



Love
PUCK



JESSA YORK

LOVE PUCK

JESSA YORK

Copyright © 2023 by Jessa York

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

This book is a work of fiction. All names, characters, locations, and incidents are products of the authors' imaginations. Any resemblance to actual persons, things, living or dead, locales, or events is entirely coincidental.

 Created with Vellum

To Youngest,

Watching you from the sidelines will forever be one of my greatest joys. My heart just about bursts.

Love,

Mawmmy.

“Isn’t it better to have your heart broken than to have it wither up?
Before it could be broken it must have felt something splendid. That
would be worth the pain.”

— L.M. MONTGOMERY

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Jessa York](#)

Cash

Beau picked Davis' pocket and stole the puck away from him. I turned immediately and headed down to the other end.

Two defensemen swarmed his ass, so he passed the puck across the ice to me.

I received it and one second later shot the puck straight to the net.

Except it wasn't anywhere near the net when I looked.

Nope.

I fanned the fuckin' thing.

"Jesus Christ," I swore under my breath, embarrassed at leaving the puck behind for Evans to swipe.

I swung around the net and Isaac said, "Wow, you really fucked that one up." He shook his head and shot me a look.

Even so, he was right.

Evans made it all the way down to the other end. Took a slapshot—and the puck sailed in.

“Fuck.” I sighed and rolled my eyes. And that hurt. They felt as dry and cracked as my mouth at the moment.

After I’d left Jillian’s last night, I might have gone back to my place and finished off my bottle.

Not like I had anything else to do.

Nope.

Jillian had confirmed that she was indeed marrying that fuckin’ douche canoe.

And when I’d actually heard the words come out of her mouth—it was just like being on the set of *Single Girl* all over again. On the very last day, that is.

The day that she gave that goddamn rose to that goddamn douche canoe.

Instead of me.

She did that to me once.

And then I’d bent over and let her do the same fuckin’ thing to me for the second time.

I still couldn’t believe it.

I’d felt our connection.

We had this instant bond that seemed to link us together, no matter where we were.

What we had was indescribable. Whether we were at the country bar—or on the ice.

Or if I had her pushed up against the wall—making her scream out my name.

Had I dreamed all of that shit?

Was I fucking delusional?

Before I could ask myself one more pathetic question, Beau stopped right in front of me—with a spray of snow—enough to hit my face, too.

“Asshole.” I skated backward and gave him a dirty look.

He jerked his head to the right and said, “Over here.” I watched him glide to the boards. I inhaled a deep breath and followed like I was the bad kid in class who didn’t do his homework.

He turned around and leaned against the boards. “Do you need some time?” he asked in a low, patient tone. To any normal person, that would have sounded kind and understanding.

To my ears, it sounded like he was calling me an incompetent loser.

“No, I’m fine,” I told my captain. Even though I was anything but fine. I couldn’t exactly tell Beau that. Not that I wanted to.

“You don’t look fine,” he replied back, and to be quite honest—that ticked me right off. A lot of things irritated me at the moment, but right now, Beau was at the top of my list.

I leaned on the boards and turned my head toward him. “Yeah, well, you don’t look fine out there, either, Captain.” I glared at him. “Neither does Trey.” I jerked my head in Trey’s direction. “You know it. I know it. Everyone fuckin’ knows it.”

Beau clamped his lips together and stared back at me. Then he sighed and shook his head. He glanced down at the ice and said, “I know that. I’m not an idiot.” His eyes shifted to the other end of the ice, where our coach was busy lecturing the team. “I just don’t know how the hell to fix it.”

I nodded, appreciating his honesty. A lot of guys would have dumped all the blame on me. But Beau was one of the good guys. He was honest and unbiased—which made him an excellent leader.

“Do you?” he asked and tapped his stick on my skate.

Jillian’s suggestions popped into my mind. At the time, some of them had seemed pretty outlandish and useless. I’d appreciated her input. However, putting any of her ideas into practice—well, that was the tricky part.

Convincing two other pro-hockey guys to take part in some—questionable—team bonding activities definitely wouldn’t be easy.

Beau looked at me with a serious expression on his face. He really wanted to fix whatever was wrong with us. So did I.

I pushed off the boards and skated backward down the ice. “Let me think about it and I’ll get back to you.”

Cash

“Ah, my boys,” Angelique cooed as she greeted us in the front room of their mansion. We rose from our seats and waited for her to hug us and give the fake double-cheek kisses she always gave.

“*Bienvenue, Cash,*” she said when she came up to me. “It’s so lovely to see you again.” Her French accent was more than apparent as she spoke. Angelique and Marcel were straight from Quebec, so this wasn’t surprising.

I smiled and nodded. “Nice to see you as well. Thanks for the invite,” I said, even though I was more than a little suspicious about why she and Marcel had called the three of us here.

Beau and Trey didn’t know why, either. But, I guess we were about to find out.

“*Merveilleux,*” Marcel entered the room and clapped his hands. “Everyone is here, *ma chérie.*”

“*Oui, mon amour.* Let us address the boys here before we eat,” Angelique suggested, and Marcel nodded and strode further into the room. We all sat down—Marcel and Angelique sitting on a couch at the end of the

room.

Beau spoke first. He was their godson—not that many people knew that. His fiancée, Gigi, was their goddaughter. Most people didn't know that either. But, if you looked on Marcel and Angelique's fireplace mantle—you'd see pictures of Beau and Gigi—and Beau's twin boys.

“What's up?” Beau asked bluntly and I had to stifle a chuckle. “I know, we've been playing like crap—” he took in a deep breath, “but we'll get there.”

I let out a sigh and settled into my chair. Beau was putting it mildly. We weren't—getting there. Not at all. In fact, I think we were playing worse than ever.

Marcel grabbed Angelique's hand, and he gave her a look before he turned fully to us.

“This is only our third year. We understand that. But we expected—”

I leaned forward, elbows on my knees, and gazed at the owners. “You're right. We're playing like—crap. Things should have improved by now. But they haven't.”

Angelique caught my eye, and she nodded. “*Oui*, Cash, I agree. You all have such potential. Such—talent. I don't know what the issue is. Do you?”

I looked over at my teammates and then lowered my eyes to the immaculate wooden floors for a moment.

I needed to be honest. But not in a way that hurt the guys I played with.

I peered up at the owners.

The owners who'd put a shit-ton of cash down to create not one—but two new league teams. That was no small order. These people had put their necks

—and their wallets out for us.

And we needed to give them our best. Which was not happening at the moment.

“I think I have an idea of what’s going on.” And I did.

Ever since that night, Jillian had pointed everything out in black and white—I knew she was right.

And it wasn’t just me.

It was—us.

Trey and Beau certainly had their issues. And so did I.

One of mine being the fact that I still had to see Jillian several times a day. And every time I saw her—I died a little more inside.

She’d been straight with me.

She was definitely—one hundred percent, marrying that douche canoe.

And not me.

Everything we’d shared in the past—and everything we’d shared since the beginning of the season—had been a lie.

She didn’t love me.

She loved Stuart.

The douche canoe.

I still couldn’t believe it. She’d dumped me—or re-dumped me—two weeks ago. And every night, I’d have to fight myself from going over there and tapping on her door. I missed her so goddamn much.

My heart ached.

My balls ached.

And my fuckin' head ached from drinking too much—and not sleeping.

I couldn't sleep without that woman beside me.

I was such a sucker.

I'd fallen for her womanly wiles.

Again.

“*S'il vous plaît*, tell us what it is?” Angelique tilted her head and gave me a sincere look.

Suddenly, two French bulldogs came barreling into the living room. “*Ah, mes bébés.*” Angelique smiled from ear to ear, and she and Marcel reached down for the dogs. “How was your walk?” Angelique asked the dog with the pink collar. Then she looked to the front entrance doors where an older man stood. He was the guy who'd let us in. He addressed her in French, and they had a short, quick discussion about something. I assumed he must be their butler.

“*Bien, Henri. Merci.*” Angelique dismissed him, and he turned to leave.

The dogs were more than happy to see their parents and the dark, furry creatures licked and whined to their mom and dad to show how much.

“Shush,” Angelique said to her babies, and finally met my eyes. “*Je suis désolé*—I am sorry for the interruption, Cash. Please continue.”

I felt my teammates' gazes, and I turned my eyes to them for a moment. They both had confused looks on their faces—and I knew if I said much more to Angelique and Marcel—that I'd betray their trust.

Trey had been through the wringer for the last year. Overcoming everything he had was no small feat. And I knew he worked daily to keep himself in check.

He didn't need me reminding him of everything that had gone on in his life. Because he was living it.

Nothing good would come out of pointing fingers.

And if Jillian was right, and Beau was really "skating around on eggshells," between us, trying to pretend everything was all right—well, then he was going to have to stop doing that.

Just like Trey and I were going to have to stop relying on him so much.

Telling the owners all of our garbage wouldn't do any good. The only thing that would do is drive a wedge between me and the guys. That wasn't going to get us to the finals.

I looked back at Angelique and Marcel. "I'd rather talk about some ways to improve."

Cash

“Isn’t it kind of late in the season to be fishing?” Beau’s annoyed voice spat out. He held the pole as though it might explode at any moment.

It was more than a little comical to see him so uncomfortable. Normally, Beau Moreau was calm, cool, and collected at all times. Seeing him out of his element was an eye-opening experience so far.

“He’s right, it’s fucking cold out here,” Trey added his two cents in, not looking pleased with his current situation.

“We fish on ice-covered lakes. This is a lot warmer.” I pointed out the truth. I’d been ice fishing many times in my life. And yes, it was colder than this. A lot colder.

Trey frowned. “You Canadians have issues. It’s cold as balls out here.” He shivered and pulled his hat further down.

Now it was Beau’s turn to frown. “I think the expression is ‘hot as balls.’ Not ‘cold as balls.’”

I couldn’t stop myself from laughing at the direction of the conversation.

Trey rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Who cares? It’s goddamn cold

out here, and I don't think I have any balls left. They've either retreated or frozen right off."

I reached forward, and the boat swayed from side to side. My fingers grasped a tag on Beau's fishing waders and yanked it off. "You forgot to remove this." I handed the price tag to Beau.

"Wait, those are new?" Trey's voice rose a few too many octaves. "I thought you said you'd fished before?"

Trey and I had a good chuckle at Beau's expense.

Beau frowned at us. "I couldn't find my fishing supplies. Gigi must've moved them around somewhere. So I had to buy new stuff."

That made Trey and I laugh even harder. When I was finally able to speak, I said, "First, it's called gear. And if you'd ever fished before—you'd know that."

Trey burst out into another laughing fit. "And second, Gigi is the most organized person I've ever met. If you can't find your crap—it never existed."

Beau set down his fishing pole—that looked suspiciously new. He grumbled something inaudible under his breath.

When Trey settled down, he looked at our captain. "We're just bugging you, man. I can help you bait your hook if you want?"

Beau's eyes narrowed slightly, and he tilted his head. "Umm, okay."

Trey shot me a look, and I smirked. "Who'd have thought our Canadian captain had never been fishing before?"

Beau shook his head and ignored our next few jabs at him and his inability to fish.

“Do you fish very often?” Trey asked me while we got Beau set up and his line in the water.

I nodded and looked at him. “Every chance I get. Which isn’t often enough.”

Trey nodded and started baiting his own hook. “Yeah, I hear ya. It seems like I go less and less every year.”

Beau cut into our conversation. “I honestly don’t get the appeal. If I wanted to sit and stare at something, I could have stayed home. And bought a salmon at the grocery store.

Trey and I stared at him with our mouths open.

“Some people just don’t get it.” Trey sighed and cast his fishing rod.

I raised my eyebrows and did the same with my own rod, but on the other side of the boat. “Fishing is a lot more than just sitting and staring.” I gave my captain a bit of a side-eye. “Give it a bit. You’ll understand soon enough.”

Or he wouldn’t.

Trey was right.

Some people just never understood the allure of fishing.

A few minutes later, a country song blared out, startling the hell out of me. “What’s—” was all I got out when I spotted Beau scrolling through his phone.

“What are you doing?” Trey asked and swiped Beau’s phone from him. He turned off the music and gave it back.

“Why’d you do that?” Beau asked and possessively grabbed his phone and stuffed it in the front pocket of his brand-new waders.

“You’ll scare all the fish away,” Trey told him the truth. “How do you not know that?”

Beau shook his head and shrugged. “This wasn’t really my scene.”

And by that, we knew what he meant.

Beau had been brought up in a huge mansion in Quebec. His father traveled a lot for work—he’d told me that years ago. His mom had been the more present parent.

I’d grown up in a big house, too. But my dad had loved the outdoors. He took me out to the cabin a lot. Mom rarely came along on those trips.

When I was young, I thought she was just disinterested in the whole outdoor thing. But as I grew older, I thought it was probably her way of letting Dad and I have time together. And while I missed my mom during these adventures—I also loved being with Dad. After he died, I was even more grateful for every fishing trip and camping trip he’d ever taken me on. Even though I didn’t have him anymore, I’d have those memories forever.

“Well, it’s a good thing you have a couple of pros to show you the ropes.” I peered over at our fishing-challenged friend.

After we set Beau up again, Trey and I followed suit. It didn’t take us long.

For a while, no one spoke—and for me at least, the silence was welcome. However, it seemed that poor Beau couldn’t stand it.

“Why isn’t anyone talking? Are you guys mad that I can’t fish?” Beau asked in a low voice. Trey and I immediately looked at him.

Trey frowned at Beau and said, “Nah, we were just bugging you, man. And silence is the best part of fishing.”

From the look on Beau's face, he wasn't buying any of this. "It is?"

I chuckled and threw in my two cents. "Fishing calms your mind. You listen to the sounds of nature instead of those in your head."

Beau's head cocked to the side. "All I can hear are Trey's teeth chattering together."

That made all of us laugh a little too loudly. "I can't help it. You took me out of hot Vegas and dumped me in freezing cold Michigan."

He was right. The Upper Peninsula was plenty cooler than Vegas. But it still wasn't cold-cold.

"Try to concentrate on the sounds of the birds and the wind and the water," I suggested to Beau. He again gave me a look that said he didn't understand. But he shut up anyway.

It didn't take me long to zone out. I loved fishing, and it had been way too long since I'd been out on my boat.

The conditions here weren't exactly ideal—and my fishing partners were acting more like hostages than friends.

Still, I was able to reach the point where my mind was truly focused on nothing else except the water, the boat, and my rod.

It was a great ten minutes.

Trey's voice took me completely out of my Zen moment, being one with nature.

"Would you stop sighing? You're supposed to be relaxing."

Beau sighed louder. "I can't help it. This is boring as hell. How much longer do we have to be out here?"

Now it was Trey's turn to sigh. "We just got out here. Usually, I fish for

hours—but it’s cold as balls out here. How about you, Cash?”

I chuckled at my teammates and shook my head. “It’s not cold as balls. It’s hot as balls. You need to stop saying that. And yeah, I usually fish for a couple of hours for sure. How about we go in as soon as one of us catches a fish?” I figured that would be a compromise for all of us. Trey and I would get some time out here, and Beau would have a goal to set his mind on.

“I can live with that,” Beau said with a small smile on his face. “How long does it usually take to catch a fish? Fifteen minutes? Twenty?”

Trey and I laughed as we looked at each other. “That’s the whole point of fishing. You don’t know when—or if you’ll catch anything,” Trey informed him.

Beau’s hopeful expression fell from his face. “Jesus. You mean we could be out here all day and not catch a thing?”

I shrugged and gave him the bad—and the good—news. “Yeah, or you could catch something in the next minute.”

“Sounds risky. All the show let us bring were three cans of beans,” Beau stated what we already knew. The show not only insisted on having their cameras present—they also gave us limits on food.

Not that I completely listened to their rules.

Fishing was risky.

I knew that.

So, I’d packed several bags of jerky along for the trip. That way, we’d have beans and jerky if nothing out here was biting our hooks.

“Then I guess we need to get to work and catch our lunch. And supper,” I told our newbie fisher.

He nodded and went back to being silent.

For a short time.

Suddenly, a loud blaring noise filled the air. My eyes dashed around until I saw Beau smiling goofily at his phone.

“What the fuck, Moreau?” Trey poked Beau’s arm. Are you trying to give us all heart attacks or what?”

Beau barely budged. All he kept doing was staring at his phone. “Gigi taught the boys a new song. In French.”

The pride he held in his heart was written all over his face at the moment. Beau didn’t find out his twins existed until they were four years old—and he was engaged to Gigi, who was not his baby mama.

That revelation had been broadcast all over the fuckin’ world at the time. I remembered hearing about it because it was on every goddamn television channel and radio station.

I didn’t know Gigi then, but I knew Beau. And I was one hundred percent certain that if he’d known about his kids—he would have been involved from day one.

What I wasn’t sure about—was how his new, much younger fiancée would take the news.

Luckily, it all worked out.

Eventually.

But I didn’t envy what it must’ve taken to get to where that new little family was now.

“Gah, fuck it. Show me. I love those little boys.” Trey held his rod in one hand and reached for the phone with his other.

Beau turned it up—and then handed it over. I could see the screen over Trey’s shoulder, and those kids were cute.

Loud.

And definitely off-tune.

But absolutely cute.

“You’re one lucky fuck, Beau Moreau. Great kids who look exactly like you, and a fiancée who stays with your sorry ass for some unknown reason.

The smile on Beau’s face grew exponentially. “Yeah, I know.” He took the phone back from Trey and turned the volume up even more before he gave the phone to me. I chuckled and watched—and listened—to the boys’ performance. “They’re great, man. Trey’s right, you are lucky.”

And I knew he was.

But I also imagined how much work he and Gigi—and the boys—and the boy’s mom—had to put in to make everything okay.

“You guys want more kids?” I asked Beau as I returned his phone.

His eyebrows rose and he shrugged. “Hopefully someday. Gigi’s still young—and she’s got big plans.”

The happiness my friend beamed back made me smile. It told me he was exactly where he wanted to be. And I couldn’t be happier for him.

“What about you guys?” I asked Trey, making him grin like a huge dufus.

“At least a dozen,” he said, and we all laughed. “Or whatever Lexi allows. We’re not in any hurry. It’s nice just being the two of us right now.”

I nodded and said, “You guys aren’t getting any younger, though.”

Beau stuffed his phone back in his pocket. “Tell me about it, asshole.” I watched him turn around and stretch his leg slightly. A move that would be

imperceptible to most people. But I knew he'd been suffering with his knee again. I'd seen him with the physio after every practice and every game.

Hockey wasn't exactly kind to your joints. I had my own issues. The worst being my stupid shoulder. Some days I'd like to just remove it from my body.

"What about you?" Trey shot the question over his shoulder.

My stomach immediately tightened into knots. Because—yeah—of course I wanted kids. But I wanted them with a woman who didn't want me.

Therefore, having those kids would be impossible.

"Uh, yeah, sure," I answered back, cursing myself for bringing this subject up. Every minute of the day, I did what I had to do to keep that specific woman out of my head.

And every minute—I failed miserably at it.

"You got anyone in mind?" Trey asked with a tilt of his head. I had the sudden urge to dive into the lake and swim for shore.

"I'm very single, Trey. You know that." What he didn't know about was the affair I'd had with Jillian. The one that left me reeling out here on a ledge.

After she'd sent me packing, I hadn't so much as said one word to her. And I still didn't have a clue why she'd let me back into her life with a bang—only to kick me out with a bigger bang.

Not that we'd talked about much of anything during our—affair.

Jesus.

I can't believe I was considered a cheater, now. I never did any of that crap in my life.

If a girl I was interested in had a boyfriend, I never pursued the matter.

Even if she looked interested.

Especially if she looked interested.

I wasn't that kind of person.

Until now.

And it made me feel like a real fuckin' heel.

Even though Stuart was a douche canoe. He still didn't deserve me stepping in and fucking his girlfriend.

Fiancée.

Fuck.

That killed whenever I thought about her marrying that idiot.

“What about that movie star you were seeing a while back? I can't remember her name?” Trey asked, and I wanted to punch him right in the throat.

“We broke up months ago,” I told him a half-truth. Yes, we did break up. But we were never really together.

My publicist had fished around for someone to be my girlfriend. After Jillian gave Stuart the rose—and not me—he said my reputation was shit.

Not that I cared at that moment.

All I cared about was going out to my cabin and hiding there for as long as I could. I didn't want to talk to anyone. Let alone start a new relationship.

Jillian's actions had made me question my sanity. For real.

What we had together—fuck. It had been like nothing I'd ever felt before in my life.

And I knew she hadn't invited anyone else over to her place during the

Single Girl show—because I was in her goddamn bed every night. I would have noticed if she hadn't come home. Or if she'd brought someone else home with her.

But, no.

It was just me.

Every night of the show.

Until the last night.

When she gave fucking Stuart the fucking rose.

“Oh, yeah. Marissa. I remember seeing you guys on social media,” Beau said as he nodded. “What happened?”

I was about ten seconds from jumping into this lake. I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. Then I turned and gave them a brief glance. “I don't know. I'm not the easiest guy to get along with.” That was the only excuse I could come up with. I wasn't going to tell them the truth.

That lying and being fake had slowly chipped away at my soul. And even though Marissa had been kind and understanding—she'd hinted a few times about wanting things to go further.

Well, more than hinted.

And I didn't enjoy fucking around with other people's hearts. Not like Jillian did. Yeah, that woman was making a whole sport out of jacking my heart around.

But I on the other hand didn't have the stomach for it. As soon as Marissa started asking for more—by slipping into my bed, naked—I called the whole thing off. She was too good of a human—I couldn't hurt her like I'd just been hurt.

It wasn't fair.

So, against the advisement of my P.R. guy—who went ballistic when I informed him Marissa and I would no longer be pretending to be a couple—I called the fake relationship off.

Marissa had taken the news fairly well. Aside from saying some shit about me in social media, and in interviews. But that I forgave her for. I assumed it was likely her P.R. people's doing.

She had to save face. And I understood that. If it meant making me sound like the bad guy, then so be it.

“Uh, actually, you are the easiest person in the world to get along with,” Trey stuck in, and I chuckled.

I turned to him and shook my head. “Depends who you ask, I guess.”

We all laughed at that, and I hoped the conversation would end. Or at least change.

“You and Jillian seemed to be getting along,” Trey said, but this time I didn't turn around.

No.

This time I was ninety-nine percent sure I'd jump into the lake and swim for shore.

“Would you shut it?” Beau cut in, and I was grateful.

“What? I'm just saying—” Trey started explaining but Beau jumped in.

“I know what you're saying. But maybe he doesn't want to talk about—her.”

Trey huffed loudly. “I thought this was supposed to be a bonding opportunity. If we don't talk about the difficult stuff, then how are we

supposed to bond?”

Beau sighed and said, “We talk about everything else. And if Cash happens to bring—that situation up—then we talk about it.”

Trey’s voice lowered. “Everyone’s thinking it. We might as well address the elephant in the room. My therapist says avoiding shit only makes things worse. We should always look the elephant directly in the eye and deal with it.”

Beau’s tone changed on a dime. He was pissed off. “You can’t force people to share their feelings. Give him a minute to—”

Oh, fuck me.

“You guys, I’m good. Jesus, that was—” I stopped myself for a second to think about how long ago that stupid show had been on. Fuck. Years. *Two? Three?*

Christ.

A long fuckin’ time.

I filled my lungs with air and thought.

I thought about how it could be possible for my heart to still feel so—raw, even after all this time.

I thought about how it felt like Jillian had just given Stuart the rose. And left me in the dust.

But that was fucking years ago.

And here I was.

Still here.

Stuck.

I hadn't even dated since then. Not including my fake relationship, that is.
I was fucking pathetic.

Jillian had made it abundantly clear that she didn't want me.

Not for anything more than a good fuck and great orgasm.

And here I was.

Waiting in the wings like she'd change her mind at any minute.

