. "Want me to watch the bar?"

"Yes, please and thank you," she says quickly, grabbing my hand. I don't even look at John as I don't want to see his expression when it's obvious my daughter wants intimate time with me.

I lead Stevie down the sidewalk. She twists her neck and calls out to her dad, "I love you."

"Love you too," he grumbles.

"We don't have other stuff to talk about, do we?" I ask as we hurry down the block. "We're going to have makeup sex, right?"

"Right," she says emphatically. "Although we can talk after. Throw some *I love you's* around, let out a little more self-loathing on both our parts. Maybe fun."

I burst out laughing and stop in the middle of the sidewalk. Pulling her into me for a kiss, just before our mouths meet, I say, "God, I love you."

My arms

are wrapped

around her

and I

smell her

hair

and I

never

forget

It's John, but neither of us moves.

"Yeah, Peas... all good," Stevie says and then twists her head to look at her dad. "Actually, we're still working out some stuff. It would be good if we could go somewhere to talk."

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I burst out laughing and stop in the middle of the sidewalk. Pulling her in for a kiss, just before our mouths meet, I say, "God, I love you."

CHAPTER 28

Stevie

TUGGING AT THE bottom of my dress, I look around the bar. It's a mass of people in varying styles—my regular biker clientele, complete in jeans and leathers, the genuine Titans fans decked out in the team colors of purple and silver, and then you have us... the Titans family.

It's not the entire team, but enough are here to outnumber my regular patrons. Many of the other players had long-set plans for New Year's Eve, so it's a full night and next day off for the team.

But enough of them came to make me marvel at just how fast I've become an extended family.

I pull at my dress again as it feels too short. Harlow insisted I wear this outfit a bit too snug and sparkly for my taste, but admittedly, when I saw it, his tongue about fell out of his head. The stiletto heels might have contributed.

However, Hendrix being Hendrix set me straight. He pulled me into his arms and whispered in my ear, "You are so hot tonight, I'm not sure how I'm going to keep my hands off you. But truth be told, you're just as hot in your jeans and a T-shirt."

One more moment when I fell deeper in love with him.

"Stop fidgeting with your dress," Harlow says, nudging me with his elbow.

"It's too short," I complain. "Everyone's looking."

"It's not too short, but the more you tug on it, the more people will look. So stop it."

"Fine," I grumble, and instead, I nervously twist the diamond stud earrings.

"What's wrong with you?" she asks, turning my way. She's drinking from a bottle of water and looks sexy as hell in her own snug little dress of emerald green.

“It’s just... yesterday I was enemy number one, and today the whole team is here in my bar to celebrate New Year’s.”

Harlow shakes her head. “No, you weren’t enemy number one yesterday. You were enemy number one five days ago, but the team learned the whole story three days ago, so you’ve been solidly back on firm ground with everyone since then.”

I roll my eyes and jab her with my elbow. “You know what I’m h-up of just... I hurt this team.”

“No,” she says in a tone that sounds like she’s lecturing a second grader. “Your mom hurt the team. And she hurt you. Everyone knows that and everyone is thrilled you and Hendrix are back together.”

My eyes drift over to him, standing with several of his teammates. They’re laughing about something, and as if he can sense me staring, he turns my way.

Cheeks heating just a bit, I smile at him. He doesn’t return the smile but tilts his head slightly, asking a silent question. *Are you okay?*

We had this same talk earlier while we were getting ready at my house and he reassured me same as Harlow. But he knows I’m nervous.

I nod and get a smile back before he turns to his friends.

“Come on,” I say, looping my arm through Harlow’s. “Let’s go celebrate the last day of this year.”

Now I’m
in jeans



“YOUR SHOT,” KIERA says as she hands me my pool stick. I let her up because we’re playing partners against Hendrix and her brother Drake.

Men versus women.

Winners versus losers.

Kiera’s not that great of a pool player, which means I’m pretty good taking on Hendrix and Drake, who’s not bad.

I walk around the table, studying what’s left of this game of eight balls. Kiera and I are stripes, and we have three balls left. Hendrix and Drake have only one solid left.

Glancing at the next table over, my heart swells full. Another great example of worlds colliding.

Brienne Norcross, billionaire owner of the Titans, chose to spend

le team Year's in my little bar, I'm sure forsaking some fancy party in tl
Hendrix said she did it for Drake, who doesn't feel comfortable in that
sterday. her world, although he'd certainly follow her anywhere.

he real But Brienne admitted to me earlier that she much prefers this atmo
id with She's dressed in tight black leather pants, a red silk halter top, an
black boots with tiny silver chains wrapped around the ankles.

nean. I She's playing pool with Jenna, and they're taking on Molly and
two of my regulars who are married to men who ride with my dad. The
grader. jeans and low-cut tank tops, both of them covered in tattoos.

at, and But the thing is... it doesn't matter what any of them are wearing l
all four women are talking and laughing as they play.

mates. Two different walks of life united over a game of pool.

his head I focus back on our table, considering my shot. Hendrix sits halfw
stool at a high top watching me. He's got one foot propped on a cross
nile but the other long leg stretched out. His pool stick is planted on the
between his legs, and he's holding the top with both hands. A leisurel
house, but there's nothing laid back in his gaze as he watches me.

"I'm going to get us another round," Drake announces.

I ignore him, focusing on my path to victory on the green felt. I ha
celebrate good choices to start, but I decide to take the shot on the side of th
closest to Hendrix.