When she obviously wasn't.

Not ever.

I was the chump.

The cheater.

Christ.

Just when I thought I couldn't feel worse about myself—I hit an all-time low.

I let out the breath I was holding. “That was years ago. I'm fine. Jillian and I are—fine.”

I saw Beau and Trey glance at each other. “Whenever Lexi says she's ‘fine,’ I have to think real hard about how I fucked up,” Trey said straight to Beau.

Beau reeled in his line and said, “Yep, that's the one word you never want to hear. I agree.”

I rolled my eyes. These idiots didn't know what they were talking about. “Okay, then. I'm great.”

Trey whistled and shivered. “Whenever ‘great’ comes right after ‘fine,’ I know I'm in big trouble.”

Beau's head nodded slowly. "Exactly."

I muttered to myself, "Whatever."

Trey snorted and said, "That's the worst word of all."

Beau answered him instantly, "I don't know, I think 'fine' is the worst. 'Whatever' is definitely trouble, but 'fine' has that—" he paused for a moment, "dismissive attitude that always comes with it."

Trey laughed. "Uh, yeah, but 'whatever' is the final nail in the coffin."

No joke, I was two seconds away from jumping into the lake—when suddenly Trey yelled out, "I've got something! Holy shit, this one's a whopper!"

I quickly reeled in my rod and dropped it on the deck. Then I stepped over to see if Trey needed any help.

He had one hand on the handle, and one on the reel. His rod was curved down and he pulled up with much effort.

It did look like this was going to be a big one.

"I'll grab the net," I said, and reached over the seat to get it. Trey kept reeling in and pulling.

"This one's gonna be a whale," he grunted. I wished I could help him, but this was his catch. All we could do was wait patiently and be here if he needed us.

"Is there something I should be doing?" Beau asked quietly with a ton of hesitation in his voice.

After I leaned over the side of the boat, I said, "Nothing yet. Right now we wait and see what Trey's caught."

Another minute or two and Trey was grunting with every pull backward.

“Jesus, I don’t think I’ve had one fight me like this before.”

Thirty seconds later, he pulled the culprit out of the water.

“What the fuck?” Trey breathed heavily as we all stared at what he had hanging from the hook.

A few seconds later—and Beau and I were cracking up laughing. I sat down on the deck and set the net down.

I wouldn’t be needing it for the dripping, soggy white underwear Trey had managed to catch.

Beau laughed so hard he had tears running down his cheeks. “You caught yourself a real whale there, buddy!” Beau burst out, making me laugh even harder.

“Fuckers,” Trey said while he dealt with his catch of the day. “There must’ve been a fish on there, too. I swear to God it was pulling like hell.”

At this point, I could hardly breathe. But somehow I managed to say, “It must’ve been huge. Those tightie-whities ain’t small.”

Beau doubled over and held his stomach. Even Trey finally started laughing, too. “Jesus, you guys can be assholes sometimes.”

After we’d teased him just the right amount—we got our rods and re-baited. Beau even did his own this time.

Turns out, he was a quick study.

Ten minutes later, he felt a tug on his line. And the look of excitement on his face made me grin. It took a bit of coaching, but he managed to reel in a decent-sized Trout.

I mean—decent if you weren’t all that hungry.

Unfortunately, we were all hungry.

And Beau was the only one who caught anything all day. Well, besides Trey's underwear—which we said we'd frame for him. All he did was shake his head and swear at us.

Later that night, around the campfire—we sat and ate our beans.

Straight from the cans.

Our tiny portions of fish didn't take long to eat.

“This can of beans is not going to do the trick,” I said, scooping out the last spoonful. I set my can down and reached into my bag. When I pulled out the jerky, my teammates smiled. “Thank God,” Trey said over a mouthful of beans. “I'm fucking starving.”

Beau nodded. “Me too.”

I threw them each a package and they dug into it immediately. So did I.

We talked and ate the jerky and—it was nice. It felt like it had been ages since I'd relaxed this much and laughed as much as I did.

I cleared my throat and set down my jerky. “Thanks for coming out.” I looked at my teammates as they chewed. “I know this wasn't exactly your dream trip to go on, but thanks for taking a chance and coming fishing with me.”

They both smiled genuinely at me.

“Thanks for the invite. It was fun. Even though it was cold as balls,” Trey said, and we all laughed.

Beau pulled his duffle bag closer. “Don't tell Gigi,” he said, his hand digging inside the bag. “But I broke into her stash.” He pulled out a white shopping bag and opened it. We watched him pull out a full-sized Mars bar.

A Canadian Mars bar.

“Oh, my God.” Trey held his hands out and said, “Chuck one of those babies over here.” Beau did what he asked and threw a Mars bar at Trey. Then he tossed one over to me.

“It’s been nice knowing you, man.” Trey ripped open the wrapper and took a huge bite into the chocolatey goodness. “Because your fiancée is going to kill you when she finds out you stole these.”

Beau’s shoulders bounced and he said, “I’ll have to think of a way to make it up to her.”

Trey instantly covered his ears. “Stop! Don’t say anything more. That’s my best friend you’re talking about.”

Beau tossed what looked—and sounded—like a box of Smarties at him. Trey caught it and grinned.

Beau asked him, “Who’s your best friend, now?”

Trey chuckled. “You, man. It was always you.”

Beau lobbed a box of Smarties over to me, too. Canadian Smarties. Tiny, colorful chocolates in a hard candy shell.

Delicious.

Then he followed up by chucking over a Mars bar. A Canadian Mars bar.

“All right, since you assholes are being all sentimental and shit, I might have smuggled something.” Trey set his snacks down and yanked his duffle bag closer. He pulled out huge bags of—Ketchup chips.

“How the fuck did you fit those in your bag?” Beau asked as Trey threw us each a big bag of chips.

“I took out my change of clothes.” He opened his bag and stuck his hand right in.

“So it’s a good thing you caught that extra pair of underwear today,” Beau shot back.

Even Trey couldn’t help but laugh. “Shut up. We leave in the morning. And I’m not taking any of my clothes off. I can’t afford to spare any body heat.”

I stared down at my bag of chips and barely heard the guys talking. The last time I ate these—was at Jillian’s. And she ate them, too.

And after she did—I sucked her fingers clean.

And then she sucked me.

Fuck.

Who knew you could get blue balls from Ketchup chips?

“Don’t tell me you hate Ketchup chips. That’s practically a national requirement,” Trey teased me.

I sighed and opened the bag. The delicious smell of ketchup chips assaulted my nose. “I’m a good Canadian. See?” I scooped up a handful of chips and crunched them down.

“You’re a messy Canadian,” Trey said as he crunched away. His hoodie wasn’t much cleaner than mine.

I wiped my hands on my jeans and grabbed more of the reddest chips ever made.

“Lexi eats these when she’s sad, or nervous about something,” Trey shared with us.

Beau nodded his head and said, “Gigi, too. She cries directly into the bag when she gets homesick, or she’s stressed.”

A thought entered my mind about Jillian. *I wondered if she only ate*

Ketchup chips when she was nervous or stressed out?

Guess I'd never find out. Not now.

Nope.

That was all Stuart's problem.

Beau cleared his throat. "And what do you do—when you're sad or stressed?" He looked at Trey and I felt the air around us grow thick.

"Eat Ketchup chips," he said, crunching another mouthful. "Go to the gym," more crunching, "Read. And seduce my wife."

Beau grinned and chuckled. "All in that order?"

Trey and I laughed and kept eating. "I do a lot of things, man. What I don't do is reach for a pill bottle anymore."

Beau and I nodded in silence. I wasn't sure what to say to that.

"Proud of you," Beau said in a quiet voice. "I mean, I knew you could climb out of that hole. I'm just really fuckin' glad you did it."

Trey's eyes got glassy and so did mine. A dry burning sensation set up behind my eyes, and my guts twisted. I wasn't around for everything that Trey had gone through. And I felt horrible I'd missed it.

"Thanks. You had more faith in me than I did, I think," Trey answered back. He set the bag of chips down and rubbed his hands together.

I peered over at Trey. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to help. I wish you'd called me," I said quietly, feeling a deeper sting behind my eyes.

Trey sighed loudly and looked at the fire for a few moments before he spoke again. His eyes shot to mine. "There wasn't anything you could do. I didn't realize how bad things were until—" he stopped for a second and took another breath, "until I did. But I appreciate you saying that." He paused for

another few seconds. “But to be honest, there was nothing you could have done. There was nothing anyone could do. I had to do it.”

We were all blinking away tears, whether we’d ever admit to that or not. It was a great moment.

“I’m glad you came out the other side. A lot don’t,” I said and looked him straight in the eye. “You should feel proud of yourself. I hope you do.”

Trey leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He gazed at both of us and told us something I was not expecting, “I’m scared as shit most days. Sometimes the anxiety of it all—eats me up inside.”

My eyes hit Beau’s, to find he was already looking at me. And the sadness in his expression probably matched mine.

Jillian’s speculation about Trey had been right on the money. He was afraid. And that was likely affecting his game.

“Sounds pretty fucking normal to me,” I said and nodded my head at Trey. “Don’t think you’d be human if that shit didn’t follow you around for a while.”

His shoulders slumped slightly, and I could see what looked like a glimmer of relief wash over his face. Which was interesting because my guts had unknotted a bit.

“One day at a time, right?” He kept his eyes on me.

I smiled at him. “You know the superstar fisherman over there,” I jerked my chin at Beau, “and I have got your back, right? And not just on the ice. All the time.”

Trey’s eyes filled with tears, and he closed them. His thumb and forefinger pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Today, tomorrow,” my voice creaked a bit too much, but I didn’t give a fuck, “and whenever you need us. We’re there for you.”

I saw Beau quickly swipe his eyes. “That asshole’s right. Our door’s always open. No questions asked.”

Trey nodded and sniffled a little. Then he sighed. “All right, do we need to hug this out?”

Beau and I laughed and smiled at each other over the fire. When our laughter settled, Trey stared at me. “You miss her,” he stated just above a whisper. “I love her to pieces, but what she did you—” he slowly shook his head, “that was fucking awful. I rolled around in the fetal position for an hour after she gave that idiot the rose.”

The knots in my stomach tightened and I found it tough to breathe. But I managed.

I shrugged and opened a Mars bar. “Shit happens,” was all I said—was all I wanted to say.

Well, no.

It wasn’t all I wanted to say.

I wanted to tell him that I agreed wholeheartedly with his conclusion.

That for a short time, she’d recently let me back into her bed.

And I’d assumed that meant I was back in her life.

But I wasn’t.

Not even close.

Nope.

She was just using me.

Again.

And fuck if I could tell the difference.

I was pretty sure I needed my head examined, because when she was with me—it was the best thing I’d ever experienced. With anyone.

No matter if I was sitting beside her killing zombies—or balls deep inside of her hot, wet pussy.

The two of us together were dynamite.

How she couldn’t see that—I’d never know.

None of this I could tell him. I’d have to continue sucking it up and living with it.

“Jillian’s a great woman. She made her decision years ago.” I reminded him, and hoped he’d let it go.

But apparently it was Beau’s turn to chime in, “I like her, too. She’s like a sister to me.” His gaze dropped to the fire for a minute. He looked over at me and said, “But this whole situation is fucked up something awful. I swear, she cringes whenever that douche canoe is around. It makes zero sense. Anyone with eyes could tell how in love you guys were on the show.”

The knots in my stomach were pulled so tightly—they were about to rip right apart. Still, I couldn’t let them know that.

“She’s made her choice,” I reiterated again, saying as little as possible. The cameras were still around, and I was more than aware of that. The last thing I wanted to do was out myself—or our affair—on national television.

Trey spoke up next, “Well, she made the wrong choice.”

Beau nodded his head and ripped off a piece of beef jerky with his teeth. “Totally fuckin’ wrong choice.”

While their support was nice to have—rehashing all of this shit didn't do much for me. Except fuck with my head even more than it already had.

After that, we didn't talk for a while. We ate and chewed and sat.

It took some extra courage, but there was something I'd wanted to address. Something I'd been avoiding.

Finally, I turned to Beau. "We've got your back, too. You know that, right? On the ice, and off?"

He had a surprised—almost confused expression on his face. "I know," he answered quickly then gazed off to the side for a minute. When he looked back at me, he asked, "Why did you mention that?" His tone was genuine—not mad or angry at all.

"Sometimes I feel like you're—" I started, but Trey took over.

"Like you're always looking over our shoulders, making sure we're doing what we're supposed to be doing."

Beau's jaw dropped, and he stared at Trey.

Then he gazed over at me. "Is that how you feel?"

I nodded. "Yeah. And I get it. I mean, you're our captain and that's your job. But we're all highly qualified—and highly paid—to do our jobs. You need to let us do them. You also need to let us help you out when you need it."

He opened another Mars bar and took a bite. "All right, what else? Let's get it out in the open."

And we did.

Fuck.

Did we ever.

It was probably the most brutally honest conversation I'd ever had with anyone in my life.

Some of it hurt.

Me.

Beau.

Trey.

But all of it was necessary to move on and improve.

Afterward, Trey let out a huge breath. "Jesus, all of this soul-searching is making me tired. I'm fucking exhausted."

He was telling the truth. I could hardly keep my eyes open. We put out the fire and got ready for bed.

I climbed into my sleeping bag and shut my eyes.

And then I felt something—or someone behind me. "What the fuck are you doing?" I asked my tentmate.

"I'm cold," Trey said, "If we squeeze together, we'll conserve body heat." He moved in closer.

"When you said you had my back," I elbowed him and he grunted, "I didn't think you meant literally."

He squished in even closer. And quite honestly—I did feel warmer. My good sleeping bags were back home in Alberta. This one wasn't near as good.

"I've always got your back, Cash. Now let me steal your heat."

Beau cut in. "Would you guys cut it out? I'm try-trying to sleep." Beau's teeth chattered slightly.

I felt sorry for him and decided to give in. "He's not wrong. It is a lot

warmer.”

Trey flopped around and the whole tent moved as he pulled Beau’s sleeping bag.

“What the fuck?” Beau yelled, and I chuckled to myself. Trey had now successfully sandwiched himself between us.

A short time later, Beau whispered, “If any of you assholes tell a soul about this—”

We all laughed—warmly.

It had been a long day, and sleep was slipping over me. So, when Trey’s voice pulled me back, I was a little ticked.

“You still love her, right?” he asked, and I immediately knew who he was talking about.

“If I answer, will you shut up and go to sleep?” I muttered with a loud yawn.

“Yeah.”

I sighed and decided to tell him the truth. There weren’t any cameras in here. “Then, yes. I still love her.”

A large hand reached around my body—and hugged me. “I’m sorry, man.” There was so much emotion in his voice, that I honestly got choked up.

“Me too, Cash,” Beau said, and then another hand grabbed onto my sleeping bag and pulled and pulled. A few tears escaped, and I was grateful for the darkness.

And I was grateful for the two men in this tent with me—who had my back.

Literally.

Jillian

“It’s an old recipe. I can give it to you if you want,” I said to Gianna who was currently very busy scooping up generous portions of my spinach dip. My mom used to make it whenever people came over.

And sometimes, she’d make it for supper. We’d hunker down for the night and watch all of her favorite eighties movies.

I took in a deep breath and tucked that memory back into a deep pocket in my brain. I had other things to deal with now.

Like what the heck would be on this week’s episode.

The show had followed me around last weekend. They wanted footage of me going into different stores. One where I picked out a China pattern.

Another one where I set up a wedding registry.

And the final one where I—tried on wedding dresses.

All of that would seem fairly typical of someone who was about to get married.

Exciting even.

Except I didn't want to marry Stuart.

And after I tried on the tenth dress—or maybe it was the twelfth—I had a bit of a—well, I had a strong reaction to that dress.

Because I freaking loved it.

And as soon as I walked out onto the raised platform and looked at myself—I imagined walking down the aisle.

To Cash.

And then I realized that would never happen.

Ever.

Stupid, horrible Stuart would be at the end of the aisle.

In the blink of an eye, I felt hot, itchy welts begin to form on my arms. I scratched, but that only made them worse.

When I looked in the mirror, I saw red welts creeping up my neck.

Then my back started itching.

“Get it off, get it off!” I screamed, clawing at the buttons on my back. I couldn't reach them, though, and that sent me into an even bigger panic.

“Help me, oh, my God, get this fucking thing off of me,” I yelled at the top of my lungs as I dropped to my knees. I couldn't breathe. The dress was choking me.

“I'll get you out, Jillian. Give me a minute,” I heard a calm, kind voice behind me. I turned to see Clara, one of the regular film crew. She was super young, but always sweet and helpful.

And she got me out of that dress in no time so I could finally breathe again.

Unfortunately, my stomach hadn't gotten the message that the threat was over. It still felt the horrible, impending doom.

"Oh, no," I said, feeling bile rising in my throat. I ran toward the bathroom. All I had on was a strapless bra and my panties. But getting to the bathroom took priority over my current state of undress.

Luckily, I arrived in the nick of time.

After I washed my face off, I stared into the mirror.

And I hardly recognized the woman staring back at me.

The circles under my eyes looked darker, and my cheeks seemed hollowed out.

If I was doing a makeover on the woman in the mirror, I'd first suggest a really good concealer—and a week of sleep.

The concealer I could find.

The sleep—well, that wasn't going to happen. I had too much to do, and not all that much time.

"Hey, are you okay?" Clara asked from the doorway.

Gosh.

She was so kind.

I wanted to tell her I was fine. That I'd had a reaction to something I ate. Only, I knew that wasn't true because I hadn't eaten anything this morning.

I'd taught my yoga class, done some work on my website, and then rushed to get ready for today's excursions.

I opened my mouth to tell Clara I was fine. Instead, I opened my mouth and said, "Nope."

The small, worried smile she had on her lips fell right off. “Oh, Jillian,” she sighed and shut the door behind her.

The tears that fell down my cheeks came fast—and hard. I could barely see Clara walking toward me.

When she got close enough, her hands touched my shoulders, and pulled me in for a giant hug.

“What the heck are you doing, girl?” she asked quietly as her body moved me side to side like she was rocking me. “Why are you marrying that douche canoe? We all know you love Cash. You’re perfect for each other.”

A new set of tears began falling, and I honestly had no idea how long I was in that bathroom with Clara. I told her I was stuck. That I had to marry Stuart.

After all that, she asked, “But you love Cash, right?” Her voice was so sweet and caring. I didn’t want to lie.

“Of course, I love Cash. He’s my soulmate, Clara. When—” I wiped my fingers underneath my eyes, “I first met him, it felt like I’d just completed a puzzle. Everything clicked into place, and life made sense.”

Her eyebrows rose. “Then break it off with Stuart and marry Cash.”

I shut my eyes and shook my head. “It’s not that easy, honey. It’s really not that easy.”

She brought me my clothes—and my sunglasses. And she told the crew that I was done filming for the day.

After I swore her to secrecy, she walked me out to my car.

Clara assured me that my—incident—wouldn’t make it onto the show. She’d see to it.

I believed that she believed that—but I also knew the show would air whatever would get them the most viewers and the most ratings.

Clara was young.

I doubted she had much—if any, pull with the powers that be.

So, yeah.

I was more than a little worried about tonight's show. And what the heck I'd say if my screaming fit made it in.

How in the world was I supposed to explain that to everyone?

And why, oh, why had I bared my soul to a perfect stranger?

Gah.

I was so stupid.

I should have kept my mouth shut. Like always.

“Whoa, is that Jillian's spinach dip?” Lexi asked as she walked into the living room.

Gianna nodded her head and grabbed another piece of bread to dunk into the dip.

“Yum, move over. This is my favorite.” Lexi settled in beside Gianna and stuck a cracker inside the bread bowl container.

Everyone was here. The dogs were over at Trey's house, so I didn't have to worry about them.

I grabbed my lemonade off the counter and sat down on the couch beside Gigi.

“I think you need to start making two of those from now on.” She pointed at the spinach dip and giggled.

I nodded and took a drink. “I think you’re right.”

Niki’s hand went up. “Show’s on!” she said, and everyone quickly quieted down. My stomach didn’t, though. And neither did my mind.

Both were nervous and wished for the next hour to fly by.

“Welcome back to the show,” Marco said into the camera. The audience clapped and the camera panned quickly around them.

“Do we have a show for you tonight!” Marco punched the air with his fists and the audience clapped harder and whistled.

When it quieted, he continued. “Take a look at what we have in store for you!” Marco’s arm swung to the side, and he stepped away as the large screen in the back flashed to life.

It showed Cash ripping a price tag off Beau’s waders. “You forgot to remove this.” Cash handed the tag to Beau. Everyone laughed as we listened to Cash and Trey. They relentlessly teased Beau about his brand new, shiny fishing gear.

It was cute to see their camaraderie, and how they treated each other. You could feel how much care and respect they held for their teammates.

The screen switched to them around the fire. It was dark, but the campfire glowed on their faces. “You miss her?” Trey asked Cash—and the entire room stopped moving.

And breathing.

Oh.

My.

Gosh.

Trey didn’t say anyone’s name—but I knew everyone assumed it was me.

“Oh, boy,” Niki said, her handful of popcorn frozen halfway to her mouth. Even she couldn’t move a muscle.

The next clip was of me.

In one of the wedding dresses.

“Double oh, boy,” Niki whispered while our eyes were glued to the TV.

The screen faded to black, and then the intro music and montage started playing.

Yikes.

While I was happy to see Cash had taken my advice on team bonding activities—I really didn’t want to deal with any backlash from it.

And from the sound of it, their trip got a little—intense. I just hoped it didn’t go in the direction that the show had teased.

Otherwise, I’d be getting a call from Stuart. Or his dad.

The girls talked in a low hum during the commercial break. Nobody addressed me directly. Gigi answered a question from a new player.

My poor stomach was practically turning inside out.

“Show’s back on,” Niki announced, and everyone looked back at the TV.

“Please welcome my wonderful co-host,” Marco introduced Christina, and she walked onto the stage.

“Thanks, Marco,” Christina waved to the audience and smiled widely. “I’m excited to be here.”

The applause from the audience slowly died down, and the camera focused back on Marco. “We have quite the show for everyone today, don’t you agree?”

The camera shot to Christina. “We really do. And I’m happy to say that our women’s team has never looked better. And they’ve got the results to show it. Another three wins on the road last week. I’m loving how strong this team is, and how they’ve grown so much in the last couple of years together.”

Both co-hosts came up on the screen. Marco tilted his head to the side in an exaggerated way. “You haven’t mentioned the men’s team yet, Christina. I wonder why?”

I bit my lip and inwardly groaned. The men hadn’t won a game. Not yet, anyway. Of course, Marco would feel the need to point that out right away.

Christina had a professional way about her—but you could tell underneath all of that—she wanted to slug him.

“Give them some time. I think you’re going to see some different results soon enough.”

Marco looked straight out into the camera. “Anyone else here think Christina’s being a little too optimistic?” He chuckled and clapped his hands together. And the audience laughed right along with him.

Christina stayed silent and glared at him. Then she said, “I’m betting after Thanksgiving, these guys are going to surprise you. I already see some big improvements. And if they keep adjusting their offense like they have—I see great things happening for this men’s team.”

Marco gave her a fake smile. “You’re really looking on the bright side. But let’s get back to the business at hand.”

I took a much needed deep breath when the next clip was us playing hockey. We just got home from playing a series in B.C. And boy, did we kick some ass. The girls loved watching the fantastic clips.

Then it switched to some montages of us hanging out at different

restaurants. Of course, we hit a mall or two. Because, yes, we were hockey players. But also, yes, we were one hundred percent shoppers.

Well, most of us, anyway.

There were a few girls who hated shopping. So, they hung back and did other stuff.

The video clips were cute and very complimentary to us. It actually gave me some hope that maybe they'd continue in that vein.

Fifty-five minutes later, my hopes were dashed when the show focused back on the fishing trip.

At first, everyone laughed themselves silly at Trey catching a pair of gross underwear. His excitement—before they'd discovered what was on the end of his hook—had been so cute. I loved that guy.

But the only one who'd caught anything—besides underwear—had been Beau. And that fish didn't look big enough to feed three huge hockey players.

Not surprisingly, they'd all managed to smuggle in snacks. I couldn't blame them. These men ate a lot, and the show had told them all they'd give them was one can of beans each. The men would have to work for their supper.

Anyway, Cash shared his jerky, Trey shared his enormous bags of ketchup chips. And Beau shared his candy stash.

Which I figured he'd likely stolen from his fiancée.

My suspicions were confirmed when Gigi stood up and shouted, "Hey! That's my stash!"

We all laughed as Gigi frowned at the TV. Beau would be in the doghouse for that.

The next part showed them having a very, very, very touching heart-to-heart—where they all shared their concerns and feelings.

It.

Was.

Wonderful.

My heart broke for Trey.

But then the other guys patched it back together.

More than a few of us got teary-eyed.

After that emotional rollercoaster, the camera focused on Trey as he said, “You miss her, right?”

Gigi gasped and sat right back down.

I tried to swallow over the dry lump in my throat. My heart constricted and twisted inside my chest.

I didn’t want to hear his answer.

Either way—I couldn’t deal with it.

“Shit happens,” Cash answered back. “Jillian’s a great woman. She made her decision years ago.”

Beau added in, “I love her, too. She’s like a sister to me.” He looked at the fire for a few seconds, then back to Cash. “But this whole situation is fucked up something awful. I swear, she cringes whenever that douche canoe is around. It makes zero sense. Anyone with eyes could tell how in love you guys were on the show.”

“Oh, boy,” Niki said as she stuffed a handful of popcorn in her mouth. The rest of the room stayed completely silent.

“She’s made her choice,” Cash told Beau. The sad, resigned tone of his voice broke my heart.

Trey turned to Beau. “Well, she made the wrong choice.”

Beau nodded and bit into his jerky. “Totally fuckin’ wrong choice.”

A pain shot through my hands, and I suddenly realized I’d been digging my fingernails into the palms of my hands. I opened my fists and took a long, deep breath.

A hand grabbed mine and squeezed. “You okay?” Gigi whispered to me. She was trying to be quiet—but the entire room was silent. So, I’m sure everyone heard.

Not that it mattered.

They all probably shared Trey and Beau’s opinions.

I mean—I did, too.

I didn’t look at Gigi, but I nodded in response to her question.

Even though I was not okay.

Nope.

Nothing about this situation was okay.

It would never be okay.

Thankfully, the screen came to a halt and Marco came back. “Whoa, it looks like those three guys had quite the fishing trip.” He spun around and spoke directly to Christina, “And what do you think about Cash’s revelation about Jillian?”

She looked more than uncomfortable. “That’s not really any of my business. But I can understand his point of view. I think we’ve all gone through difficult breakups before.” The audience clapped and there was a low

hum from them talking to each other.

“Come on, that’s some juicy stuff right there!” Marco’s eyebrows rose and he grinned into the camera. “I wonder if we’ll ever find out why Jillian dumped Cash at the rose ceremony? Because I’m with Trey and Beau on this one. Why would she have chosen Stuart over Cash?”

Christina looked like she wanted to bodycheck Marco right off the stage.

So did I.

“We don’t know what goes on behind closed doors, Marco.”

“Well, actually—” Marco’s arm flung out and he pointed at the large screen, “we do now.”

The screen went nearly pitch black. You could hear some rustling around, but it was mostly quiet.

Until Trey’s very, very soft voice asked, “You still love her, right?”

A few seconds passed, and in the still, dark night, Cash said, “If I answer, will you shut up and go to sleep?” He let out a loud yawn. I knew it was his yawn because I’d heard it many times before.

“Yeah,” Trey stated immediately.

Cash sighed and said, “Then, yes. I still love her.”

Oh.

My.

Gosh.

My heart exploded.

And butterflies started fluttering around in my belly.

Niki said, “Oh, boy.”

Gianna gasped, “What in the world?”

Trey’s voice floated up and out of the screen. “I’m sorry, man.”

Then we heard Beau say, “Me too, Cash.”

I closed my eyes, feeling the burn behind them was too much. It matched the burn I felt behind my heart.

Marco and Christina popped back up on the screen. I saw their lips moving.

But I couldn’t understand what the heck they were saying.

Cash just admitted to his teammates—and the whole world—that he still loved me.

Even after everything I’d done to him.

I didn’t deserve his love. That I knew for sure.

It was at that point I realized how freaking selfish I was because—even though I couldn’t be with Cash—could never be with Cash—knowing that he loved me made my heart start tap dancing with joy.

And that was all kinds of messed up.

Cash

Fuck.

I shifted my backpack over my other shoulder and hoped the figure standing beside my truck was simply a mirage.

Because she was absolutely the last person on the face of this earth that I wanted to speak with.

Ever again.

As I stepped closer, I shook my head. “If you need a ride home,” I jerked my thumb behind me, “ask someone else.” I nodded my head back toward the rink. “I don’t have room for you.”

Jillian bit her lip in that cute little way she had about her when she was unsure about something.

“Cash, I think,” she started to say, but I didn’t let her finish.

I pulled my keys out of my pocket and aimed them at my truck. “I don’t give a shit what you think, Jillian. Go grab someone else in the rink. Or text Trey. I’m sure he’ll help you out if your car’s fucked up or if you need a ride.” I pressed the button to unlock the doors.

Her shoulders sank as she gazed down to the ground and back up to me.

And fuck if I didn't feel like a complete dick for talking to her like this.
But she embarrassed me in front of the entire goddamn world.

Again.

Jesus Christ.

How many times was I going to let her kick me around on National TV?

Okay, so maybe it had been me—and my fuckin' words.

But still.

I didn't think there were any cameras inside the tent.

No.

The show specifically told us there wouldn't be any cameras inside the tent.

Technically, the camera that broadcast my admission of love for Jillian—
was outside the tent.

Still.

It had been late.

And I was mostly asleep.

And I really wasn't thinking about the likelihood of the outside camera
even being on or recording.

“My car's fine. I just want to talk about the show,” she said almost
sheepishly.

I glared at her and shook my head. “I don't,” I said grabbing the door
handle and yanking it open. After I tossed my bag onto the passenger seat, I
slid inside.

I almost closed my door.

Almost.

“You said you still loved me,” those six words burst out of her mouth so quickly that it sounded like one.

My head spun to the left and I spat out, “Don’t worry, Jillian. I’m workin’ real hard to stop doing that. Goodbye.”

With that, I slammed my door and put my truck in gear.

The entire drive, I blared music from one of my country music playlists. Part of me wanted to go straight to the country bar and ask if I could start their open mic early.

The other part of me wanted to go home and crack open a few beers.

The entire way home, I felt like I was in some kind of haze. How in the fuck was this my life?

I’d finally had another chance with Jillian—and I somehow fucked it up. We’d been so goddamn close. I knew how she felt when she was lying in my arms. I could feel it.

But somehow—that wasn’t enough for her.

Stuart, that douche canoe, meant more to her than I did.

How in the goddamn world did that make any kind of sense at all?

Yeah, he came from money.

Stuart wrecked of it.

But I had fucking money, too.

Even if Stuart the douche canoe had more money than I did, I still had a lot.

I mean, how much cash did Jillian need? I'd been making millions a year.
For years.

She knew that.

Christ, the entire fucking world knew that.

But for some reason that wasn't enough.

Or—I wasn't enough.

My heart cracked again and it fucking hurt. I rubbed the middle of my chest and took a deep breath.

Okay, I tried to take a deep breath.

But I couldn't.

It just hurt too fucking much.

When I finally pulled into the parking lot, I was relieved.

Relieved to be home.

Relieved to be away from the cameras.

Relieved to be away from Jillian.

I pulled my bag off the seat and opened the door.

And I kid you not.

The second I stepped out of my truck—Jillian pulled in right beside me.

Fuck me.

I slammed my door shut and walked around her car. "Cash, wait a second!" Jillian called out, but I kept moving. There was no way in fucking hell I was going to stop and talk with her. What was she going to say? All that woman could do now was drive another nail into my coffin.

If I let her.

And I never would.

Not again.

Nope.

I was done with her.

For sure this time.

“I’m busy, Jillian!” I yelled back. “Go call your fiancé. I’m sure he’d be more than happy to hear from you.”

A warm hand landed on my arm and tugged. “Give me one freaking minute,” she said, sounding completely out of breath. “I deserve one minute.”

That made me stop on a dime and laugh. I turned to her and squinted. “Are you kidding me right now?” I stared a hole through her. “Please tell me you did not just say you deserve anything from me.” I pulled my arm out of her grasp. “Because that’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard. After everything you’ve done to me—” I inhaled sharply, “I owe you? I owe you exactly fuck-all, Jillian. Now leave me the hell alone.”

The expression on her face changed so drastically I thought she might start crying.

But why?

Why the fuck did anything I say or do affect her at all? She’d dumped me.

Twice.

But honest to God—she was shocked.

And fuck me all to hell—I hated myself for talking to her like this. But she was the one forcing my hand.

Then she surprised me and leaned in. “After everything we shared, yes, I deserve your ear for one minute.”

That hit me directly, smack-dab, in the chest. If she'd fired a cannon a few feet away—it couldn't have hurt this much.

My eyebrows shot up, and my jaw fell open. “Are you serious? That's the biggest load of bullshit I've ever heard. You don't deserve one second of my time after what you've done to me. This is bullshit.” I pointed at her face. “Leave me the fuck alone. I'm finished with you.”

I turned around and walked away.

Cash

“We had a great fucking week, man,” Trey said and then guzzled half of his large water bottle back.

Beau grinned and agreed, “That was the best we’ve played.”

Trey wiped his mouth and nodded. “Yep, let’s see what that fucker has to say about three wins on the road.”

That fucker was, of course, Marco.

The show was set to start any minute. His constant mocking about our play hadn’t exactly been well received by the guys. But this week, he’d have to eat his own shirt. Because we tore it up on the road.

I had to admit, I was looking forward to Marco—not—laughing at us tonight.

The opening song started blaring through the TV. It surprised me how nervous I was to watch us on screen tonight. Nervous in a good way.

For once.

We’d made some great plays that people were still talking about.

And that felt fucking awesome.

The other good thing was not being anywhere near Jillian all week. Not having to see her and actively ignore her was a relief.

She'd knocked on my door a few times before I'd left with the team.

And no, I didn't answer.

I did have some self-preservation left.

Not a lot.

But some.

We got back late last night. I was in bed, and I thought I heard a light knock on my front door. But I stuck my earbuds in and shut my eyes.

Of course, I could try my best to avoid Jillian during the day.

But.

The nights were a whole different animal.

While I was asleep, my mind went to all the places I wouldn't allow it to go during the day.

It was a beautiful torture.

Me at Jillian's place. The two of us hanging out, killing zombies. And then one thing leads to the next—and we end up taking a—break. No one took a—break—like Jillian.

No one.

She was the absolute best. By far.

Then I'd dream of us skiing on the mountains near my cabin. Just us.

Then we'd be in the cabin. In my bed.

Keeping each other warm.

Those were the cruelest dreams.

I loved my cabin.

And I'd never forget the time Jillian had spent there with me.

But seeing her there—in the place I loved the most in the world—hurt so much worse when I woke up and real life caught up with me.

Jillian would never be at my cabin.

Ever again.

We'd never ski on my mountains.

Or sit around my firepit while we played our guitars and sang.

She'd never be in my bed. And I'd never hold her all night long.

Every night before I went to sleep, I prayed that I wouldn't dream about her. I begged God and the universe to stop punishing me for whatever it was punishing me for. Because these nightly dreams were a brutal assault on my mind.

And my heart.

Marco and Christina flashed onto the screen, taking me out of my current misery.

“Well, what a difference a week can make,” Marco said with a huge, movie star grin. He looked over at Christina. “Our men certainly pulled up their socks.” The audience clapped and hooted loudly.

And it felt real fucking good.

“Yeah, that's right,” Trey said while giving the guys around him high-fives.

“Welcome back, everyone. And let's not forget about my wonderful co-

host, Christina LaBrecque.” The audience clapped as the camera panned the crowd.

“Thanks, Marco. I’m happy to be back for another show. And yes, you’re right about our men—they certainly got their game on this week. It was an absolute joy to watch them out there.”

For the next several minutes, they showed clips from the three games we played.

And won.

It was pretty great for our team to finally be shown in a positive light. I could feel the pride in my teammates surrounding me.

The next part of the show focused on the women’s team. They’ve been sweeping nearly all of their games. Predictions already had them winning the cup again this year. They certainly deserved it. Their team played like a well-oiled machine. I loved watching their games.

And I had to admit—for the first time, I enjoyed watching this show. Normally, my guts were in a knot, wondering what kind of horseshit they were going to spew about me.

And Jillian.

But so far tonight—nothing. It looked like they were onto other things, and that suited me just fine.

The show continued on their feel-good theme for the evening. Gigi and Beau and his twins were out at a playground. Seeing Beau as a father—made me happy as fuck for the guy. Those kids were cute, and you could tell how much they loved him.

Next, it showed Trey and Lexi out for a hike. Those two really got along

well. I've never seen Trey look at another woman the way he looked at his wife. She was fully enamored with him, as well. And again, I was glad he found that. And kept it.

The large screen in the back faded to black, and the camera zoomed right in on Marco. "But, not everyone on the teams appear to be getting along." Marco paused for a long moment. Well, he couldn't be talking about the men's team. Other than the regular jabs, nobody was arguing. Not as far as I knew, anyway.

It must be the women's team.

Marco stepped away and the big screen started playing—holy shit.

Holy.

Motherfucking.

Shit.

It showed Jillian trying to talk to me in the parking lot at the rink. There wasn't any audio.

Which made it better.

And worse.

I looked plenty pissed right off—while Jillian stood there with a meek expression her face. Until that expression turned sad.

Fuck.

It looked like I was being the asshole.

Okay, so I *was* being an asshole.

But she'd been a bigger one to me.

First.

Not that I could tell anyone that.

Nope.

Because if I did—I'd have to admit I was a liar and a cheater as well.

This was a lose/lose situation for me.

The screen played me peeling out of the parking lot like I was on fire.

And it showed Jillian wiping underneath her eyes.

Fuck.

Me.

The next clip started with me entering the parking lot at our condos. Jillian pulled in just as I was jumping out.

She laid into me—and I laid into her right back.

But I was bigger than her. And I definitely looked like the bigger jackass in this scenario.

Christ.

My guts twisted right back up, and that all too familiar tightness in my chest returned.

The only thing I could be grateful for was there was zero audio. Nobody could hear what we said.

Not that it mattered all that much. My body language and facial expressions told my feelings fairly accurately.

“Well, well, well,” Marco said with his hands together. He stared grimly into the camera. “It looks like Cash is definitely still carrying a flame for Jillian. As he stated last week. And now, he’s taking it out on her. What do you think, Christina?” He turned and set his thumb and forefinger on his chin

as though he were pondering something serious.

Fuck me.

Christina shrugged and let out a sigh. “Look, Marco, as I’ve said many times before—” she inhaled and looked out at the audience, “we don’t know what goes on behind closed doors. And we don’t know what precipitated this argument. There’s no context here whatsoever.”

Marco’s head tilted and he took a step back. “You can’t see the context here, Christina? Because I see a lot of it. Jillian is trying to be kind to Cash—and he’s yelling at her.”

They spoke back and forth for a couple more minutes—but I’d already tuned out.

This was a complete and utter disaster. Explaining this away was going to be impossible.

Or more like, explaining this in a way that didn’t make me look like an absolute dick—was impossible.

Fuck.

Cash

Called to supper.

That was what the email from the owners said.

Everyone knew that meant I was about to be reprimanded by the highest tier of this team.

Angelique and Marcel.

At their mansion.

Oh, and I was the only one invited.

From what I could tell, anyway. No one else left when I did. And no one talked about it at practice today.

Not that the guys were being all that friendly to me since the show aired last night.

Trey and Beau had come over to my place after nine o'clock. In Trey's words, they wanted to know, "What the fuck that was all about?"

Beau added in, "We know you two have a—past. But man, you can't go talking to Jillian like that. She's our friend."

There was no way out of this mess. I looked like a dick.

Yeah, I'd acted like one.

But Jillian had deserved it—cornering me, and asking me about what—what I'd said on national fucking TV.

She should have left it alone.

She'd kicked me out of her life—again. And now, she needed to let sleeping dogs lie.

Not rub salt in the deep wound she'd left me with.

I did my best at explaining away my actions. I told them she wanted to talk. And obviously, I didn't.

I never wanted to speak to her again.

But the way they looked at me—and the way the whole fucking team gave me the cold shoulder today—I knew I was going to have to do more than that.

Fuck.

I pulled up to the mansion and parked. Christ, this place was huge. I walked up the steps and admired the enormous Mediterranean-style stone columns. Not one—but two balconies hung overhead. I knocked on the oversized double doors and their butler, Henri, opened the door. “Hi.” I gave him a nod, and he smiled at me.

“*Monsieur Clemens, entrez,*” he said and pulled the door open wide.

“Thanks, Henri. Nice to see you again.”

He smiled at me and shut the door. “*Oui*, nice to see you, too. Follow me, *s'il vous plaît.*” He motioned with his hand. I followed him to the front room and thanked him.

Exactly one step into the room, and I heard, “Hi, Cash.”

My eyes shot to the right—and sitting on a chair was—Jillian.

Fuck.

Me.

“Ah, I see you two have met,” Henri said as he stepped to the side and let me through.

“You could say that,” I muttered under my breath while I glared at Jillian.

And Christ—she looked gorgeous in that tight red dress. Her long hair was swept up, showing off her bare shoulders. Of course, my eyes went right from Jillian’s bare shoulders down her perfect cleavage and curvy hips to those long, toned legs of hers. And red heels.

Jesus.

Was she intentionally trying to kill me?

Instantly, my brain conjured up an image of me picking her up, bending her over that fucking chair—and having my way with her until she screamed out my name.

Christ.

I was all kinds of fucked up.

Because even though this woman had embarrassed me in front of the entire world—more than once—I still wanted her.

Fuck.

I needed help.

And possibly a frontal lobotomy. Anything to forget all about this woman sitting in front of me.

“Marcel and Angelique will be with you shortly,” Henri said before I heard the French doors close.

I let out a frustrated sigh and chose a chair across the room.

“Cash, we need to talk,” Jillian said in her soft, caring voice. Normally, I loved it when she used this tone. She reserved it for quiet times. And usually her hands—and her mouth—were trailing over me.

But not now.

Nope.

Right now, she wanted—

Fuck.

What the hell did she want?

She’d already dug the knife in. *Did she just want to twist it around a little more?*

I sat down and stared right at her. “No, we don’t.”

She bit her lip in that cute little way I loved. And it made me want to kiss those plump lips of hers.

Christ.

I really needed my head examined.

I thought by sitting over here that she’d be out of eyeshot.

But, no.

That perfect cleavage, and those gorgeous legs were still well in sight.

“Cash, honey, look at me, please,” her voice flowed like honey all over my body. Even after everything she’d pulled. I shut my eyes and took a deep breath. “You just don’t get it, do you?” I turned my head toward her. “I don’t

want to look at you. What you did—” I shook my head and gritted my teeth together. “And now everyone thinks I’m,” I slapped my hand on my chest, “the asshole. And I can’t tell anyone. Because if I do—I’ll look like an even bigger asshole.”

I stared at her glassy eyes and wondered what the hell could possibly be going on in that beautiful head of hers. *What could she be saying to herself to make this all right? Cheating on her fiancé?* Christ, that was deplorable.

I swear her chin wobbled. *What the fuck?*

“I know, and I’m sorry.” She inhaled and said, “I’m so sorry, Cash. This is all my fault. I deserved the way you spoke to me. I know that, and—”

She was suddenly interrupted. “Magnifique! Our guests have arrived,” Marcel’s voice blasted into the room.

We both turned our heads to see the owners of this house—and our teams—standing at the now open French doors.

Jillian and I stood to greet them.

After the hellos and double cheek air kisses, we sat back down.

Marcel helped Angelique get comfortable. They really seemed like a tight couple. No kids, but they had the French bulldogs—who you’d swear were their kids.

Marcel doted on Angelique like she was his queen.

You’d never find a more eccentric couple. I was certain of that. But what they had together worked. And it had worked for decades.

“It was so lovely of you two to join us for supper at such short notice,” Angelique said, as though we had a choice on whether to show up or not. Which we did not.

If the owners of your team called you in—you went.

“Thank you for the invitation.” Jillian smiled at them.

Marcel gazed lovingly at his wife before he turned to us. “While we’re excited to have you here, we have to admit there is a *petit problème* that I’m sure you two are aware of.”

Angelique added her two cents, “Marcel is correct, my loves. We are very distressed about you two. Everything on social media has, how do you say—blown up—overnight since the show aired.”

Marcel grabbed his wife’s hand and nodded his head as he looked at us with a grim expression. “Yes, my wife is telling the truth. We are quite concerned with your—relationship.”

The knots in my gut tightened. “With all due respect, there is no relationship between us. That ended when Jillian gave the rose to Stuart.”

Angelique glanced at her husband. And then her head teetered from side to side. “*Oui*, but did it, Cash? The way you look at each other sometimes, it—well, it seems like there might be more going on.” Her eyebrows rose, and I felt a sharp stabbing sensation run through my stomach.

“I assure you, nothing is going on between us. I don’t know what you think you’re seeing, but Jillian and I have been done for years. She’s engaged to Stuart, and I respect that,” I lied my ever-loving face right off. But it wasn’t like they could prove anything.

And I absolutely wouldn’t touch Jillian ever again, so it really didn’t matter anymore.

If Jillian chose not to tell her fiancé that she’d been dicking around on him—that was her decision. Not mine.

“I see,” Angelique said in a rather unconvincing tone. Her head turned to Jillian. “Is this true? Are you and Cash not involved?”

Jillian’s eyes widened, and she shook her head. “No, no, not at all.”

Angelique’s lips pursed together for a moment before she spoke again. “Your disagreements in the parking lots,” she peered at Marcel and then at me, “they look to me like a lover’s quarrel.”

I cleared my throat. “No, there’s nothing going on.” I looked at Jillian. “And there never will be.”

Marcel spoke next and he frowned at me, “Cash, you were more than just upset with Jillian. There has to be something else there, *non?*”

I shook my head again. “No.”

Marcel sighed and sat back in the couch. “All right, then. If there’s nothing going on between you, two, then we need to decide how to go forward. And save your *réputations.*”

Cash

Unfuckingbelievable. She takes my dick for a ride—and I'm the one who has to apologize.

Fuck.

Me.

How fair was this bullshit?

Zero percent fair.

But, this is what the owners wanted—or more like ordered.

And that wasn't all.

Nope.

We had to become friends.

Friends.

Me and Jillian.

Fucking friends.

Complete bullshit.

Marcel and Angelique said it was the only way to repair my rep.

I mean, yeah, okay.

I had acted like a total dick to Jillian in the parking lots.

But I had a fucking reason to act that way.

A reason that I couldn't tell one other soul in the world about.

So, where did that leave me?

Looking like I regularly yelled at unsuspecting, innocent women in parking lots.

So, last night, with their help—including Jillian's—I constructed an apology to post to social media.

Apologizing for my actions.

Promising to do better.

Fuck.

Me.

On the way home, I swear I nearly kept driving instead of taking the exit.

Ninety-nine percent of me wanted to keep on going until I hit my cabin in the mountains.

Run away from all of this bullshit.

Retire.

And never look back.

But the other one percent knew I couldn't do that.

Not yet.

I wasn't ready to hang up my skates. I loved my career and I'd worked way too hard to get where I have.