He smirks as I walk around, adding a bit of sway to my hips. My
killing me in these heels, but I suffer it because they're part of the p
that makes his eyes glitter with appreciation.

se it as Giving him my back, I bend over to line up my shot. I know m
rides up a bit, not anywhere close to indecent, but enough that I kn
were to turn around to look at Hendrix, his eyes would be pinned on m

7 much "Hey, baby," he says, low enough for me to hear. I ignor
concentrating on dropping that five ball in the side pocket. "Please
take you into the storeroom for fifteen minutes."

ht ball. "You're cute," I say out of the side of my mouth and then execute
ke have shot. The five ball disappears. I straighten and turn to him. "But if we
the storeroom, we'll miss out on midnight, and I'm not about to miss a
glorious kiss of the new year."

id New Hendrix glances at his watch and frowns. "Seven minutes. Defini
enough time for what I'd want to do to you in there."

the city. Laughing, I fist his shirt and pull him to me. I brush my lips against his neck and start to pull away, but I'm stopped with his hand going to the back of my neck. He deepens the kiss and when he finally breaks apart, he presses his forehead against my mouth, "I love you."

And killer A shiver skitters up my spine over the naked truth in his statement. I turn my back, stare him in the eye, and give him my own honesty. "I love you, Kara, much."

They're in He grins, releases his hold, and nods at the table. "Put us out of our misery."

Because I do him a solid and run the next two balls, winning the game. Drake returns holding two bottles of beer in each hand.

"Damn," he mutters, offering us our drinks. He then pulls out his wallet and hands Kiera a twenty.

Bar and "You thought I'd be a liability to my team, didn't you?" she asks, smiling happily.

My pose, "I thought Hendrix and I would at least have a fighting chance with Stevie's partner."

"Want to go double or nothing?" Kiera asks.

Give two "No fucking way," Drake says, his gaze drifting over to Brienne. "I want to watch my girl play."

Kiera turns to Bain and Camden sitting at the table beside Hendrix. "Come on... who wants to play?"

Package "I'm in," Bain says, fishing change out of his pocket to release the bet for another game.

My dress Drake gives him an icy glare. It's a warning that his baby sister will not let him go if he limits.

My ass. Bain rolls his eyes. "Relax, dude. It's a game of pool."

He him, "Don't pay him any attention," Kiera assures Bain. "He's only letting me just lost twenty bucks."

A hand wraps around my wrist, and Hendrix pulls me to him. I lean against a clean pool stick against the wall and lean into him as one arm wraps around my waist so we can watch Bain and Kiera play.

My first Hendrix leans to the side of his stool, pulling out his phone. I watch him curiously as he opens the camera app and holds it out just far enough to take a selfie.

His entire face fills the screen in a big, cheesy grin.

inst his “What’s your dad’s phone number?” he asks, and I look on as he p
k of mya text with the photo.

urmurs I give it to him, and then he types, *Happy New Year. Wish you were here.*

Laughing, I push in close as he hits Send, knowing my dad will re
t. I leanmight have chosen to stay at home tonight and binge-watch true
you. Sodoocumentaries, but he’s a night owl same as me and won’t be asleep.

It takes less than ten seconds for his reply.

of our A picture of my dad’s face, glaring into the camera. *Glad you’re not he
New Year.*

just as Hendrix and I both burst out laughing. “You know... I think yo
likes me,” he says.

s wallet I don’t affirm this, but he’s not wrong. My dad likes him a lot.

“He’d be here if Aunt Rory were here,” I observe.

e quips Hendrix grimaces. “Please don’t even go there.”

“You know it’s true,” I tease.

ith you Suddenly, the music on the jukebox silences and someone yell
almost time.”

The bartender turns up the volume on the large-screen TVs arou
“Goingbar, all tuned in to watch the ball drop in New York City.

Less than thirty seconds. Everyone scrambles to find their hone
lendrix.with mine, so I watch as the pairs come together.

Drake and Brienne at the pool table next to us.

ne balls Gage and Jenna at the bar, sitting on stools next to Baden and Soph
Coach West is at a table, Ava on his lap, sharing beers with Co
is off-Tillie.

Around the dartboard, a handful of the single guys, including C
who moved off to join Kirill, Boone, and Foster.

mad he And at our pool table, Kiera and Bain ignoring the TV and contin
with their game.

set my Hendrix rises from the stool, turns me toward him, and wraps
nd myaround the back of my waist.

His hand comes under my chin to force my gaze on him.
[watchbackground, I hear the crowd counting down from ten as the New Yea
to takeclose. “Nine... eight... seven...”

“This is the beginning,” he says. “New year, the rest of our lives.”

prepares “Six... five...”
“I’ve never looked forward to anything more,” I say, my hands
chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart.
ply. He “Four... three... two...”
: crime Hendrix dips his head, presses his mouth to mine.
“One. Happy New Year!”
Vaguely, I hear people cheering and party favors chirping as
re. Happy flutters down around us. But I tune it all out as Hendrix deepens the k
we step into our future... together.
our dad

Camden Poe is the last of *The Lucky Three*, the three Pittsburgh Titan
weren’t on the team plane the night it went down. He appeared to h
adjusted to post-crash life well, but lately there have been some cracks
walls he’s erected to hide his pain. When he meets Danica Brandt, w
s, “It’s her husband in the crash, those walls are completely destroyed. Can
broken souls help one another heal? [CLICK HERE](#) for details on *Ca*
and the

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About the Author

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two New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling
mden. Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that
to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy ro
and both women's and general fiction, Sawyer writes something
about everyone.

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About the Author



New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling author Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that appeal to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy romance, and both women's and general fiction, Sawyer writes something for just about everyone.

A former trial lawyer from North Carolina, when she is not bringing fiction to life, Sawyer is a chauffeur, stylist, chef, maid, and personal assistant to her very adorable daughter, as well as full-time servant to her wonderfully naughty dogs.

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