Most guys would give their right nut to be where I am right now. And I wasn't about to give it up because of this mess I'd gotten myself into.

So now, in order to save face, Jillian and I were supposed to fake a friendship.

For the sake of the team.

And our own reputations.

That was what Marcel and Angelique wanted. And whatever the owners wanted—the owners got.

Fuck.

Me.

They were the ones who'd laid down a gazillion dollars to start not one—but two new franchises.

After I got home last night, I heard a knock at the door.

When I opened it, Gigi and Lexi walked in. "Hello, ladies. What can I do for you?" I asked, wondering what the hell they were doing at my door this late at night.

Gigi started talking first. "We just grilled Jillian. But she won't talk." Her eyes narrowed and she leaned in. "What were you yelling at her about in the parking lots?"

Ah. I see. It was my turn to get grilled for information.

I crossed my arms. "That's between us. Is there something else you wanted? Otherwise, I need to get to bed." I jerked my head toward the hallway.

Lexi stepped up and stood beside Gigi. "What we need, Clemens," now she leaned in, "is for you to tell us what you guys were fighting about."

I tilted my head and put my hands on my hips. “Look, I appreciate you guys having Jillian’s back. But those were private conversations. I’m not proud of how I acted during either of them. I apologized for my part in that.”

The two women looked me over. “We like you, Cash,” Gigi stated briefly.

“We do,” Lexi added, “but we don’t like it when anyone yells at our friends. All Jillybean will say is that she deserved what you said to her. But she won’t tell us why she’d deserve to get yelled at. Or what you said.”

Christ.

I ran my hand through my hair and sighed. The fact that Jillian was taking the blame for this—fuck. That hit me right in the chest. And for some reason, I felt a whole lot lighter with that knowledge.

“Well, she’s wrong. She didn’t deserve me yelling. It was a dick move, and I won’t do it again.”

They stared at me for at least a minute before Gigi said, “We know people make mistakes, Cash. And we respect that you acknowledged it and apologized.”

Lexi nodded and stepped closer to me. “And that you didn’t try to throw her under the bus.” Lexi’s eyes scanned my face. “I can definitely respect that.”

They looked at each other.

Then back to me.

“Jillian told us we weren’t allowed to be mad at you. And that if she caught us being mad at you, she’d kick our asses.”

That made me chuckle, even though I really didn’t want to laugh.

“So, we’re going to do what she says, and trust her. Partly because we believe her,” Gigi said, but Lexi cut in.

“And partly because we’re a little afraid of her.”

I laughed out loud that time and felt some of the stress in my body dissipate.

“And also, because we really like you, Cash,” Gigi said as her hand touched my arm. “But honest to goodness, if you hurt our girl, we will kick your ass. Do you get me?”

I smiled at Gigi and nodded. “I get you. And I also think Jillian is very lucky to have you two on her side.”

They both gave me wide grins. Then, in a lower voice, I asked, “Are we good?”

Lexi smiled at me. “We’re—” she hesitated for a moment, “cautiously good.”

I nodded and felt a wave of relief. “I can accept and understand that.”

The last thing I needed was to have the women’s team kicking my ass.

After that, I thought maybe I’d sleep. But no. Every time I closed my eyes, I saw Jillian in that red dress. And then my mind took that image and made up a lot of really great scenarios.

Like her knocking on my door in that red dress.

And me pulling her inside and removing that red dress. Then carrying her to my bed. And then—well, and then a lot of things.

Needless to say, I hardly slept.

Which was shitty because I had to be up early.

I yawned and hoped the day would go by quickly. Maybe we’d luck out

and be able to leave by noon.

I turned into the tiny parking lot on my right. As soon as I pulled into the last empty stall, I noticed all the people.

Christ.

It was a fucking zoo here already, and the day had hardly begun.

I jumped out of my truck and headed into the building. It was decorated with colorful balloons and streamers. A giant “Happy Forever Home Day!!” banner hung across the far wall.

This was another one of our team bonding experiments. And the guys had come along on the one I’d chosen. So, now it was Beau’s turn.

And he picked adoption day at Trey’s brother’s vet practice.

I’d met Dr. Barnes more than a time or two over the years. He and Trey got along well.

And in the early years, we all thought Barnes would be in the big league with us.

But a few injuries set him back. And he eventually headed to vet school instead.

“Hey, man, good to see you.” Barnes walked around the counter to greet me. He shook my hand and pulled me in for a quick slap on the back. “Fuck, it’s been too long. Glad we’re in the same city. We’ll have to hit up the country bars when you’ve got a minute.”

I nodded and said, “Yeah, of course. Anytime, you name it.”

Right then, Beau, Gigi, Trey, and Lexi walked through the doors. They all looked at me and made their way through the foyer filled with people.

“People are here already?” Trey said as he took off his sunglasses. His

arm reached around Lexi's shoulders and pulled her in for a kiss.

"They're here to adopt a pet. And take a look at a few of the hot Las Vegas Angels," Lexi told him.

He gave her a smirk. "You do look hot today," he said in a suggestive tone.

Beau leaned down and kissed Gigi. "I love you," Beau said, "but we are not bringing another animal home today."

Gigi's hand fell from his face. "We—might—bring another animal home today."

Beau shook his head. "*Non, Geneviève,*" Beau used her full French name in a low, stern tone.

It didn't seem to faze Gigi at all. She rolled her eyes and said, "What about a cat? Cats are small. They don't take up much room."

Beau's eyes narrowed on his fiancée. "You know what takes up a lot of room? Twin boys and two French bulldogs."

She rolled her eyes again. "Pfft, your house is huge. You wouldn't even know if one tiny kitten was in it."

His eyebrows rose nearly to his hairline. "I'll know because I'll be the one cleaning the litter box."

Gigi answered him in French.

Beau answered back in French.

I looked over at Trey and he nodded his head toward the back room. Lexi grabbed his hand, and we headed that way.

It was quieter back here in the small office.

"Who do you think will win?" Lexi asked as we sat down. Trey took the

large chair behind the desk that was obviously his brother's. Lexi and I sat on the uncomfortable metal chairs in front.

“My money's on Gigi. But she'll have to put up a fight.” Trey sat back and lifted his feet onto the desk.

“I don't know. Beau sounded pretty set in his ways,” Lexi answered. “What do you think?” She looked at me and waited for an answer.

But before I could, Jillian walked into the office. “Hi,” she said, first looking at me, then at Trey and Lexi.

We all replied with our hellos. I stood and waved my hand at the chair. “Sit if you want,” I said and backed away to the side of the office.

Jillian walked further inside. “It's fine, Cash. I'm okay with standing.” Her voice was soft and kind.

“Oh, just sit,” Lexi ordered her in a sweet way. She patted the chair with her hand and Jillian sat down. Then they started talking about all the cute animals.

And I started counting down the minutes until I could get out of here.



THOSE SHORTS SHOULD BE ILLEGAL.

The way the cutoffs hugged Jillian's ass—fuck. And watching her long legs every time she moved or walked.

Or breathed.

Fuck.

Barnes had put us in the room with the elderly animals. And absolutely zero people had come in to see them.

Well, a few did.

And once they realized how old these animals were, they quickly retreated.

Jillian had made fast friends with one of the dogs. He was a sixteen year old Jack Russell terrier, named Wyatt.

“You are the cutest,” she told Wyatt and gave him a hug. Wyatt loved the attention and sat in her lap on the floor.

“You should adopt him. He’s really taken with you,” I said to Jillian as I picked a yappy Chihuahua.

Jillian looked over at me. “I don’t have time to take care of a dog. I can barely manage what I’m doing now. And I’m gone so much. It wouldn’t be fair to him.”

Wyatt gave her face a quick lick, and she giggled.

Fuck.

I missed her laugh.

“You’d be fine,” I told her the truth. “He could go to doggie daycare with Hailey, Angel, and Gordie.” That was true, too. “I bet you guys could take turns dropping off and picking up.”

She bit her lip for a second. “It’s a big commitment. And I don’t know if I could even care for him properly.”

I frowned and wondered what she meant.

“You know,” her voice took on a more serious tone, then she whispered, “because of his missing leg.”

I couldn’t help but burst out laughing at that. “Why are you whispering? I don’t think Wyatt can understand you. And anyway, I’m pretty sure he knows he’s only got three legs.”

She scowled at me. “You don’t need to laugh at him.”

That sobered me up. “I’m not laughing at him. I’m laughing at you. Wyatt can handle himself. He’s getting around just fine.”

And he was.

The elderly dog didn’t move too quickly. But he moved.

Wyatt got where he needed to go. Yeah, he did it a little differently. But he didn’t seem to mind.

In fact, he seemed like a good-natured dog. Barnes said Wyatt’s owners passed away. They were elderly, too.

No close family that could take the dog.

Wyatt’s time was running out in more ways than one.

“He’s just a dog. You can handle a dog,” I said, and I believed it, too. You could tell how attached she was to him already. And while Wyatt didn’t seem like the picky type, he sure seemed to love her.

But that was understandable. I knew exactly how he felt.

A few people filtered in and out during the rest of the afternoon. But no one was interested in these older animals.

There were cameras around. We both knew that. The crew had been in to take some shots of us with the animals.

The rest of the time, Jillian and I made light conversation. Neither of us mentioned anything about the parking lot incidents. Or the supper at Marcel and Angelique’s. Or the apology I posted on social media.

Nope.

So, for once, I was actually grateful for the cameras. It forced us both to be on our best behavior.

Barnes asked us to bathe some of the dogs. It seemed like a good way to break up the last chunk of the day.

Boy, was I wrong.

Watching Jillian bend over—in those shorts, was pure torture. And after the first two dogs—her shirt was soaking wet.

It really was just too much.

I did my best to ignore Jillian's short shorts and her wet shirt.

But I was only human.

Jillian and I looked at each other and laughed.

After we'd finished washing and drying Wyatt, Dr. Barnes walked in. He took a step back and looked us over. "Well, you two have been busy."

Jillian and I peered at each other and laughed. We were wetter than any of the dogs had been.

I spoke up and said, "Sorry, Barnes. We'll clean this place up before we go."

"That would be a big help. And if you two could hang back and help me put these guys back in their kennels, I'd really appreciate it. Nobody filled out adoption forms for any of them, so they'll have to go back tonight." Barnes was about to turn and leave when I caught him.

"Actually, someone did." I wiped my hands on my already wet jeans. So, that didn't help. I pulled a form off the table and handed it to him.

Barnes looked down and read it. Then he smiled. "Good choice, Clemens. Give me a minute to fill the rest of this in."

He was right.

I'd made a good choice.

I could feel it right in my gut.

My gut never let me down.

Well, except with Jillian. My gut told me she was—the one. And obviously, she wasn't. But other than that, it had never been wrong.

“What’s he talking about?” Jillian asked as she put Wyatt’s collar back on.

Christ.

Even soaking wet with dog fur all over her, she was fucking gorgeous.

“I’m taking Wyatt home.”

Her jaw fell open. “What—what do you mean?”

I looked at my new-old dog and smiled. A sense of peace I hadn’t felt in ages covered me like a blanket.

Yeah.

This was a good thing.

“I’m adopting Wyatt,” I clarified for her. He took that opportunity to lick her face again.

“What? You can’t,” she said with a serious look on her face. Jillian gazed up at me with confusion written all over her face.

“Why not? Are you going to take him?” I asked, wondering if maybe she’d changed her mind.

Her eyes fell to Wyatt. “No, I told you I can’t.”

I nodded. “I understand, Jillian. But I can. So, I’m going to.”

She stared at me and a look I’d never seen before crossed her face. “I just worry about what kind of life he’ll have, you know?”

I shrugged and crouched down in front of them. Wyatt let me pet him, and I smiled. “The life he lives, is the life he lives. That’s his right. And I’ll be here to help him out—however he needs it. Who are we to judge the quality of his life? He’s got just as much right to happiness as any other dog.”

She pursed her lips together, and I could tell she was really thinking about this. “But he’s got issues.”

I let out a sarcastic laugh. “Don’t we all?”

Jillian gazed down at Wyatt and nodded. “Good point.”

She had a defeated look on her face, and even though I was still angry at her—I didn’t want her to feel bad.

I sighed and said, “From the looks of it, he doesn’t need much except a roof over his head and a full belly.”

Jillian’s eyes grew watery. “And an owner with a big heart.”

Wyatt decided to lick my face and I laughed. “I’ve got a heart. Don’t know how big it is.”

Jillian didn’t miss a beat. “I do.”

A few hours later, and Wyatt and I pulled into the parking lot at home.

Wyatt’s new home.

Barnes had asked me to stay later and help get the other adoptions finalized and out the door. My co-workers seemed to have disappeared, so I couldn’t exactly say no.

Not that I would have.

But I was eager to get Wyatt back to my place so I could get him used to where he’d be living. We jumped out of my truck and headed toward the iron gate. I opened it to a courtyard full of people.

A huge sign read, “Welcome to your new home, Wyatt!!”

There was a long table set up with food. It looked—and smelled amazing.

Jillian came running up to us. The smile on her face was contagious, so I smiled back.

“Was this—” I looked around and jerked my head at the party happening behind her, “you?”

Her smile grew. “I had a ton of help.” Jillian bent down and said, “Hello, Wyatt. Welcome to your first night at your new forever home.” He gave her cheek a big lick and panted. “Aww, are you thirsty? Come with me. I’ll get you some water.” She straightened up and asked, “If that’s okay with you, I mean?”

She’d showered and changed into a cute sundress.

Well, it might have started out cute. But the way it showed off Jillian’s cleavage—and fuck me—her long legs, it looked a lot less cute. And a lot more sexy.

“Of course, here,” I said, offering her the leash.

She reached for it, and as she did, our hands touched. I felt that familiar zinging sensation when I touched her skin.

“Thanks.” She grinned before turning around. “Let’s go meet your new friends, okay?” Jillian posed the question to the new-old dog. He followed her lead, and I watched them wander off into the crowd.

“Congrats, man.” Trey approached with two pop cans in his hands. He handed one to me. I took it gratefully and drank half of it right away.

I wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. “Thanks. I didn’t expect to come home to this.”

Trey opened his pop and took a few swallows. “We take our pets pretty seriously around here.” He bumped his elbow against my arm. “And you did a really good thing by picking Wyatt.”

I finished off the cola and shook my head. “Nah, he picked me.”

We joined the party, where Wyatt was given all kinds of love and attention. As well as gifts.

Bones.

Balls.

Beau and Gigi even gave him a huge dog bed.

Wyatt was in new-old dog delight with all of it.

Later on, when I was finally filling my plate at the food table, Gigi came up beside me. “Wyatt’s such a good boy. Do you want us to take him to doggie daycare in the morning?”

I grabbed some watermelon and said, “How about I follow you there? I’d like to drop him off myself for the first while.”

Gigi’s face got all soft and dreamy. “You are such a good dog-daddy already.”

I chuckled at that. “I’m not sure about that, but I’ll give it a good try. And thanks for the party. It was nice of you.”

Gigi’s grin grew. “That was mostly Jillian. But you know we chipped in as soon she told us you’d adopted Wyatt.”

There was cheering going on, so we both looked over and saw Wyatt with a large stuffed monkey in his mouth.

“Aww, he’s seriously cute. You’re so lucky,” Gigi said, clearly enamored with my new-old dog. I thanked her again for helping put all of this together.

And then I went to sit down among the partygoers.

An hour or so later, Beau and Dr. Barnes showed up. They walked through the iron gate, both of them wearing large smiles.

“Hey, there he is.” Lexi nudged Gigi’s leg.

Gigi looked up from her phone. She’d been trying to text Beau for a while now, but he wasn’t answering.

“Oh, good,” she said, and then her eyes opened wide. And her mouth formed a perfect ‘O.’ “Oh, my gosh. What is that he’s carrying?”

My eyes dropped down to the pink carrying case in Beau’s hand.

Lexi gasped. “Do you think he—” she started to say, but Gigi was already running toward her fiancé.

Beau stopped walking and held up the case. There seemed to be a small window on the front, and Gigi looked inside.

And then her arms rose to the sky as she excitedly jumped up and down. Even if I spoke French, I didn’t think I’d be able to understand one word of what she said.

But anyone watching could see how thrilled she was. Gigi wrapped her arms around Beau’s neck and gave him a kiss.

A really great fuckin’ kiss.

After that, she let him go and opened the pink carrying case—and pulled out a small, white kitten.

“Oh, my gosh, he did it,” Lexi said in a whispered voice. “He’s just the best.”

Trey frowned at his wife, apparently taking offense. “I told you we could adopt whatever you wanted.”

Lexi snapped out of her haze and looked at her husband. “Oh, yeah, I know. It’s just—”

Trey’s hand swept her hair back from her face. “It’s just what?”

She shrugged and looked back at her friend. Gigi was kissing the white kitten and Beau was kissing the top of Gigi’s head.

“It’s just romantic, that’s all,” Lexi said, and then looked back at her husband.

“But I said you could bring home whatever animal you wanted. Do you want me to go back to the clinic?” Trey moved like he was going to stand up.

Lexi immediately grabbed his arm. “No, oh, my gosh. No. Our lives are busy enough. We don’t need to add anything or anyone else to it.”

Trey still looked perplexed. “So how is Beau the best, then? When he told Gigi no—and I told you yes?”

Lexi grinned and touched his face. “You’re also the best.” Then she kissed him.

“You’re just trying to shut me up,” Trey muttered against her lips.

Lexi giggled and kissed him again.

I took that as my signal to get up. After I stood, I saw Jillian walking toward the table. Against my better judgment, I decided to join her.

“Hey,” I said as I approached her side.

She looked over at me and gave me a smile. “Hey.”

Christ.

She was so fucking beautiful.

“Thank you for setting this up. It was a nice surprise,” I said, meaning

every word. Even though I had not one clue why she'd go through this trouble.

“I had a lot of help. But you're welcome.” She downplayed her involvement, I was fairly certain.

We stood there in awkward silence until she turned to me with a faint blush on her cheeks. “I can help you with him—Wyatt, I mean. If you need it. I mean, you probably don't. But still, if you do, I'm here,” she said so quickly I almost didn't catch all of it.

Instead of saying what I wanted to say, something like, “Will your douche canoe fiancé allow that?” I took the high road. “That would be nice. Thanks for offering.”

Her eyes brightened. “Really?”

I chuckled and said, “Yeah, of course. That's what friends do, right? Help each other?” I stared right into her eyes and watched as she bit into her lip and nodded. “Yeah, friends.”

Cash

Miller was on my ass again, and the refs didn't seem to give a fuck. He'd already tripped me twice this period—and no calls.

“Fuck off!” I yelled at him as I bolted past the center line. Unfortunately, Miller was not fucking off.

He blocked my view, so I couldn't tell if Beau or Trey were there or not. But something in my gut told me one of them would be. I took a chance and backhanded the puck to my left.

Exactly zero seconds later, Beau sped by and shot the goddamn thing directly into the back of the net.

His arms flew up, and I veered directly into him. “Great fuckin' pass, man,” he shouted at me over top of the goal horn and the screaming fans.

“I knew you were there the whole time,” I said, and we both laughed. Trey glided over to celebrate. “Nice shot,” he told Beau and slapped him on the shoulder. “And great pass, Clemens.”

Beau panted and took his mouthguard out. “If we win this, we can skip book club on Thursday,” he said, completely out of breath. Sweat poured

down his face just like it did mine.

“Fuck, no,” Trey said adamantly, and he really surprised me.

“Come on, are you really expecting us to read that chick book?” Beau asked while we skated back to line up for the faceoff.

“Hey, I froze my balls off for you on a rickety old boat.” Trey shoved my shoulder. “And I bathed fifteen dogs for you.” He pointed the end of his stick at Beau.

“You fuckers owe me.” Trey leveled his gaze at both of us. “Read the book.” Then he swiftly turned and shot off to the center line.

Beau looked at me. “I guess we’re reading a chick book.”

I chuckled and hit him on the shoulder. “I’m halfway through. It’s pretty good, actually.”

His eyebrows rose under his drenched and dripping hair. “You’re reading it?”

I nodded and started moving forward. “It’s a quick read,” I said as I moved past him. “It won’t take you long.”

The only reply I heard was him saying, “Christ,” under his breath. Which only made me laugh.



THREE DAYS LATER, we sat in the courtyard. Jillian and Wyatt walked toward us—both of them wearing smiles. “He was a good boy,” she said and handed his leash to me. Her fingers grazed my hand, and I felt a bolt of electricity up my arm.

“Thanks for picking him up,” I said and took a long drink from my water bottle. The men had a meeting after practice, today. Jillian offered to pick

Wyatt up from doggie daycare and take him to the dog park for a while.

The last two weeks, she'd been helping me out with the dog—just like she'd said she would.

A part of me liked having an extra hand with him. Especially when I was on the road.

I'd made arrangements at a local doggie hotel—yes, that was what they called it—for Wyatt. But when I told Jillian she wouldn't have to worry about him for a few days because he'd be there—let's just say she didn't take it that well.

“You don't trust me to look after him? He can stay with me. I'll take him to doggie care while you're gone.”

My instincts told me this was a bad idea.

A real fuckin' bad idea.

We weren't a couple.

At best, we were faking a friendship.

And Jillian's interest in Wyatt seemed like—more than what a friend should do. She was in his daily life.

Which meant she was also in my daily life.

And trust me, it was difficult enough seeing Jillian in the courtyard and at the rink every day. But having her at my place, talking to me, texting me—it was just too fucking much.

Mostly because all I wanted to do was pull her in close and kiss the hell out of those plump lips of hers.

Damn it. I was going to have to speak to her.

“It was fun. He loves playing with the other dogs.” She gave me a soft

smile before saying her goodbyes to Beau and Trey.

Beau looked at me with a critical eye while he opened his energy drink. “How’s,” he nodded toward Jillian’s retreating form, “that going.”

I drank the rest of my water and shrugged. “It’s going.”

It was Trey’s turn to poke his nose in. “Are you guys really friends, now?”

I wanted to say, “Fuck, no.”

Instead, I said, “Yeah, of course. We’re both adults. Whatever happened in the past—is done. There’s no reason we can’t get along. She’s a great woman and an even better friend.”

Jesus Christ.

If lightning didn’t strike me down right fucking here, I’d be surprised. Because the lies I’d just told—fuck me. Everything I’d just spouted off was bullshit.

Beau and Trey stared at me with doubtful eyes. But there was nothing I could do about that.

Trey cleared his throat and sat back in his chair. “That’s very mature of you guys.”

Wyatt sat on my foot and peered back at me with a long pink tongue hanging out of his mouth.

I grinned and gave him a good scratch. “Yep, that’s me, mature.”

A few seconds later, Lexi’s voice called out to her husband. “Honey, I made you a smoothie.” We looked over to see her standing in their doorway.

Trey grinned widely at her, then turned to us. “See you fuckers later.” He jumped out of his chair like it was on fire.

“Why do I think that’s their code word for—something else?” Beau asked as he pulled a dog treat out of his pocket. Wyatt immediately rose and went to him.

“Because it’s probably their code word for—something else.” I laughed and watched Beau ask Wyatt to sit, and then to shake a paw. All of which he did eagerly. This dog’s former owners had loved him and spent a lot of time with training him. You could tell.

“Are you ready for book club?” I asked and gazed at my phone. We still had a few hours before it started. When Beau didn’t respond, I narrowed my eyes at him. “You read the book, right?”

He rolled his eyes and kept getting Wyatt to do tricks. “I just—I didn’t have time,” he muttered out, trying his best to ignore me.

I laughed and threw my head back. “What the fuck are you going to talk about at book club, then?”

He sighed and gave Wyatt some good pats and scratches. “I was hoping not to say anything at all.”

I raised my eyebrows and looked down my nose at him. “You think if you’re there with all those women, that they aren’t going to single out the captain of the men’s team?”

He shook his head and mumbled, “Fuck.” Then he asked, “Why don’t you tell me about the book? Just give me some key phrases so I don’t sound stupid.”

I looked over at my friend who’d just royally fucked up. This was supposed to be a team bonding activity for us. We’d all promised to read the book that Trey had chosen for the book club he was in.

During our camping trip, Trey had told us how those romance books had

helped him through a really rough time after his horrific accident.

He told us how they took his brain places his body couldn't go. And how they'd kept him sane for all those months while he was recovering.

This meant a lot to Trey.

And Trey meant a lot to us.

The last thing I wanted was for Beau to ruin this for him.

"Fine, but we don't have much time. First of all, it's a hockey romance," I started saying.

He cut me off, "There's romance in hockey?"

I slapped him on the shoulder. "In this book, there sure is. And a lot of it."

Then, I gave him what he'd asked for. I just hoped he remembered what I told him.

A few minutes later, Jillian walked out of her door. "Hey, I think I've given you enough hints. You still have time to read at least part of the book before the meeting. I have to ask Jillian something. I'll catch you later."

I grabbed Wyatt's leash and lead him over to Jillian.

"Hi, baby." She bent down and gave him some love. Wyatt reciprocated by licking her face a few times.

"Are you going somewhere? I'd like a word before you take off," I said, inwardly trying my best to gather some courage. I didn't want to have this conversation. But for my own sanity—I had to.

Jillian's eyes met mine. "I just have to grab something from my car." She stood and scanned my face.

"Good, we'll follow you." The cameras would still see us—but there was

no audio out there.

We walked to the iron gate, and I held it open for her. Wyatt walked through and I closed it up tight.

“What do you want to talk about?” Jillian asked quietly as she gazed at me from under her long eyelashes.

Fuck me.

She was so beautiful.

“Where’s your car?” I asked unnecessarily just to fill time until we got to her vehicle.

“Uh, over here.” She pointed, and I nodded. We were quiet until we got to her car. She opened the locks.

Then I took a deep breath. “I need you to lay off with the help.”

She peered down at the ground and then up at me. “What?”

I stared into her beautiful eyes—the eyes I’d been so sure I’d be staring into for the rest of my life. “With Wyatt. You’re doing too much.”

Her head tilted to the side slightly and the soft look on her face fell right off. “You said you wanted help.”

I clamped my lips together and shook my head. “No, you volunteered. And honestly, I thought you meant taking him on a walk now and then. But it’s every fuckin’ day, Jillian. If you’re not coming over, you’re texting me. If you’re not texting me, you’re calling me. It’s just too much.” My throat suddenly felt as dry as the cement we were standing on. I swallowed but it took some effort.

Her spine straightened. “I thought that’s what friends did.” The sharp edge to her voice cut me—and it hurt. I’d disappointed her.

And because I still loved the woman standing right in front of me—I never wanted to disappoint her.

But I had to start thinking about myself. “We aren’t friends, Jillian. We’re pretending to be friends for the fucking team. And for the cameras that are zooming in on us as we speak.”

Her body actually moved backward after I said that. “You can be a real asshole, Cash. Did you know that?”

I grinned at her and placed my hand on the handle of the backdoor. “Whatever you say—” I opened the door for her, “friend.”

She glared at me and ducked into her backseat. Then she quickly reemerged with a large—dog bed in her hands. “Well, I guess I won’t be needing this anymore. Here,” she shoved it against my chest, “consider it a gift.”

And with that, she stormed off. Leaving me and Wyatt in her wake.

Cash

“Why do I feel so nervous?” Beau asked as he walked down the stairs from his place. Book club was at Jillian’s. And I didn’t want to walk in by myself.

“Maybe because you didn’t read the fuckin’ book?” I replied and shook my head.

He brushed me off. “Whatever.” He grabbed the leash from me. “You gave me the gist of what the book’s about. I can bullshit my way out of it.”

I held in my laugh and shrugged my shoulders. “Hey, it’s your funeral, man.”

A few steps later, we were at Jillian’s. Beau knocked at the door, and it quickly opened for us. “Hi,” Jillian said with a smile on her face. “Welcome to book club, gentlemen.” She waved her arm and stepped back and let us in.

Even though Jillian smiled at me, I could tell it definitely wasn’t a real smile. When Jillian gave me a genuine grin—I felt it right in my chest.

This smile felt like she wanted to stab me with something—right in my chest.

And part of me wanted her to do exactly that.

Which was stupid.

I'd set a boundary with her. A boundary I had every right to make. Jillian was engaged to another man. She shouldn't be poking her nose in my life.

It didn't make any sense.

The other thing that didn't make any sense was the fact that I felt fucking guilty.

I kept playing that scene over and over in my mind. The look on her face when I told her she was too involved—

Fuck.

I knew I was right.

But that didn't mean I felt like any less of an asshole for doing it.

Beau gave her a quick hello, and she talked with him—and Wyatt—for a minute. Then he took the dog and went off to sit with Gigi. This left Jillian and I staring awkwardly at each other. “Thanks for the—” I started to say.

But Jillian spoke at the exact same time. “Thanks for—”

Like I said—fuckin' awkward.

“Thanks for the invite,” I spoke up and nodded at her. My fingers wanted to reach over and undo her messy bun. And my eyes wanted to watch her long hair tumble down over her shoulders. And my heart wanted to yell at my fingers and my eyes.

Christ.

How the hell was I going to get over Jillian when every time I turned around—she was there?

She gave me another fake smile. “It was nice of you to join us.” She shut the door behind me, and I walked all the way in.

There were a lot of extra chairs set up. A few were empty. Some of the women sat on the floor in groups and chatted and laughed.

Christ, I wished I could feel half that relaxed right now. Instead, my guts were in a nervous knot.

No part of me wanted to be here tonight.

Yes, I’d read the book. That part didn’t bother me.

But having that conversation with Jillian had bothered me more than I thought it would.

Was it necessary?

Absofuckingloutlely.

I’d meant every word of what I’d said. Her being around me—and contacting me all the goddamn time—was too much. More than I wanted to handle. Or should need to handle.

This fake friendship charade did not mean we had to be attached at the hip twenty-four/seven.

A really, really great image of us being attached at the hips just shot into my brain.

Fuck.

I shut my eyes and rubbed them. Christ, I was hopeless.

“Headache?” Trey’s voice made me open my eyes. He looked at me and grabbed my shoulder in hello.

“No, I’m okay. I’ll take a water if you’ve got one, though.”

He nodded and jerked his head toward the kitchen. “Follow me.”

I did as I was told, saying hello to the book club members as we passed by.

“So, you all ready for tonight?” Trey asked as he grabbed a water bottle out of the fridge and tossed it to me.

“You bet. I read it cover to cover.” I opened the cap and took a nice long guzzle of cool water.

“This was her best one, yet. I loved it.” Trey opened his own water and drank half of it with one gulp. His eyes widened, and he waved to someone behind me.

Beau walked up to us, and Trey asked if he wanted anything. Beau asked for a sports drink.

“So, how’d you like the book?” Trey asked him as he reached inside the fridge.

Beau shot me a look and said, “I really liked it.”

Trey shut the door and passed him the drink. “Can you expand on that?”

Part of me wanted to laugh right the hell out loud. But now was not the time.

“Okay, everybody!” Gigi yelled, inadvertently saving her fiancé from answering Trey’s question. She waved her arms around. “Let’s get started.”

The chatter stopped, and everyone settled down.

Beau turned around and led us into the living room. He walked over and sat in a chair next to Gigi. Trey wandered off in Lexi’s direction. She smiled up at him and leaned into the girl beside her—who leaned into the girl beside her—forcing them to squeeze over and make room for her husband. They

didn't mind—I could tell that from the giggles and subsequent shoving matches that ensued.

There was one seat left.

Of course, there was.

Right beside Jillian.

On the loveseat.

Christ.

If I chose to sit on the floor—everyone would notice that I didn't sit beside her.

If I sat beside her—everyone would notice that I sat beside her instead of sitting on the floor.

Fuck.

This was a lose/lose situation.

The one thing I knew I couldn't do was hesitate any longer. Or people would take note of that as well.

Christ.

So, I sucked up my pride, and headed toward Jillian. Her eyebrows lifted slightly as she watched me move closer.

Then she turned her head and spoke to one of her teammates. I sat down and the cushions sank—causing her to slide into me. There wasn't much room on the love seat, but I took up most of it.

“Oof,” Jillian grunted while pushing against my arm. “What are you doing?” She jabbed her elbow into my ribs.

I frowned at her and tried my best to move over as much as I could. “I'm

sitting. What are you doing? Besides elbowing me?” I shot back at her and grabbed the offending elbow. Her skin was soft and warm, and I felt a bolt of electricity blaze through me.

Not that I could let it show.

“Let go of me,” Jillian whispered sharply. The look in her eyes didn’t match her words, though.

Nope.

The look in her eyes—yeah, I knew that look well. It was her “kiss me” look.

We were so close.

The side of my leg was jammed against the side of hers. And I could smell her sweet flowery scent.

“I will when you stop elbowing me in the ribs.” I squeezed her arm—but instead of feeling anger—I felt—fuck. I felt turned on.

Jesus.

I had issues.

“Let me go and I’ll stop elbowing you,” she gritted out and jerked her elbow again.

“I like my ribs where they are, thank you very much.” My hand held her tighter—and part of me wanted stand up and run out of the door.

The other part wanted to pull her into me and kiss the fuck out of her plump, pink lips.

Yeah.

I was definitely messed up.

Her eyes flared at me, and she pulled her arm out of my grasp. “Fine, move over then.”

I gave her a look and shook my head. “Woman, I am over. If I move any further, I’ll break the goddamn furniture.”

She scowled at me. “You don’t need to swear. All I asked you to do was move.”

Okay.

I was fucking done.

“Great, I’ll move.” I pulled my feet back, but before I could push myself up—Jillian’s hand landed on my arm.

“I didn’t ask you to move off the loveseat.”

I turned my head and said, “Yes, you did.”

She rolled her eyes and tugged my arm. “No, I didn’t.”

My head fell back, and I sighed. I leaned forward—elbows on my knees and closed my eyes for a few seconds. This woman was driving me to drink.

I took a deep breath and turned to her. “Am I leaving this seat or not?”

She bit her lip in that cute little way—fuck. I wanted to kiss her.

Right after I spanked her ass.

“No,” she said quietly. “Just move over.”

I huffed and slid back into my spot. And no, I didn’t move over—because I couldn’t.

“This is as far as I can get,” I said under my breath as I gave her a side-eye.

“Fine,” she said in a tone that made me take another deep breath.

“Fine,” I answered back, handing her the same tone she’d just given me.

When I finally looked up—I realized that all eyes had been on us.

For how long—I had no idea.

But from the looks on their faces—they were definitely confused.

Join the fuckin’ club.

“Now that we’re all—fine—is it okay if we start?” Gigi asked in her strict, teacherly voice.

“Ah, yeah, sorry about that,” I grumbled at the same time Jillian issued her own apology.

After that, Lexi stood up and started the meeting. She was great. You could tell how seriously these women took reading. Trey was in there like a dirty shirt, too.

And the way Lexi looked at him with adoring eyes whenever he talked—well, it was pretty fuckin’ cute.

I added my two cents in here and there.

The only person who hadn’t shared anything yet was—Beau.

Gigi finally called on him, “How did you feel about that part of the book?”

Beau’s eyes shot from his fiancée to me. The look of supreme terror in his eyes nearly made me laugh. “Yeah, Beau,” I raised my eyebrows and asked, “tell us how you felt about that storyline?”

How I managed not to laugh—I’d never know.

Beau cleared his throat and used his TV interview voice and persona. “I felt like the handoffs were perfect. And the way the characters positioned themselves to make their plays successful was—extraordinary. The talking

lions were a surprise—obviously. But I understood why the author used that particular device in this story. It all came together nicely in the end with the Christmas scene. Although I felt like the snowball scene was more violent than it had to be.”

The silence in the room was deafening. Beau looked around nervously, and holy fuck—I couldn’t hold it in anymore.

I finally burst out laughing.

And the entire room followed.

I laughed so hard that tears started falling down my cheeks. I wiped at them so many times but I just couldn’t stop laughing.

Jillian was having the same problem.

Fuck.

I loved it when she laughed.

Beau just sat there.

Confused.

Once we quieted down, Gigi shook her head. “So, you didn’t actually read the book?”

He opened his mouth and looked from her to me—and then I could see realization set in. “I take it the book isn’t really a hockey romance?”

That set everyone off again. This fit of laughter didn’t last as long as the first, though.

“I can’t believe you fucked me over.” Beau stared at me, and he might have shown me a middle finger.

Or two.

“Sorry, man. You should have done the work.” I shrugged and shook my head at him.

“We’ll talk about this later.” Gigi gave Beau a tone and a glance that all men feared.

She turned to me next. “And, Cash, since you actually read the book,” she gave her fiancé another scowl, “how did you like the book as a whole? Have you ever read a romance before?”

I grinned at her. “I really liked it. But fuck if I’m sharing my woman with five guys. No way.”

Beau’s eyes widened so large I chuckled. “Five guys?” His chin nearly dropped to the floor. “What do they all even do?”

That earned him a lot more laughs.

“Oh, they manage to keep real busy,” I said with a smile. “You should read the book and find out.”

I looked back at Gigi. “I’ve never read a romance novel before—and certainly nothing in this genre. I have to admit, the level of character development really drew me in. The suspense surprised me. So did the way each hero ended up being changed by their love for the heroine. It really was touching.”

Gigi smiled at me. “Great answer, Clemens.”

Lexi cut in and asked, “What about the—heat level? What did you think about that?” The look of anticipation on her face made me chuckle.

“That—” I inhaled, “really shocked me. The group scenes were especially steamy. But so were the one-on-one scenes. The author had the perfect mix of hot sex, sweet, cute moments, and action scenes. At the end, when they all

worked together to save the heroine from her evil stepfather,” I started saying, but Beau cut me off.

“Hey, spoilers!” he shouted and covered his ears.

Gigi rolled her eyes and pointed to the door. “Take off, Moreau,” she said sternly, “it’s your own fault that you didn’t read the book.”

He gave her a sour look but stood and walked toward the door. I thought he might say something before he left—but he didn’t.

Lexi posed another question. Wyatt, however, seemed to be done with book club. He walked up to me and whined. “What do you want, boy?”

Jillian reached over and rubbed his head. “Maybe he needs to go out?”

I shook my head and scratched his back. “I took him a few minutes before we came over.”

“Maybe he’s hungry?” She looked over at me, waiting for a response.

“I fed him.” And I had. Exactly as per Dr. Barnes’ instructions. “Do you want up?” I asked before I picked him up and put him on my lap. He licked my face and I chuckled. Then he turned his head and licked Jillian’s cheek. She giggled, and I swear to Christ that sound went straight to my dick. Fuck.

Wyatt laid down—on our laps. He rested his head on Jillian’s arm and let out a loud yawn. I smiled, and when I peered over at Jillian—she was grinning down at Wyatt like he was the most perfect dog in the world.

Which was completely true.

Book club kept going in the background. But being cuddled up beside Jillian—smelling her flowery scent and having her warm body beside me again—comforted me.

Wyatt weighed me down and before I knew it, my eyelids suddenly

became way too heavy.

I decided to shut them for a few minutes.

Yeah.

A few minutes wouldn't hurt. Nobody would even notice.



“YOU'RE REALLY SHOWING your age there, Clemens,” I heard someone off in the distance say. Something poked my shoulder and startled me awake.

I opened my eyes to see—a whack of eyes staring back at me.

At us.

I gazed down and saw Jillian asleep. Her head laying on my chest.

I bounced my arm—which just happened to be around her shoulders.

“Sweetness, wake up.”

Fuck.

Habit.

That was the only excuse I had for what I'd just called her.

In front of everyone.

Fuck.

“No, honey, I'm tired. So tired,” she mumbled sweetly and burrowed her head further into my chest.

“Jillian.” I set my hand on her shoulder and moved it. “Wake up.”

She finally opened her eyes, blinking them furiously as she sat up. “Oh, sorry. I didn't realize I'd fallen asleep.”

Yeah, neither had I.

“Okay, Wyatt, time to go.” I patted him on the back, and he jumped

down. He and I said our goodbyes and left as quickly as I possibly could. I had to get out of there.

Away from Jillian.

“Cash, hold on,” Jillian called from behind me. I was nearly at my door. All I wanted to do was escape.

From her.

I’d had it.

It was after nine o’clock. The cameras were off.

I stopped and spun around so quickly she bumped into me. “Oof,” she said, tits pressed against my chest—and her eyes looking up at me like—

Fuck.

I could not do this.

“What?” I narrowed my gaze at her and stepped away. “What do you want now?”

She bit her lip and looked down to the ground for a second, then she met my eyes. “I just wanted to apologize for,” she pointed behind her, “that. I don’t even remember—”

That was enough.

This was all fucking enough.

I stepped forward and leaned down. Speaking directly into her face, I said, “Yeah? Well, I remember. I remember every fucking thing. And I sure as fuck remember everything that happened between us. Even though I wish like hell I could forget—” I gritted my teeth and clenched my hands into fists. “What I wouldn’t fucking give to forget everything about you. About us.”

Jillian moved back and the shocked look on her face might have affected

me—if I gave a fuck anymore.

“You don’t mean that, Cash. You can’t—” she whispered. Her eyes stayed glued to mine, and she didn’t blink.

“Yeah, I fuckin’ do. I wish to Christ I could forget everything about you. I’d be so much happier if I could erase every goddamn detail of knowing you.”

Her eyes teared up, but her backbone straightened. With her hands on her hips, she leaned into me. “You don’t mean that.”

I slowly shook my head from side to side. “It’s the truth. I would be better off if I could forget ever meeting you.”

The tears in her eyes threatened to fall. “You’re an asshole,” she spat out as she blinked furiously.

“Yeah, that’s right. I’m the asshole in this situation. Fuck,” I said, feeling like my head was about to explode. I needed to get out of here before I said anything else.

“I’m done with you, Jillian. I’ll still pretend that we’re fucking friends in front of the cameras. But anything else? Go bother someone who gives a shit.”

Cash

Fuck.

I loved Johnny Reid.

Almost as much as I loved Jillian.

I belted out his song, “A Picture of You.”

It never got old.

I always got goose bumps whenever I sang these lyrics.

It so clearly described everything I felt for Jillian.

Everything I wasn’t allowed to feel for Jillian.

It was a song about memories.

And stolen kisses—and stolen hearts.

Mostly, it was about how little fucking time we really have here.

Memories.

Fucking memories were all I had of my time with Jillian.

All I’d ever have.

She'd never be mine.

The whole bar was so quiet, I knew all eyes were on me. And that suited me just fine.

I knew I could sing the fuck out of this song. Because I felt every goddamn word.

I'd lived every word.

After the last chord, I grabbed my whiskey and downed the entire glass. I'd been here for what felt like hours.

I should get up.

I should go home.

I should forget about Jillian.

Yeah.

I should do a lot of fucking things.

Instead, I let my fingers find their places, and I started playing Johnny Cash's, "She Used to Love Me a Lot."

Because I swear to God—Jillian used to love me. I thought she still did.

When I looked in her beautiful eyes—I saw love staring back at me.

But it wasn't.

She didn't love me anymore.

If she ever did.

Did Jillian ever love me?

Or was I just someone she used and threw away?

Yeah.

That's exactly what I was to her.

And just like Johnny—I was fucking shocked.

No one in the bar so much as breathed while I sang. And it made me feel an odd kinship with the strangers who watched and listened to me.

They knew my pain.

They knew what I'd gone through.

They knew my fucking life was never going to be the same.

When I finished, everyone clapped, hooted, and whistled. I smiled and for the first time in a while, I looked out at the crowd.

And saw her.

Jillian sat at the bar.

And I saw her.

Wiping underneath her eyes.

She wasn't the only one in the room doing that.

Feelings—yeah.

Feelings.

I felt all the fucking feelings.

Jesus Christ.

I needed to stop doing that.

How? I didn't know. But I'd have to learn pretty fucking fast. I couldn't keep going at this rate.

I needed to get a life.

One that didn't include me singing break-up songs while the reason for the break-up listened in the same room.

I took one last look out at the crowd and nodded my head in thanks. After

that, I stood and packed away my guitar.

It was time to get the hell out of here.

Now.

I stepped off the stage and walked over to the bar. The opposite end to where Jillian sat. Then I stopped and gestured to the bartender. He dropped his current order and grabbed a glass for me.

Normally, I'd insist he finish what he was doing. But I needed one for the road.

Feeling the burn of the whiskey down my throat might help me forget.

Forget about Jillian.

Forget about what we almost had.

Even if it was only in my head.

I pulled a few bills out of my wallet, but the bartender shoved his hand out. "Nah, man. This one's on me. We gotta start paying you if you keep singing like that."

I gave him a quick smile as I tossed the glass back and welcomed the fiery sting while I swallowed.

"Thanks," I breathed out and slapped the empty glass on the bar. "Next time, you pick my first song."

He smiled and went back to his other customers.

I headed out the side door and into the clear, dark night. It had cooled off considerably and I was grateful.

I yanked the keys from my pocket and aimed them at my truck. The lights blinked and—

“What the fuck?” I yelled when a hand swooped in and stole my keys.

“You are not driving.” Jillian darted in front of me.

“Yeah, I am. Give my keys back, woman.” I followed closely behind but she had the advantage.

Into my truck she slipped and locked the doors.

I rolled my eyes and knocked on the driver’s side window.

Of my truck.

Jillian swung the keys in her hand. I could hear her say, “I’ll drive. Get in.”

I rapped my knuckle on the window and said, “Stop fucking around. I’m not drunk.”

She ignored me and started the truck.

Sonofabitch.

I gave up and headed around to the other side. As soon as I touched the handle, she opened the door.

I slid inside and turned to her. “I’m not kidding, Jillian. You’re not driving me home. I only had three drinks tonight. I’m fine.”

Her eyes looked me over, and she shook her head. “Nope,” was all she said before backing out of the parking spot. “Two of those drinks you had in the last ten minutes.”

I let out a loud huff. I sat back and pulled the seat belt around me. “I’m not drunk.”

She shrugged and drove us out and onto the main road. “It’s not worth the risk. You’re a good guy, Cash. This is not something you need on your rap sheet.”

What the fuck?

I frowned and turned my head to her. “My rap sheet? I don’t have a rap sheet.”

She nodded and changed lanes. “Exactly. And that’s how it’s going to stay.”

Oh, my God. This woman was irrational. I wasn’t drunk. Not even close.

I’d been trying to get away from her, so I could fucking breathe—Christ. When was the last time I’d taken an actual deep breath? I couldn’t remember.

Other than the music on the country channel playing, we drove the rest of the way home in silence. I was too goddamn mad to speak. And I knew anything I said right now—I’d be apologizing for tomorrow.

Because—

“I can take Wyatt overnight if you want?” She glanced briefly in my direction. “I mean, if you want to sleep it off or whatever.”

My chin fell to my chest, and I was this close—this fucking close to losing my ever-loving mind. “First of all—I had three drinks. I’ve already told you that. Secondly, I can handle the dog. If I couldn’t, I wouldn’t have adopted him.”

I turned more fully to her. “And thirdly, I asked you to stay away. I told you I’d still fake being friends with you for the cameras. And for Angelique and Marcel.”

I could see Jillian’s chest rising and falling faster. Her heart was beating quicker. I saw the vein in her neck pulsing wildly.

I knew that vein.

I loved licking it and kissing it while we made out. And Jillian fucking

loved it when I did that. She'd moan and tilt her head to the side, giving me more access.

"There's no reason we can't be real friends, Cash. You're being unreasonable."

I gazed out the windshield and then back to her. "What did you just say?"

She drove into our parking lot and did a loop around to find an open spot. Everyone was home and asleep by now, so the only available spaces were in the far corner. It was darker over here and certainly out of eyeshot.

Which was good.

Nobody would see us getting out of my truck.

Jillian pulled into a space and put the truck in park. "I said," she moved around to face me, "there's no reason we can't be friends."

Yeah, she fucking said that.

Unbelievable.

"Really?" I squinted at her. "Because I can think of about a million reasons we can't be friends."

On the radio, Kenny Rogers started crooning. "We've Got Tonight" floated out of the speakers.

Fuck me.

Sheena Easton's voice joined his, and they continued with one of the best songs ever made.

"You want to be friends with me." Jillian touched my arm and let her hand slide down to mine. I felt goose bumps form in the wake of her touch.

Fuck.

This woman was not out of my brain.

Not even close.

The effect she had on me was insane.

“No, I don’t,” I answered back. My tone sounded weak and unconvincing even to me.

She smiled like she knew how much I wanted her right now.

How much I always wanted her.

“We’d make great friends, honey.” She let her fingers trail up my arm and over my shoulder. The feel of her fingertips grazing my neck nearly did me in.

“Jillian.” My voice cracked, showing the weakness I’d tried to hide.

“Come on, be my friend. Please?” Her voice—her soft, beautiful, melodious voice—washed over me like a warm, comforting blanket.

“Friends don’t do that, Jillian.”

That didn’t stop her. Not one bit. She watched as her fingers traced over my cheek and around my ear—and then into my hair.

“Oh, okay. Do friends do this?” She played with the hair at the back of my head, twirling it around her fingers. She knew that drove me crazy.

“Jillian,” I said again, this time it came out even weaker, though. If anyone had ever shown their cards—it was me.

I heard her seat belt unclick, and it retreated over her arm.

She twisted more fully to me and pulled my head toward hers. “What about this?” she whispered inches from my lips until—she kissed me. Our lips had barely touched, and I felt that old familiar fire back again.

That blinding, all-consuming urge to devour her.

So, that was what I did. I immediately took over the kiss and deepened it so far—so fucking good—it possessed me.

I had to have her.

The woman I loved.

The only woman I'd ever loved.

I needed her like I needed my next goddamn breath. She tasted minty and fresh and like—Jillian.

Her lips kept up with mine.

Searching.

Taking.

Giving.

“I miss you so much,” she murmured. Her hands moved on my chest, trying to undo the buttons on my shirt.

Without even thinking, I undid my seat belt, and in one fell swoop, I scooped her up and moved her over the middle console.

Directly onto my lap.

She straddled me easily, the bottom of her dress flowing over my thighs.

Before I knew it, the buttons on my shirt were open and her hands were touching me hungrily. My hands sat on her hips, but slowly moved up to her full breasts.

Jillian sighed into my mouth and instantly turned my cock rock fucking hard.

Christ.

She was so soft. Except for her nipples. They poked out against the palms of my hands.

Jillian's hips moved and ground into mine. Soon her fingertips slipped down my stomach and directly over my dick.

Then it was my turn to groan into her mouth. Because—fuck—that felt so good. “Do you like my hard cock, Jillian?” I asked in between kisses.

She nodded and panted, “Yes, Cash. I love your cock so much. Let me touch you, please, honey.”

I groaned even louder as her fingers found the button on my jeans. My hands moved hers away, and I opened the button—and pulled my jeans down just enough. Her hand found me and stroked up and down just how I liked.

Our mouths crashed against each other so powerfully, I thought for sure we'd leave bruises.

But neither of us cared.

I inhaled Jillian's floral scent, slightly tinged with the tantalizingly musky smell of her excitement.

Yeah.

She wanted me.

Just as much as I wanted her.

My hands landed on her warm shoulders. I pulled the thin straps of her dress down.

And down.

And down.

Until her breasts popped out. “Fuck,” I said as I stared at her chest, “you are so fucking beautiful.” I lifted both breasts in my hands. Jillian rose up on

her knees—and hit her head on the ceiling of the truck.

“Oof,” she said, and we both laughed.

I reached between the door and the seat and found the button I needed.
The seat tipped back.

And back.

And back.

Her nipples were perfectly in line with my mouth now. And I took full advantage.

Licking.

Sucking.

Playing.

To my heart’s content.

Jillian’s pussy rubbed against my aching cock, teasing me with her soaking wet panties.

The noises she made were quickly driving me to the brink—and I wasn’t even inside of her.

Yet.

“Cash, honey, I want you,” Jillian breathed out a sexy sigh. And she didn’t have to ask me twice.

I let go of her tits and grabbed my cock with one hand and moved her panties over to the side with the other.

I swirled the tip of my cock around in her wetness. Then my free hand found her hip and I pulled her down.

And down.

And down.

We both let out carnal gasps at the best feeling there ever was. Ever could be.

“You feel too fucking good,” I said, grasping her other hip and lifting her up—just enough.

Before I pulled her back down again.

Jillian took over and I gladly let her set the pace. She was an absolute queen at riding me. And I knew she enjoyed the fuck out of the ride, too.

Firstly, from the way her tight pussy held onto me so perfectly.

And secondly, because of her dripping wetness that slipped down my shaft.

“Yeah, sweetness,” I grunted out, “fuck that cock.”

She let out a sigh and quickened her movements. My hands found her ass—her perfect fucking ass—and I gripped her hard with my fingertips.

“Cash,” she whimpered in a tone that I recognized well. She was close.

Which was fucking fantastic.

Because I was almost there, too.

“I’m right here, sweetness,” I breathed out and started pumping my hips up to meet hers.

“Oh, Cash,” she shut her eyes and arched her back, “I love you, honey. So much. I love you.”

Fuck.

She said the words I wanted to hear.

The only words in the goddamn world I wanted to hear.

“I love you, too, sweetness. And I’m going to blow my fuckin’ load inside your pussy. Christ, I can’t wait anymore. Come with me,” I growled as she whimpered and cried out. Her walls grabbed me and I knew she’d gone over the edge.

And nothing could stop me from following.

Her hot release dripped down my cock, and I was a fucking goner. “Fuck, I’m coming inside of you. Holy fuck,” I grunted while slamming her hips down on my lap.

Over.

And.

Over again.

Her breasts swung in my face, so I licked one nipple into my mouth and pulled.

Her back arched violently, and she cried out. And I knew—I just knew she was coming all over again.

I wanted to make this good for her. My fingers slipped off her hip, and down to her clit. As soon as I started rubbing, her fingers dug into my shoulders. “Yes, oh, yes!”

Her pussy pulsed violently around my cock and milked every last drop of my release from me.

A few seconds later—she collapsed on top of me. Her breathing was erratic, and I could feel her heart beating an impossible rhythm against mine.

I wrapped my arms around her hot, sweaty, spent body and held her close. I kissed her damp forehead and it tasted salty from all of her hard work. My cock was still buried deep inside of her—and I never wanted to

leave. I wanted to stay here.

Like this.

Forever.

After a long while, I felt her hands moving over my arms and my chest.
Not asking for anything.

Just touching.

I drank up her attentions and locked out the rest of the world.

Finally, she lifted her head and kissed me sweetly.

Gently.

So, I kissed her back the same way.

Soon, my hands wandered her body, touching her like she was touching
me.

But—like often happened when Jillian and I touched and kissed—desire
jumped right back in.

Her touch became more needy.

Her kisses more desperate.

Her body asked.

And mine answered.

Jillian

“**H**old onto your boyfriends, ladies,” Netta, Ottawa’s captain yelled.
“Parker is in the house.” She sneered at me.

“That’s real nice, Netta.” I gave her my best, “Bite me,” look.

Not that she seemed to care.

“Are we fucking around with men or hockey today, ladies?” the ref asked as she came to a swift, crisp stop on the center line.

“Parker is the only one fucking around with men,” Netta said, and the other women on her team laughed. “Her man, other women’s men. It doesn’t matter. If it’s got a dick—Parker is on it!”

The ref blew her whistle and Netta had to leave and let another girl faceoff against me.

“Don’t let her bother you,” a new girl on their team that I didn’t recognize skated up. “She’s just jealous that you’re fucking Cash Clemens.”

The ref blew her whistle again. “Are we going to get our bonnets on and go for tea? Or are we going to play the game? Your decision, Walsh.”

If anyone ever felt like a slutty McSlutterson—it was me.

The latest episode aired last night.

It featured our evening at book club.

Then it showed Cash's arm around me—as I was snuggled into his side.

My head on his chest

And when he woke me, he called me—sweetness.

And then I called him—honey.

Of course, the freaking show decided to run with it. Even though I called and drove down to talk with the show's head honchos.

“Jillian, with all due respect, we're going to do what's best for the show. Each of you signed contracts at the beginning of the season. This should come as no surprise,” the biggest head-honcho said. And then I was escorted out of their huge building.

So, yeah.

The episode aired.

And immediately afterward—the social media backlash began.

Not everyone called me a slut.

Or a whore.

Or a cheater.

But a good number of people did.

Of course, all of this caused a backlash with Stuart. And worst of all—his dad.

So, I had to immediately get onto my social media and make a public statement. Stuart and his dad wanted me to do a live apology. But I knew

there was no hope of me holding myself together long enough to do that.

Instead, I wrote up a quick statement. I explained how tired I'd been and that I fell asleep. I said it was a mistake to sit beside Cash—even though we were just friends. And that I was sorry for embarrassing my fiancé—whom I loved very much.

Blah, blah, blah.

You get the idea.

Stuart and his dad were less than pleased at my “lack of effort.” Stuart's dad said, “You were most unconvincing. You're going to have to do more to save my son's reputation.”

I'd wanted to reach through the phone and slap him.

And his son.

I wanted to scream at both of them and tell them to leave me the hell alone.

I also wanted to run away and forget the day I'd ever met Stuart.

Or his dad.

“Let's go!” I yelled at Walsh as I hit my stick on the ice. She assumed the position and shut up.

Thank goodness.

The ref blew her whistle and dropped the puck.

Which I won.

If there was one thing I was good at—no, freaking great at—it was channeling my anger into my game.

And good grief was I ever angry.

Angry at Stuart.

Angry at his dad.

Angry at the stupid show.

Angry at the world.

I passed the puck directly to Gigi, and she took off down to the other end. I checked two players out of my way as I followed her.

“Shot!” I yelled out to my best friend. And without a second of hesitation, she gave me the puck right back.

With the power of my anger—I attacked. The goalie didn’t see it coming.

Upper right—where she’d left just the perfect amount of space for me to slip the puck into the net. She dropped down to her knees and then began swearing a blue streak when the goal horn went off.

I laughed and glided around the net. Gigi met me there and grabbed me. “Nice goal, Jillybean!” She laughed as Lexi and a few other teammates joined in. They all congratulated me before skating back to the center ice.

When I started following them, Gigi turned around and hit her stick against my leg. “Don’t listen to those idiots.” Her eyes held mine and all hints of celebration had exited her gaze. “They don’t know you. We all know you’d never cheat on your fiancé. So don’t listen to them, okay?”

The joy I’d just felt in my heart suddenly skated away. Along with my pride.

Because Gigi—and the rest of these women—thought more highly of me than they should.

Because the idiots on the other team were right—I was a cheater. And the worst part about it was—I didn’t care. I wanted Cash. And even though it

wasn't fair to him at all, I'd keep cheating with him.

As long as he'd let me.

"Thanks, Gigi. That means a lot." I gave her a smile before she turned and coasted off. My belly clenched up into a thousand knots. This lying game I'd been playing—in so many parts of my life—was getting freaking exhausting. And every time I wondered how much longer I'd have to keep up this rouse—I reminded myself.

"Forever," I whispered while I stopped on the center line.

Freaking forever.

Cash

A loud, angry knock sounded at the door.

I frowned and turned down the volume on the TV.

An even louder, angrier knock followed.

“Christ, keep your shirt on,” I said as I tossed the remote on the couch and stood. I strode to the door—but not fast enough for the knocker. Another round of banging started before I opened the door. “What is your—” I started saying.

But then my mother interrupted.

“I finally get a grandchild and you don’t think to give me a call? And I have to find out on a goddamn TV show? Instead of from my own son?” She pushed in past me and looked around. “Oh, my goodness. Look at the good boy!” my mom squealed and rushed toward Wyatt. He was on the couch with his head raised. Probably wondering what all the racket was about.

Mom talked exclusively to Wyatt for the next ten minutes or so—completely ignoring me.

It was pretty fuckin’ funny.

When she finally spoke to me, she said, “You did a good thing, Cash. He’s adorable.” Wyatt thanked mom by licking her cheek. She laughed and gave him more pets.

“He’s a good dog, and he keeps me company,” I told her and walked around the back of the couch to sit.

Mom’s eyes widened and she pointed at me. “Do not sit down,” she said in her mom voice. “We are going for a walk—or a drive—” she looked from Wyatt to me, “can he go for a walk?” she asked in a whisper.

I chuckled at my mom. “He can go for walks. He’s got three good legs and has no problem getting around.” I leaned against the side of the couch. “And you don’t have to whisper around him.”

She frowned at me and rolled her eyes. “I just didn’t want to offend him, that’s all.”

This time I out and out laughed at my mom. “He’s good, Mom. What’s up?”

Hesitantly, she peered up at the camera in the corner of the room. “Not here. Let’s get away from that piece of crap.” She waved her hand toward the camera. “You must get sick of having that thing around all the time.”

I shrugged and wandered off to find Wyatt’s leash. “Nah, you get used to it. I forget it’s there most of the time.” Unless I was at Jillian’s. But Mom didn’t need to know that.

Ten minutes later, we were at a park. It wasn’t a very big one, but that wasn’t the point of this excursion, and I knew it.

We found a bench and sat down.

“What’s going on?” Mom asked as she rubbed Wyatt’s back.

“I got a dog.”

Mom’s head snapped to me. “That’s not what I’m talking about, and you know it.”

I gazed out at the busy park. Parents stood around the little playground and watched their kids. Other people walked around and visited. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

Mom sat back and crossed her legs. “Tough shit. What the hell’s going on between you and Jillian?”

From the sound of it, she already knew.

“Mom, lay off. She’s engaged, okay? Nothing’s going on,” I lied to my own mother.

And no doubt she knew it.

“Bullshit.”

Yeah.

She knew.

I could see the aggravation bubbling up inside of her. And I felt bad that I’d done this to her.

I also hated that the whole fuckin’ world was catching glimpses of our lives—and making their own assumptions.

The worst part was—they were right.

A few calming breaths later, she said, “I completely understand your desire to win Jillian back. And I hope like hell you do it. But sleeping around and cheating—” she shook her head, “that is not the way, Cash. Not how you win over a woman. This is not how you were raised.”

Her words cut.

To the bone.

“Do you hear me?”

I nodded while the guilt that only a mother could serve up weighed on top of me.

“You’re better than this.” Her hand landed on my shoulder. “Promise me you’ll find a better way to win her back.” Mom turned more fully to me and opened her arms. I hugged her. “You are worth more than this. So much more.”

I sighed and lowered my head to her shoulder. She smelled like roses and chamomile.

If there was one person in this world, I hated disappointing—it was my mom. She and my dad had done everything for me. And after Dad died, my bond with Mom only grew stronger. It was just the two of us left.

“I love you,” she whispered and squeezed me harder. “And I only want the best for you.”

I nodded as I hugged her harder. “I know. I love you, too.”

Jillian

“WHERE DID THE CAMERA PEOPLE GO?” I asked and looked around the store again. They’d followed Heather—Cash’s mom—and I here but then disappeared when I came out of the dressing room.

Her eyes scanned up and down my body. “I told them to beat it. I don’t know how you guys manage with them watching all the time.”

I shrugged and twirled around.

The dress Heather had picked out for me was cute. A short, flirty yellow sundress that accented my cleavage and my legs.

“What do you think?” I asked while I looked at myself in the mirror. “It’s nice, but I don’t really need it.”

Heather walked closer to me. “Nobody needs a new sundress, sweetie.” She stepped to my side and caught my eyes in the big mirror. “But this one is a must.”

I smiled and tilted my head, taking another look. I really loved it. The only thing I didn’t like about it was the price tag. “Hmm, I don’t know.” I didn’t want to mention the dire state of my finances. And at the moment, I sure didn’t have any extra money to buy something I couldn’t eat, drive, or pay my electric bill with. “I’ll think about it.”

Heather gave me a small smile. “You’ve said that about the last ten things. You aren’t as much fun to shop with anymore.”

Her words hurt. I didn’t think she meant them to sting. But they did. The last time we went shopping together was when Cash took me back home to meet her.

Cash loved his mom.

Whenever he talked about her, he got the sweetest look on his face. And when I met Heather, I knew why. She was a strong, intelligent woman. She was also kind and loving.

It wasn’t hard to figure out why Cash was who he was. With Heather as his mom—he had no choice but to grow up to be a wonderful man.

And I loved that for him.

The bond they still had made my heart happy.

Having to leave Cash was horrible. I'd never get over what I'd done to him.

Having to leave Heather behind—well, that sucked, too. Majorly. I still felt that loss. She and I had really connected during our visit.

Oh, well.

That was life for you.

I shrugged and grinned at her. “My closet is pretty full as it is.”

Her gaze held mine in the mirror. “Alright, go change. And then we’re going out for lunch.” Her hands grasped my arms. “We need to talk about you and my son.”

Oh, crap.



“THANK you again for the clothes. You really didn’t have to do that,” I said to Heather while the server filled our water glasses. Of course, Heather would choose one of the best restaurants around for a quick lunch. Crisp, white, cloth napkins. Fresh flowers in a small vase on each table.

Heather Clemens was pure class.

“I wanted to, Jillian. You’re welcome.”

We both thanked the server, and he left.

“I’ve missed you, sweetie.” Heather reached over and put her hand over mine.

“I’ve missed you, too,” I said truthfully.

Her eyes scanned my face. “I told you that even if things didn’t work out with Cash, that I wanted us to keep in contact.”

My stomach got all twisty and weird. “It just—didn’t seem like the right

thing to do. After—” I couldn’t finish that sentence.

Because there was just too much that happened—after.

“I meant what I said about staying in contact with you. And I also meant what I what I said about investing in your bikini line.” Her hand squeezed mine a little bit tighter. “I left messages.”

I bit my lower lip and let my gaze fall to the table. “I’m sorry. I wanted to call you.” I peered over at her. “But I couldn’t.” And that was also the truth. The loss I’d felt when I had to let her—and Cash—go was too big. Anything I could do to avoid thinking or dealing with that situation—I did.

And keeping Heather in my life—without Cash—well, that wasn’t possible.

She let go of my hand and nodded. “You know I can help make your business soar. I was serious about that offer. And I still am.” Heather sat back in her chair and picked up her water glass. She took a sip from it, making the ice inside clink together. “Even if you and Cash aren’t together.”

Having Heather Clemens behind you on a business deal would be—amazing. She was a real force of nature in the business world. If you wanted to know how to get something done, you called Heather.

“Jillian, you know I’ve been playing with the big boys for years now. I can separate business and family. If I didn’t believe in you and your product—well, I wouldn’t have said a darn word about it.”

I picked up my glass and took a quick drink. “I don’t know what to say.”

She set her glass down and looked at me for a moment. “Then think about it.”

I nodded. “Thanks, I will.”

“Okay, with that out of the way,” she said and cleared her throat, “tell me what the heck’s going on between you and my son.”

Oh, crap.

I swallowed and sighed. “Nothing. We’re just friends.”

She shook her head. “Level with me, Jillian. Please. Because from the look of things, you’re a whole lot more than that.”

This was another one of those times where I wished like heck I could spill everything.

But I couldn’t.

Ever.

“The show twists things around to sensationalize—”

Heather giggled and interrupted me, “Sweetie, you called him honey on national TV. While you were wrapped around him like a boa constrictor.” She laughed again. “And he called you sweetness. None of this tells me you two aren’t knockin’ boots.”

My heart started to race.

I couldn’t tell her the truth.

And it didn’t seem like she was willing to let this go.

“Old habits, I guess. Wyatt laid down on us and he was warm and snuggly.” I looked out the huge atrium windows and watched the hustle and bustle of people walking around and the cars driving past. “And Cash was all warm and snuggly,” my voice trailed off.

Crap.

I was making this sound worse.

I looked back at Heather, and the sneaky grin she had on her face shocked me. “Lady, it sounds to me like you’re still carrying a flame for my son. And I’m one hundred percent sure he’s still carrying one for you. The only thing that’s stopping you is—”

I had to stop this.

And I had to stop it now.

“Heather, you don’t understand,” I said, because she really didn’t. And she never would. “I’m engaged to Stuart. We’re getting married.”

Her eyes scanned my face again. This time, she took a bit longer. To tell you the truth, it was more than a little unnerving. “You don’t look like you’re happy about that, sweetie. I’m not sure why.” She leaned forward and motioned for my hand. Dejectedly, I gave it to her. “If you need help with something—” she lowered her voice, “or with a situation, no matter how big. You know you can call me, right?”

Her eyes held mine for a long while.

Her kind, motherly, empathetic eyes.

“Thanks, but I’m okay, really,” I practically whispered, not sounding very convincing at all.

“Jillian,” she said, leaning forward, “I can help you with anything. If you’re in some kind of trouble, I swear I can help you. No judgments.”

I swallowed again over a dry lump in my throat.

Gosh.

It would be so easy to give up.

Tell Heather exactly what was going on.

Hand it all over to her.

But I couldn't.

This was my problem.

And I'd deal with it.

"That's very kind of you. Everything's fine, though." I slipped my hand out of hers and hoped she'd give up.

"Jillian," she sat back again, "you still have my number, right?"

"Yeah."

"Good. You use it any time you want. For anything. I will answer."

Gosh.

Her kindness was making my eyes burn. I could not start crying here at the table. Or she'd know for sure that something was up. "Thanks, I will."

Heather took a deep breath and pulled the white napkin off her plate. She arranged it on her lap and said, "Okay, then let's talk business instead. I want to hear what you have in mind for your social media channel this quarter."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

And then I told her exactly what I had planned for the next quarter.

And she listened.

Then she gave me a few ideas.

And I listened and typed them into my phone so I wouldn't forget.

Because Heather's advice was priceless.

And I needed all the help I could get.

After that, we ate a lovely lunch and talked about hockey.

Which was by far our favorite topic of all.

Cash

“**F**uck, is it just me,” Isaac leaned forward and rubbed the back of his neck, “or is that guy the biggest fuckin’ douche canoe you’ve ever met?”

Beau, Trey, and a few of the other guys sitting with us started laughing.

I didn’t, though.

Nope.

Because even though Isaac was right, Jillian had still chosen Stuart over me.

“Actually, you just insulted all the douche canoes in the world. Because that guy,” Trey jerked his head in Stuart’s direction, “takes douche canoe to a whole other level.” Everyone around us agreed, while Trey continued. “This morning, after I walked Hayley, I sat here by the pool. Stuart walked out of Jillian’s and joined me. Then he continued to tell me how much money his family was worth. Swear to God,” Trey glared over at the offender, “he practically itemized everything his daddy owned. Like, is that supposed to impress me or something? Being handed shit from your father? And bragging

about it?”

Beau shook his head and sighed. “He did the same thing to me an hour ago. I had to take the dogs out and he followed along. Didn’t shut up the entire time about how rich his family is. I think he’s hoping the show will take one of the clips and play it in the next episode.”

I sat back and looked over at Stuart. He was talking to Lexi—or more like, he was talking at her. She had on a flat, fake smile that didn’t quite hit her eyes. You could tell she wanted to be absolutely anywhere except standing around listening to Stuart.

Trey shut his eyes and groaned, “Damn it, I have to go save my wife. And somehow not let that douche canoe trap me into a conversation.” He stood and made his way over to Lexi—who was more than happy to be rescued.

Isaac looked at me and shook his head. “I will never understand why she’d choose him over you, man. That just defies all logic.”

Even though he didn’t say her name, we knew Isaac was talking about Jillian. And once again, I couldn’t say one goddamn thing about the whole stupid situation. Especially since I’d fallen back into fucking her again.

No part of this scenario would favor me.

Not anymore.

Jillian had told me—been very clear—about the fact that she loved Stuart. And that she was marrying him.

And I’d fucked her anyway.

More than once.

I sighed and closed my eyes for a few seconds. Yeah, there was no way to spin this where I turned out to be the hero.

I was fucking an almost-married woman.

Christ.

Did I feel bad about it?

I did.

But I also didn't.

At least not when I was with Jillian.

And certainly not when I was—in—Jillian.

No.

That felt like the most natural thing in the fucking world.

The rightest thing in the fucking world.

“Shit,” Beau muttered under his breath, and leaned back. “He’s coming over here.”

My eyes immediately snapped up and—yes—Stuart was definitely walking in this direction.

“Douche canoe alert,” Isaac coughed out, and the other guys laughed.

“Cash,” Stuart called out to me as he got closer. “I need a moment of your time.” He stood a few feet away and glared at me. His hands moved to his hips. “Man to man.”

Fuck.

I sighed and nodded before I stood. Stuart walked toward the front gate and I followed.

I swear I heard Isaac say, “More like Douche canoe to man—not man to man.” And the guys erupted into loud laughter.

Stuart suddenly turned around just in front of the iron gate. “Are you

having an affair with my fiancée?” His hands sat back on his hips.

I shook my head and let out a deep breath. “No, of course not.” I frowned at him and tried to put on my best bullshit face.

“Seeing you two—” he raised his hand and pointed right at me, “on the couch together—”

I cut him off right there. I was already done with this conversation. “Man-to-man?” I leaned in and narrowed my gaze. “Years ago on the Single Girl show, you walked into Jillian’s cabin and saw me balls deep inside of her. Just like I was every fuckin’ night of that show.” I lowered my voice. “And I’m fairly sure you know that.”

He stepped back and the expression on his face looked as though I’d slapped him. “There’s no need to be crass,” he said in a sour, disgusted tone.

I raised my eyebrows and tilted my head. “I’m not being crass, Stuart. I’m being honest.” I took a step forward. “Just like I am now. And I’m telling you,” I held his eyes and lied, “we aren’t fucking.”

The offended look on his face changed to anger. “It looked otherwise on the show. I think you’re lying to me.”

I shook my head again and felt my guts twist.

Christ.

I’d never wanted to pound someone into the ground more than I did at this moment. “You know what? I don’t give one fuck what you think. I know the truth.”

Yeah.

I sure did.

I took a few steps to the iron gate and opened it, wishing I was miles

away from this place. Like at my cabin. Where no one else was.

Out in the fresh, cool mountain air.

Where the only predators I had to deal with were mountain lions and bears.

“Cash,” Stuart yelled, but I didn’t turn around. “Things better stay that way!” he hollered from behind me.

And it took every ounce of control inside of me—not—to turn back around and pound him into the pavement. “Fuck off,” I muttered under my breath as I stormed off toward my truck. I pulled my keys out and clicked the doors open.

“What happened?” I heard Jillian’s breathless voice ask behind me.

I was in no mood to deal with her. And there were cameras watching. “Go ask your fiancé.” I kept walking at a fast clip and hoped she’d give up. At the moment, I needed to get the hell out of here.

“Cash, would you stop for a minute?” she asked in a louder, more demanding tone.

But I wasn’t about to get in trouble again.

Nope.

I held my tongue and didn’t reply.

After I rounded my truck, I opened the door and slid inside. Then I took a deep fuckin’ breath. Thirty more seconds and I’d be out of this parking lot—and away from the cameras.

And Jillian’s fiancé.

And Jillian.

“What the heck just happened?” My head snapped to see the passenger

door open. And Jillian frowning at me.

As though I'd done something wrong.

“Go back to your fiancé,” I said in a low voice as I narrowed my eyes at her, “now.”

Instead, Jillian rolled her eyes and jumped into the seat. She slammed the door and turned to me. “What is going on?” The way she stared at me—fuck. Her eyes were full of concern.

Or at least that was what I thought I saw in them. But when it came to Jillian, my radar was obviously off a few degrees.

I tried to take a calming breath.

Nope.

Didn't work.

I turned to Jillian. “Your fiancé just asked me if we were fucking.”

Her eyes nearly fell right out of their sockets. “Oh, shit,” she whispered, barely moving her lips. Then her front teeth bit into her bottom lip.

“Yeah, shit,” I repeated back to her. “You need to go back and—” I started saying, but I could tell Jillian wasn't paying attention to me.

She cut me off, and asked, “What did you say?” Her eyes held mine, and I wasn't sure if she was even breathing.

“I told him we weren't.”

Her shoulders went slack, and she leaned back against the seat. I loud exhale came out of her mouth, and she took some deep breaths after that.

“Because we aren't. Not anymore, Jillian.” My voice was firm and authoritative.

At least, I hoped it was.

Her eyes—her watery eyes—found mine. “Cash, I—”

This time, I didn't let her speak. “I'm serious. I can't do this again. If someone catches us, our reputations will be—”

Jillian's hand reached out and touched my arm. “No one will catch us.”

Fuck.

The feel of her touch and the look in her eye—I was such a fuckin' sucker. If it wasn't bright daylight outside—and if there weren't a couple dozen people outside in the courtyard—I'd probably—

Fuck.

I had to stop this.

Now.

“Jillian,” I leveled my gaze at her, “we're done. This is done. You're marrying that fucking—” I raised my hand and shakily pointed out the window.

I exhaled and dropped my hand. “Just go.”

She pursed her lips together. “He's leaving in the morning. And who knows when he'll be back again?”

I shook my head and looked out the side window for half a minute or so. Then I peered back at her. “Maybe you'll see him at your wedding?”

Her expression fell, and those beautiful eyes of hers got even wetter. Jillian nodded as her hand reached for the door handle. “Have a nice life, Cash.”

I let out a sarcastic laugh. “Yeah, you, too, Jillian. I hope you have a real nice fuckin' life.”

Christ.

Her eyes traveled all over my face. “I mean it. I hope you have the best life. You deserve it.” Her voice hitched on that last part before she practically ran out of my truck and shut the door.

“What the fuck?” I asked myself while I watched Jillian slowly shuffle back to the iron gate.

Cash

Just like Jillian said, the douche canoe went home the next day. But not until after a heck of a fight, apparently.

I hadn't been around for it. But that was all anyone was talking about.

In the courtyard.

And at the rink.

I had to physically stop myself from running over to Jillian and asking what that idiot said to her. Everything in me needed to know she was okay.

And everything in me knew—I no longer had the right to ask that. Or to take care of her.

Jillian was engaged to another man. She wasn't mine.

Even though I sometimes caught her looking over at me with sad eyes.

And those sad eyes called to me.

Asking me to knock on her door late at night.

Or to meet her after-hours at the rink.

Or the country bar.

Neither of which I'd done for two weeks now.

And yes, I knew exactly how many days I'd been Jillian-free. Detoxing from that woman wasn't easy.

Not texting her—or showing up at her door—was so fucking hard. Especially when she was so goddamn close.

A twenty-second walk across the courtyard.

Or one text away.

In other words—I was in hell.

The only bright side of all this—our team had finally gotten its collective shit together. We'd been completely dominating on the ice.

And fuck—it felt great.

The fans loved us again.

The owners even invited the three of us back over to their mansion. This time—it was all good news and congratulations.

Beau and Trey toasted me—saying it was all because of our “stupid team bonding ideas.”

I wasn't sure if that was true or not. Even so, I wanted to call up Jillian and thank her for giving that advice.

Which I absolutely could not do.

Nope.

Just hearing her voice on the phone might send me into another downward spiral. And I wasn't willing to throw away the last two weeks of detoxing I'd done.

Wyatt laid down at my feet with a thump, and I patted his back. “Good

boy. I'll take you for a walk in a few minutes."

Trey walked up and sat with us. "I can't wait to get on the road," he said while opening a large bottle of water.

Beau nodded and agreed. "Me, too. We've got some asses to kick."

He was more than right.

After the less than stellar start to the season, we definitely had some redeeming to do. I wanted to get back out there and keep showing everyone what we could really do.

Trey looked over at his wife, who was rushing across the courtyard. "What's the hurry?" he asked with a frown.

Lexi called out, "Jillian needs help."

Trey nodded, but didn't take his eyes off her until she was at Jillian's door. "She's been helping Jillian a lot lately."

Beau shrugged and nodded. "Gigi, too. I mean, they sometimes help her with filming and shit. But it seems like they're over there more often than usual."

Trey set his water bottle down. "That's because her computer keeps fucking up. I don't know how many times they had to re-shoot that last nail polish experiment."

Beau chuckled and corrected him. "It's a segment, not an experiment."

Trey's eyebrows raised up on his forehead. "Trust me, the way Lexi's nails looked—it was definitely an experiment." They both laughed and kept on talking about some of the crazy products their women had helped Jillian with.

I didn't participate in this conversation at all.

I knew exactly what they were talking about. I'd been Jillian's victim more than once before. And they were right—some of her sponsors sent really weird shit.

Other sponsors sent great shit.

It was a crapshoot.

I didn't want to tell them about the times—years ago—when I helped Jillian with her product testing. Or when I helped her film the results.

And I couldn't tell them about how I'd so willingly stepped back into that role at the start of this season.

Christ.

What I wouldn't give to—

Fuck.

Honest to God.

I needed to find a way to stop thinking about Jillian.

And the past.

And the present.

Just then, Gigi stepped out of Jillian's place, shut the door with a bang, and stormed over to us.

Gigi stopped in front of her fiancé and said, "You need to stop me from tossing that stupid computer into the stupid pool."

Beau sighed and grabbed her hand. He pulled Gigi onto his lap. "How many times have I told her I'd buy her a new computer?"

She slipped an arm around the back of his neck. "Four hundred?"

He chuckled and nodded. "At least. Should I go in and try again?"

She shook her head in a slow, resigned fashion. “No, I’ve tried. She’s too proud.”

Beau lightly kissed her lips. “You couldn’t get her computer to work?”

Gigi answered back in a sad voice. “No, it’s hopeless.”

He kissed her one more time and said, “Let me go see what I can do.”

Then she slid off his lap and let him up. Gigi wished Beau luck before she collapsed into his vacant chair.

“I’ve offered to buy her a new computer,” Trey told Gigi. They spoke for a while about ways to somehow get rid of her old computer and sneak a new one in its place.

This was something about Jillian that had always confused me.

She made money.

I’d seen with my own two eyes how much she could make from one bikini launch.

Not to mention the money that sponsors gave her.

The team gave the women a paycheck, too. Granted, it wasn’t close to what the men made—but it was still something.

And Jillian did not lead an extravagant lifestyle. Not at all.

There were no expensive trips or luxury vehicles.

And even if there were, her mom was loaded. And her dad had made millions playing pro-hockey. I doubted he pissed it all away.

Jillian’s mom had to have made a pretty penny so far in her career, too. She was a much sought after celebrity in her own right.

So, the question in my mind was—couldn’t her mom buy a new

computer? Christmas was just around the corner.

Even if it wasn't, Jillian could always ask for help.

If it were my mom—before I made pro—she'd lend me the money.

Then make me cut her enormous lawn a few hundred times to pay her back.

None of that made sense to me.

Yeah.

I didn't understand Jillian's relationship with her mom.

Not at all.

During the Single Girl show, we were supposed to visit her mom during an episode. But at the last minute, she canceled. The only reason Jillian gave was that, "It wasn't a good time."

To me, that seemed more than a little weird. Especially since Jillian's mom was so well-known. You'd think she'd jump at the chance to help her daughter out and show off where Jillian came from.

Nope.

Nothing.

I had to admit I'd been disappointed—and a little embarrassed. And she wasn't even my mom.

Anyway, even if Jillian's mom refused to help out her daughter—then her fucking douche canoe of a fiancé should step in and buy Jillian a new goddamn computer.

He had the money.

And he'd made sure to inform everyone on the property of that fact.

Why he wouldn't put out and buy his woman something that she desperately needed—I'd never understand.

After a few minutes, I stood up and asked, "Can you guys watch Wyatt for an hour? I have an errand to run."



SHIT.

What should have taken me half an hour, took triple that. I'd texted Trey. He had Wyatt at his place and said my dog could stay with them tonight.

Which made all of this slightly less stressful.

Getting what I needed wasn't the stressful part. I knew exactly what to buy.

For some reason, my guts were in a knot thinking about Jillian in a panic.

Which should absolutely not bother me. Not anymore.

She wasn't my problem.

And I'd been trying to convince myself of that exact thing as I was driving.

And shopping.

And driving again.

This wasn't my problem to fix.

Even so, I parked my truck, got out, and made my way up to the iron gate. It took me a second to shift the bags in my hands so I could open the gate and walk through.

Luckily, the courtyard was empty.

Probably because there was another stupid episode of the stupid show on

tonight. I was supposed to go over to Beau's in an hour.

I didn't see how I'd make it.

Oh, well.

I knocked on the door in front of me, but there was no answer. I tried again.

The door swung open, and I was face-to-face with a very angry Beau. I could feel the frustrated energy flowing out of him.

His eyes darted to the bags in my hand, and he let out a long, growling sound. "Thank fuck. Now move out of my way, Clemens. There's only one fuckin' place for this computer." He held it up in one hand as his eyes stared at me—unblinking.

I raised my eyebrows and quickly stepped out of his way. I wasn't sure what he was about to do, but I knew there'd be no stopping him even if I did.

"No, stop!" Jillian shouted from inside her place. And then two seconds later, she burst through the doorway. "Don't! Beau!"

He turned around and scowled at her. "It has to be done, Jillian. This is the only humane thing to do. You have to put it out of its misery. And you have to put us out of ours. Every last person here has tried to fix it. There's no hope." Beau's voice had trailed off and for a moment, I thought he was going to hand the computer back to Jillian.

Nope.

He suddenly turned back around and stalked to the edge of the pool.

And then—

"Holy shit," I muttered under my breath while I watched Jillian's computer sail through the air.

And directly into the pool.

“No!” Jillian shouted, her hands clasping her head.

Beau stepped over to her and put his hands on her shoulders. “It had to be done. You weren’t strong enough to let go. So, I did it for you.”

Not surprisingly, Jillian did not appear to be all that grateful. Her eyes got wide. So did her mouth. “Are you insane?”

Beau briefly closed his eyes and then said, “One day you’ll thank me for this.”

Jillian’s eyes narrowed, and I saw—and heard—her take a huge breath, “No,” she said in an eerily quiet tone, “I’m going to kill you!”

And then—

I swear, I’m not lying.

She pushed Beau into the pool.

Had I not seen it with my own two eyes—I would not have believed she’d be strong enough to make him budge.

But Jillian had the benefit of decades of training. And part of that training was how to body check.

Hard.

The surprised-shocked look on Beau Moreau’s face was so comical I started laughing.

Jillian wasn’t, though.

Nope.

She was madder than hell.

Beau’s huge body splashed into the pool. He quickly came up for air,

soaking wet.

“Get my fucking computer, Moreau! Or your ass is grass!” Jillian’s arm shot out, and she pointed at the sunken computer now sitting at the bottom of the pool.

“Leave it alone, Jillian. It’s where it belongs. It’s finally at peace,” Beau tried to explain. He rubbed his hands on his face in an effort to clear the water dripping down it.

“Get,” Jillian bent over, “my,” she jerked her entire arm and finger at the computer, “computer!”

Beau rolled his eyes and shook his head. Then he dove underwater and retrieved the sunken wreck.

When he re-emerged with it in his hand, he swam over to the edge of the pool. “It’s gone, Jillian.” He handed it to her and sighed.

“That was not cool, Moreau.” Jillian lowered her voice. The sound of outrage was unmistakable. “You better pray this turns back on.” And with that, she spun around on her heel and stormed back to her door—the water leaking out of the computer and leaving a wet trail the whole way.

I followed her in and shut the door behind me. “Hey,” I started to say, but she immediately cut me off.

“Leave, Cash. I don’t have time for your bullshit right now.”

I walked through her living room and right to the table where she worked at. I set the bags down and watched Jillian searching her cupboards for something.

“Motherfucking, goddamn, piece of shit,” she turned around and dumped the computer onto the counter, “men!”

She'd clearly lost her mind.

Jillian rarely swore.

And I'd never heard a string of language—like that—flow out of her mouth. Yeah, she was pissed right off. I moved quickly around the island. “It’s okay,” I began, but she didn’t let me finish.

The frown on her face said it all. “I just said I don’t have time for your bullshit. What are you still doing here?”

Ouch.

If looks—and words—could kill, I’d be a goner. I held my hands up. “Jillian, sweetness,” I said and stepped closer, “it’s going to be okay. Take a breath and listen to me for a second.”

I approached her slowly, but she moved back and turned to the cupboard. “It’s not going to be,” she slammed the cupboard door so hard it even made me jump, “fine. I don’t have a fucking,” she opened a drawer and rifled through it, “computer!” she shouted and shut the drawer with so much force it bounced back open again.

“That’s what I came to tell you.”

Jillian opened another cabinet and pulled out a big bag of rice. “Thank goodness I bought a brand-new bag last week,” she said to herself. Her feet carried her across the floor to the pantry. She yanked out a plastic container.

“The freaking,” she stomped back to the bag of rice and set the container down, “nerve. I can’t believe he’d do that.”

Her fingers ripped into the bag. She picked it up and dumped the entire contents into the plastic container.

“Where does he get off doing something that mean?”

Even though I was pretty sure she wasn't asking me, I answered anyway, "I think he was trying to help you."

I was not prepared for the scowl she gave me. "By killing my computer?"

Yeah.

She was really pissed.

"Sweetness," I set my hands on her shoulders, "I think it was already dead."

She shook her head and turned around. Her hands grabbed the computer and then she whirled around and placed it inside the container.

"I wonder if that's enough rice?" she said more to herself than me.

But I answered anyway. "There's not enough rice in the whole world to save your computer," I told her the honest to God truth.

Her gaze moved from the computer to me.

And it wasn't a nice gaze.

Nope.

"Whatever," she spat out, and then plunked the lid on the container. Jillian's eyes hit the clock on the microwave, then moved to me. "You better go. The show starts soon."

And with that, she walked around me and headed to the table.

Where she stopped dead in her tracks.

"What is that?" she asked unnecessarily, seeing as the very well-known brand of the computer store—and the computer—was smack dab in the middle of the bags.

I strode up behind her. "I bought you something." All on their own, my

hands found her shoulders again.

“No, you did not,” was her only reply. Her body remained stock still.

“Yeah, I did. Open it up and I’ll help you if you want.” My hands squeezed her shoulders. But she didn’t move. I wasn’t completely sure she was breathing.

“No, you did not.” If it wasn’t so quiet in here, I might not have heard her.

One last squeeze and I said, “Yeah, I did. Let’s get started. There might be some glitches we’ll have to iron out.”

Slowly, she shifted around to me. Her beautiful, perfect eyes held something in them that I couldn’t read. “I can’t accept,” her hand waved out to the side, “all that.”

My eyes scanned her face. Even though I didn’t understand her reaction—it was still cute as hell. And something down deep inside of me—fucking loved the way she was gazing at me right now.

Yeah.

Loved it way too much.

“Good thing I didn’t ask you to accept it, then. Now, hurry up and open it so we can get started.”

Her eyes looked down, and she began biting on her lower lip. When she peered back at me, the emotion on her face nearly knocked me out of my shoes. “You don’t understand, Cash. I can’t pay you back. Not for a while.”

I leaned in. “I didn’t ask you to.” It was obvious that Jillian wasn’t going to get this show on the road. So, I walked around her and began taking everything out of the bags.

“I’m hoping you still have everything backed up, right?” I asked, knowing full well she did. That was one of the things we talked about on our first “date.”

As soon as she told me what she did for a living—other than hockey—I talked to her about security and backing up.

And because Jillian ran her business like a business, she had everything looked after. I did make some suggestions and helped her tweak a few things.

But all in all, Jillian knew her shit.

Jillian cleared her throat. “Yeah, of course.”

I nodded my head.

And then she got to work.

It didn’t take us long.

Well, it didn’t feel like a long time.

But it was.

We’d both missed the show.

Jillian reminded me a few times.

Finally, the last time I said, “Fuck the show. This is more important.”

Her eyes had gotten all glassy, and she’d given me a wobbly smile.

I stayed until she was completely up and running. For some reason, I needed to know everything worked, and that she had access to all the things she needed access to.

By then, we were both starving.

And tired.

But I knew if I went home, my brain wouldn’t be able to shut off,

anyway.

So, when Jillian offered to make us a very, very late supper—I didn't refuse.

I also didn't refuse because of the fact that Jillian made the best goddamn hamburgers I'd ever tasted.

Meat, cheese, bacon—and a secret sauce that she refused to share the ingredients for.

Three burgers in and I finally leaned back and quit. I set the last few bites down on the plate and groaned, "I can't do it. I want to eat it," I stared at the lonely leftovers on my plate, "but my stomach's gonna explode."

Jillian's laughter made me look up. She wiped the corner of her mouth. "I thought I might have to grab another pack of ground sirloin."

It was well after midnight.

But I still knew that if I'd asked her to make more burgers, she'd do it—grab her keys, take off the twenty-four-hour market.

And buy whatever the hell she needed.

All to make her special burgers.

"Nope." I patted my stomach. "I'm a quitter." I smiled over at her.

She stood and began grabbing the plates. "I'll clean up. You must be exhausted."

I watched as she turned around and headed into the kitchen. My eyes immediately fell to her swaying hips.

Christ.

I missed those hips.

And that ass.

My mouth watered—just like it had for her burgers.

Fuck.

I needed a brain transplant.

“I’m okay, it’s only…” I peered down at my watch for the first time in ages and saw what time it was. One fifty-three. “Holy fuck.”

I heard Jillian’s sigh. “I’m sorry to keep you up so late, Cash. You’re going to be dead on your skates tomorrow.”

Two in the morning.

And I had to be up at four.

I shut my eyes for a few seconds and took a deep breath. At this point, no sleep was better than grabbing an hour or two. I always felt like shit if I pulled something like that.

“You didn’t keep me. I wanted to stay.”

She gazed over her shoulder. “I’d probably be crying in bed if you hadn’t shown up when you did.” Her voice lowered while she scraped our plates off. “Or possibly in prison for strangling Beau.”

I chuckled and got up to help clean off the table. “He meant well. But his execution could use some work.”

I heard Jillian huff out in frustration. After I tossed a couple of things into the fridge, I set my hands on her shoulders. “Seriously, sweetness. Don’t be mad at him. He just did what we all wanted to do. Beau has mad respect for you. I hope you know that.”

She sighed, and her shoulders slumped. “He does have a pretty bad track record with throwing things into the pool.” She bit her lip. “So does Trey.”

Then she launched into telling me those stories. About various objects—like cameras and divorce papers—being thrown into the pool.

And I laughed at each one of them as I helped dry the dishes.

By the time we were done—it was even fucking later. Really is no sense in going to sleep.

Jillian squeezed the rag out and set it to the side. “Thanks again for your help. Let’s make a payment plan after practice today.”

I tossed the dishtowel onto the counter. “Let’s not.”

She picked up the dishtowel and folded it nicely. “I’m paying you back.”

“No, you’re not.”

“I am.”

“Not.”

“Cash.”

“Jillian.”

She threw her head back and stared up at the ceiling. “It’s going to take me a while. But I’m going to pay you back.”

I nodded and said, “No, you aren’t.”

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “You can’t spend that kind of money on me.”

I leaned my hip against the counter and crossed my arms over my chest. “That’s interesting,” I glared down at her, “because I just did.”

Her eyes squinted, and her voice lowered. “I’m paying you back.”

I leaned down. “No, you aren’t.”

She let out what was close to a growl, then set her hands on her hips. “I

am.”

I sighed and turned to her fridge. After I opened it, I pulled out a beer—even though I had to be on the ice in three hours. I knew I was going to need it to get through this conversation with Jillian. “Woman, do you know how fucking insulting you’re being right now?” I opened the bottle and took a long pull from it.

Her head twisted and she frowned. “How am I insulting you?”

My eyebrows shot up, and I took another long drink. “You know what I make—and what I’ve made during my career. Or you at least have a decent idea as to the fuckload of money I’ve made. I think you also know I don’t go around throwing it out the window.”

Her frown grew deeper, and she asked, “So?”

Deep breath.

Another sip of beer.

“So? Do you really think with the money I make that buying one computer will hurt me in any way, shape, or form?”

And then Jillian said something so—Jillian. And when she said it, I knew that was one of the biggest reasons I loved her.

“Yeah, well, it’ll hurt me if I don’t pay you back. I’ll feel like a total mooch.” Her eyes got all watery and my damn heart felt like it was going to burst.

I sat my beer on the counter and stepped right up to her. Even if I wanted to—I couldn’t stop my hands from running up her arms, over her shoulders to cup her face. “You’ll get over it.”

Despite herself, she laughed. And seeing and hearing her let go made

something inside of me sing.

All on its own, my head dipped down.

And I kissed her forehead.

I wanted to kiss her smiling lips.

Real bad.

Luckily, I veered.

“Now that we’ve settled that,” I looked down into her eyes, “you should go to bed. Get some sleep.”

Her gaze slid to the side, and I knew.

I just knew.

Jillian Parker was not getting any sleep tonight.

Her eyes slipped back to mine, and she nodded. “Okay, thanks again for —” she took a deep breath, “everything.”

I held on to her longer than I should have. My hands dropped from her head, and I took a step back. “You are the worst fuckin’ liar.”

A cute, confused look crossed her face. And it made me want to kiss her even more. “What?”

“You’re not going to sleep,” I stated the obvious, not taking my eyes off her.

“Umm,” she started to say, but I cut her off. Why—I had no idea. No part of me should give a shit what she does after I walk out that door.

Unfortunately, I still did.

“What are you going to do instead?”

I thought she’d be mad that I called her out. The grin on her face told me

something different.

“I’m too excited. I thought I’d try to film a quick video and upload it. See how it plays.”

Christ.

The excitement in her eyes—and written all over her face—was contagious.

I nodded and turned around. “Sounds good. I’ll set up the lighting. The salesperson might have sold me a new system for you.”

Hearing Jillian’s squeal of delight made me chuckle as I walked toward the table. I’d left one of the bags on the floor beside it. After I lifted the bag and set it on the table—I felt Jillian’s arms wrap around me from behind.

“Thanks, Cash,” was all she said with a quick squeeze before letting me go and rushing down the hallway.

It didn’t take me long to put the lights together. And Jillian came out and arranged the table. She completely transformed it, just like she always did.

I had the tripod up and we’d done about a dozen test shots until everything was just right. Jillian was meticulous about how her videos looked.

Finally, I was allowed to start shooting for real.

If there was one thing I loved—it was how quickly Jillian changed into “star mode.” One second, she’d be all frazzled. And the next, she’d turn it on.

I couldn’t even explain exactly what it was.

But whatever it was—whatever Jillian had—it was magnetic. She pulled you in through the lens and made you want to stay awhile. I was completely captivated and found myself grinning like a fool as she applied several

various types of nail polish.

The next step was to brush on some kind of quick drying polish on top. And then wait for the allotted amount of time.

You wouldn't think literally—watching paint dry was a fun activity. But somehow, Jillian made it that way. The way she explained everything definitely made me a semi-expert on nail polish and the quick drying gloopy stuff.

She gave me the signal to stop recording, so I click off.

“Darn, I should have done this when I had a bunch of nail polish removers to test, too. Why didn't I think of that earlier?” Jillian shook her head, appearing to be disappointed in herself. Which was insane.

“You did a great job. In fact, I have half a mind to get you to paint my nails.” I winked at her, then went about transferring the video to her new computer.

She giggled.

And that sound.

Fuck.

It hit me right in the chest.

And ran straight to my dick.

“I'm serious, Jillian. That was great. I don't think we'll even have to do much editing.” I took a few deep breaths and tried to get some blood flow back to my brain.

Her eyes stayed on me. “Cash, you don't have to stay to edit. You've done way too much already.” She looked down at her multi-colored nails with a frown.

“I can help,” I said and cleared my throat. Then I sat down with her at the table and started doing just that. “If you want to do another one or two videos, I’ll stay.”

Her eyes grew brighter, even at this time of the night.

Or more like morning.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded and kept clicking and typing on the computer. She didn’t waste any time at all getting up and rushing to the bathroom. When she came back, I saw a bottle of nail polish remover in her hand and a long bag with the words “makeup rounds” on it.

She sat down and started removing the nail polish she’d just taken great pains to paint on. All of this also fascinated me. I loved watching her do anything. And obviously I wasn’t alone—Jillian had many fans who shared my point of view.

After a few minutes, she huffed and puffed. “Crap.”

I lifted my eyes to see her still working on a few fingers. “Do you need help?” I asked, wondering what kind of problem she was having.

“Umm,” she said, but didn’t say anything else.

Several more frustrating minutes went by.

The scent of nail polish remover was starting to make me a little lightheaded. I stood and moved my chair closer to hers. Then I took matters into my own hands. “Here, let me do it.”

I grabbed one of the white round things and doused it with the stinky, noxious liquid. My hand picked up hers—and I did my best to ignore how it felt to have her hand in mine.

Which meant I failed terribly at it.

“Why isn’t it coming off?” I asked after a minute of rubbing her deep red painted nail. It still looked the same as before I started.

Jillian sighed and shook her head. “I have no idea. This stuff is the strongest remover on the market.”

I nodded and tried again.

Nothing.

“Christ, woman. I think this is on here for good.” I peered down into her eyes, expecting to see anger. Or at the very least, unhappiness.

Instead, she had a soft look on her face. Her shoulders shrugged. “It’s okay. Don’t worry about it,” she said in a barely-there voice. Her hand slipped out of mine, and I couldn’t believe it—but I felt that loss. A large part of me wanted to keep her warm, soft hand in mine.

“Well, what are you going to do?” I asked, as my mind raced around with puzzlement. Jillian gave up way too fast. And there was no way she could film any more videos unless her nails were sorted.

She gave me a small smile. And with a gentle voice, she said, “I’ll just paint them all red.”

That made me laugh. It was such a simple solution that hadn’t occurred to me. As I laughed, I noticed her gaze fall to my lips. And down to my chest. “I miss hearing your laugh,” she said in a small, matter-of-fact voice.

Christ.

It felt like she’d just delivered a slapshot directly to my heart.

Without my gear on.

“Jillian,” I said, unable to think of anything else to add.

I wasn't even sure how long we stared at each other for. But finally, Jillian cleared her throat. "Let me do the rest of my nails and then I'll set up for a mascara shoot next." She talked about the different kinds of samples a few companies had sent her. And I pretended to listen. Because my mind—and my heart—were busy thinking about the way Jillian had looked at me.

And spoken to me.

Yeah.

It was going to be a long fucking night.

Cash

The next few weeks had been a lot like that night. Jillian and I were back in each other's spaces. I helped her out on a regular basis.

And she was also back to sharing doggie care as well.

I even gave her back the doggie bed she'd bought for Wyatt.

In other words—Jillian was constantly around.

In my face.

In my ears.

And in my fuckin' dreams.

Every goddamn night.

It really was driving me mad.

The smell of her hair hit me at different times during the day. Even when she wasn't even around.

I'd swear I could smell that flowery scent—or even hear her giggle.

Every time my phone beeped or buzzed, my eyes would dash expectantly right to it. My brain wanting that constant hit of Jillian to keep me going.

And I fucking hated what a chump I was being. I hadn't stuck to my guns at all. Not one bit.

I'd asked her to stay away. But it was like we both knew I hadn't meant it.

Had I?

Christ.

I didn't even know anymore.

My brain and my heart were speaking two different languages. And the translation key didn't exist.

The only good thing was the show had mellowed out. There were more than a few times when I wondered if they'd decide to spin something a different way.

Like me showing up with a new computer for Jillian. They hadn't aired anything about that. Although part of me really wanted to see what good old Stuart would do—or say, about another man taking care of his fiancée.

But another part of me wanted to spare Jillian from that confrontation with the douche canoe.

I continued to help Jillian with her filming. Not all the time. But a lot of the time.

Some of the episodes I recorded had another of her teammates or two helping her out with some product or new hair curling or straightening device.

The show didn't air any of that, either.

I'd asked them not to. For many different reasons. Mostly because they'd focused on the two of us and our shit long enough. I'd sat down and spoken

with a few of the producers.

I suggested they take a hiatus from the Cash Clemens and Jillian Parker dumpster fire. And focus more on the teams and the incredible shit we were doing. The women's team continued to kick ass and take names.

Our men's team got stronger every minute we were on the ice. It was amazing how we'd pulled together. If the hockey gods kept smiling down on us, we'd be on our way to achieving big success.

Anyway, so far, the show had complied.

And that meant I had a lot fewer gut aches.

Over the show at least.

However, my Jillian Parker problem still followed me around.

Day and night.

And it was about to get worse.

We always got a handful of days off for Christmas. It wasn't a lot, but it was something. And this year, I'd be spending it at Lexi's parents' place.

With her dad and her new stepmom—who also just happened to be Trey's mom. Yeah, the family dynamics were a little complicated.

My sister and brother—and his current woman of the week would be there as well.

As would Beau, Gigi, and his twin boys.

Oh, and Gigi's mom and stepfather.

And because the universe hated me—Jillian and her douche canoe were attending.

A couple of weeks ago, the owners had called me in for a meeting. My

agent showed up, too. I was told in no uncertain terms that I'd be spending the holidays at Lexi's parents' house.

This did not impress me.

Not one bit.

I already had plans to be at my mom's place. And then take a day or two at my cabin. By myself. I needed that so much.

No.

My fucking soul needed that so much.

This whole season had felt like one big roller coaster.

Ups.

Downs.

More ups.

More downs.

And then a leveling off, which had me constantly on edge.

Waiting to see if I'd be going back up.

Or further down.

So, the thought of spending the holidays—not—at my mom's—or at my cabin—made me want to jump off that fuckin' roller coaster and finally get my feet on solid ground.

But.

Nope.

Not only was I ordered to go to Lexi's parents' house, but I was also ordered to bring a woman. A fake girlfriend.

Because—and this was the last thing they told me—Jillian was bringing

her douche canoe.

Yeah.

I was going to be under the same roof as Jillian and her fiancé.

After my head exploded, and after I exploded, they explained that I had no choice in the matter. The cameras would be filming for the show.

And this would forever put an end to the debate about whether Jillian and I were an item.

Because I'd be there.

With Jillian and her douche canoe fiancé.

Under the same roof.

Celebrating the holidays.

Eating at the same table.

Being friendly and making nice.

Until I strangled that douche canoe on national television...

Fuck my life.

My agent had already contacted Marissa. She was the only logical woman for me to bring along. She'd been my fake girlfriend before and the leap to her and I getting back together would be more believable than bringing in someone new.

So, yeah.

Fuck my life.

So far, Marissa had been kind and understanding. She'd asked if something was really up between me and Jillian.

My only answer had been, "She's engaged." At that, Marissa had nodded.

Don't get me wrong, Marissa was a great woman. She just wasn't the woman I was in love with.

Even still, she was fun to be around. And any awkwardness I'd been afraid of wasn't there at all. At least she didn't seem to give off any of those vibes.

Which told me she hadn't taken my refusal to heart. She'd accepted the fact that I hadn't wanted to upgrade our fake relationship to a real relationship all those years ago. I wasn't sure until we'd seen each other at the airport.

She'd smiled at me and run into my arms. I hugged her and did the obligatory lip touch for the cameras.

"Hi, friend. I missed you," she whispered in my ear. It made me smile, and I was glad that she wasn't pissed at me. A lot of women might have held a grudge. But Marissa appeared to be over it.

We talked and laughed the whole drive up to Wes' place. And it warmed my heart to know I hadn't hurt her.

Anyway, now was now.

And we'd just arrived at Lexi's parents' place. The one and only Wes Hunter was the first to greet us. We'd met a few times before at various events.

Back in the day, he'd been one of the top hockey gods around. His wrist shot—which he'd also passed on to his daughter—was still legendary and talked about often.

"Come on in, folks," he said as he opened the door. Wes leaned on a cane in his right hand.

“Thanks, Wes.” I introduced him to Marissa.

“Nice to meet you, Marissa. I’m glad you were able to join us,” Wes said with a smile as he shook her hand.

Marissa smiled right back. “Thanks for the invite, Wes. I haven’t been to Canada in a while.” They talked for a bit about where in Canada Marissa had traveled. But to tell you the truth—I didn’t really care. All I was concerned about was getting these next two days over with.

And avoiding the douche canoe.

I jerked my chin and looked down at his brand-new knee. “How’s the knee?”

He smiled from ear to ear. “Good, man. Got rid of the walker two weeks ago. Hopefully, I can burn this stupid cane soon, too.”

We shot the shit for a few more minutes before his wife came in. She was drying her hands off on a green and red dishtowel. “Wes, are you hogging our guests all to yourself?” Marianne Turner—or I suppose now it was Hunter. I wasn’t sure if she’d taken Wes’ name or not. She introduced herself to us and welcomed us to their new home.

“Marissa, come hang out with us girls in the kitchen.” Marianne grabbed my fake girlfriend, and they wandered off.

I followed Wes around as he showed me the house—his idea, not mine. He said it was better if he moved around than sat.

The entire house was decorated for the season. Not one room was spared some kind of festive touch. I lost count of how many Christmas trees we passed by.

It took forever.

Literally.

But to be honest, I wished it would have taken him two days. Because then Marissa and I could leave.

No such luck, though.

The last stop was the huge living room where Beau and Trey currently lounged.

“Cash, you made it,” Beau said and nodded in my direction. He had a pop can in his hand and a small plate of cookies in the other.

Trey said his hello over a full mouth of cookies. He had a large plate of cookies and tarts in his hand. It looked delicious.

“Lex, grab some cookies for Cash!” Trey yelled, mouth still full of cookies.

“She’s out walking the dogs,” Marianne shouted back from the kitchen. She stood there with Marissa and a couple of other women who I’d guess were Gigi’s mom and Trey’s sister.

No sign of Jillian.

Or the douche canoe.

I sat down and talked with the guys for a while. Marianne brought over a few platters of desserts and a tray with coffee and sugar and cream.

Trey frowned. “Why didn’t you bring this out earlier?” He seemed genuinely stumped.

Marianne looked down at her son. “Because you would have eaten it all yourself.”

He shrugged, probably knowing his mom was right about that.

“Whatever,” he muttered and swiped a handful of treats.

Wes told me all about his knee replacement and the physio, etc., he'd been doing.

I guess it was a little too much for Trey. "Okay, okay already. Enough about your new knee. Jesus, you'd think it's bionic or something."

Then he and Beau laughed.

Wes laughed, too, and shook his head. "Just you wait, kid."

At that moment, the front door opened. Everyone turned their heads to see—the fucking douche canoe. "They didn't have any knee replacement cream, Wes," he said as he hung up his coat and took off his boots. "And, Marianne, I couldn't find any wheat germ tapioca. The grocery clerks said they'd never heard of it."

Trey snorted and then coughed loudly. Beau's shoulders bounced as he held in his laughter.

"You don't say?" Marianne's voice carried from the kitchen. "That's too bad. I wanted to make pudding. Oh, well."

Stuart walked into the kitchen carrying a jug of milk. He stayed there and talked to them.

Trey whispered over to me, "Mom and Wes have been sending him out on errands. But they ask him to get shit that doesn't exist—just so it keeps him out of the house longer." He and Beau burst out in laughter and Wes' lips flattened. He turned his head to me and said, "That guy is—" he took a deep breath, "a lot. We need the break."

I didn't say a word. There was really nothing I could say in this situation.

A few minutes later, Stuart walked into the living room and stopped in front of me. "I was sitting there, Cash."

Fuck.

I'd been under the same roof as him for exactly five minutes and I already wanted to punch him.

Wes spoke up, "We're just catching up with each other. There's plenty of other seats, Stu."

Stuart's eyes shot from me to Wes and back again. He rolled his eyes and shook his head before he retreated to a different couch.

"A real piece of work, eh?" Wes said under his breath. All I did was shrug. Again, there was nothing I could say.

Beau started talking about our travel schedule for the new year. That kept the conversation flowing—between everyone except the douche canoe—until the backdoors opened and three very excited dogs came running in.

Beau and Gigi's French bulldogs zoomed into the living room for pets and attention. Trey and Lexi's golden retriever took a detour into the kitchen before joining her friends in the living room.

Jillian, Gigi, and Lexi walked in with huge smiles on their faces. They were giggling together about something. Jillian's eyes swept over to me, and her grin grew. I smiled back and gave her a small wave.

She gazed toward the kitchen, and I saw her expression fall.

I turned back to the TV and then looked at Beau. He had one French bulldog standing in his lap. The dog was licking Beau's face excitedly.

"Where are the boys?" I asked as I took another look around for the kids. Those boys weren't exactly the silent types. If they were in a room, you'd know.

"The neighbor kids asked if they could come over and build snow forts."

He kept talking, but my mind was busy. I couldn't help myself. I swung my head around and watched Jillian walk into the kitchen. She started talking to Marissa.

And—my guts twisted.

Jillian smiled and shook Marissa's hand.

Then I looked away.

Fuck.

This was going to be a longest two days of my goddamn life.

Cash

Definitely the longest evening I'd ever spent anywhere in my fucking life.

Marianne and Wes were wonderful hosts. But good God, I wanted to slug Stuart. It seemed like each, and every time Jillian was having fun of some kind—laughing, playing a game, or chasing the twins around—he had to come in and ruin everything.

It was some weird shit.

At first, I thought maybe I was just biased. Until Wes mumbled to me, “Why can’t that fucker let her have fun? Jesus, he’s such a fuckin’ douche canoe.”

And then I knew for sure I was right. Stuart was definitely a douche canoe.

Even still, I sat at the supper table—which was long enough to fit the entire block—and tried my best to pretend Stuart didn’t exist.

One more day.

And then I’d be out of here.

Luckily, Beau's twin boys provided a lot of banter and hilarity to the mix. The only awkward time was when Stuart turned to Jillian and nudged her. "Hon, let's make sure we just have one baby at a time. No twins, okay?"

The look of disgust on Jillian's face as she glared at her fiancé nearly made me duck under the table.

"That's a really shitty thing to say, Stuart," she said loud enough for everyone—including the boys—to hear. She looked down at her plate and then over at Beau and Gigi. "I'm sorry," she apologized to them unnecessarily.

Beau, being the bigger man in every sense of the word, immediately changed the subject and everyone helped him out with that. All the while, anyone with eyes and ears could see and hear Jillian and Stuart bickering quietly.

Yeah.

Fuckin' awkward.

Melissa had played the part of dutiful girlfriend. But never laying it on too thick. An occasional touch or grab of my hand. No huge PDAs, though. Thank God.

Marianne assumed that me being a warm-blooded man, and Marissa being a gorgeous actress on the rise—that we were sharing a bed. Therefore, Marianne had our bags in one bedroom.

With one bed.

My plan was—

Well.

I didn't have one.

But I planned to eventually have a plan.

“Look, we’re both adults. We can share the bed,” she said to me as she picked through her suitcase on the bed.

I stood there awkwardly for a moment or two before I picked up my small bag. “I’m not tired yet. I think I’ll go watch TV downstairs for a while.”

Her eyes locked on mine, and she gave me a sad smile. “Cash, she’s here with her fiancé.”

My grip on the strap of the bag tightened. “I know that, Marissa.”

She sighed and picked up something pink and silky. I tried my best not to look. “All I’m saying is—she’s down the hall—in bed with her fiancé right now.”

I nodded, not wanting to think of Jillian in anyone’s bed.

Except mine.

“I realize that.” I cleared my throat and moved toward the door.

Just as my hand touched the doorknob, Marissa called out, “Cash.”

I spun my head back to look at her.

She stared at me and said, “She’s not worth it.”

My guts twisted because I wanted to answer back. I wanted to tell her how—worth it—Jillian was. Instead, I nodded and said, “See ya later. Thanks again for coming along.”

Her shoulders slumped, and she sighed and went back to her suitcase.

I opened the door and closed it quietly behind me. The hallway was dimly lit by a light coming from downstairs. Everything was quiet, and that gave me a small bit of peace.

But not much.

Once I was downstairs, I wandered into the kitchen. I'd already had eaten more cookies and tarts than any human being should consume in a lifetime. If I were back in Las Vegas, I'd go out to the country bar and sing at the open mic. Or sneak into the rink and take shots until I felt bone tired and ready to collapse.

There was a backyard rink here that Wes had pointed out on my tour. I walked over to the huge wall of windows on the back of the house. It was dark. Nobody would see me out there.

I walked to the front closet to grab my coat. Then I strode back into the kitchen and continued over to the side door. It led to a huge indoor pool and a cozy hot tub. The humidity in the pool area hit me as I opened the door and walked inside. Maybe after the rink, I'd take a quick dip in the pool.

I'd already changed into my gray sweats and Lexi had insisted we bring our skates. There was some kind of holiday skating on the river tomorrow and she wanted all of us to go.

Through the pool area, there was a door at the back. Marianne had made sure there was a big porch built on. It acted as a warming shack in the winter and a place to store hockey sticks and pucks, skates, and whatever else you'd need outside on a cold winter day.

I opened the door to the back porch and sat down on one of the wooden benches. I opened my bag and yanked out my skates. After I slipped them on, I realized I'd left my gloves upstairs. I swore until I spotted a basket labeled "Gloves."

Brilliant.

Marianne thought of everything.

I pulled out a large pair and put them on, then I grabbed a stick from the corner and headed out.

As soon as the cold air hit me, I took in a deep lungful and held it. Christ, I loved the air up here. There was nothing in the world as crisp and clean as the air in Alberta.

Fuck.

I missed it.

I smiled to myself and started down the walkway. Halfway to the rink—I noticed some movement.

I stopped and watched.

The only light out here was from the moon and stars. And they were truly showing off tonight.

I didn't need much light at all to recognize the midnight skater, though.

I shook my head and kept moving. Once I was at the edge of the rink, I called out, "Fancy meeting you here."

Jillian shrieked and came to a dead stop. Her hands flew right to her chest. "Oh my gosh, you scared the crap outta me!"

"Shh," I said as I stepped onto the ice. "Sound carries out here." And it did. Especially late at night.

"You're the one out here creeping around, scaring people." She skated over to me and gave me shit.

I chuckled and said, "Fair enough. Did you grab a stick? Or should I go back and get one for you?"

She was close enough now that I could see her beautiful face. And her even more beautiful smile. "I already have one."

I raised my eyebrows and dashed to the center of the rink. “Last one to the middle plays goal.”

I heard her frustrated sigh and watched as she raced to the other end of the ice. She retrieved her stick that sat against the net and made her way to me at center ice.

“Unfair advantage, Clemens.”

I smirked, shrugged, and said, “Alberta rules, sweetness. If you’re here, you gotta play by them.”

She rolled her eyes. “Besides, I’m not playing goalie in the dark. I can barely see the puck as it is. I won’t see a thing if you shoot at me.”

“You’re not playing net. We’re working on your faceoff skills.”

She didn’t fight me on that. Jillian was always open to my input, and I loved that about her. This woman would do anything to improve her game. What she probably didn’t know was I learned a thing or two from her as well.

It was a cold December night, but that didn’t mean we couldn’t work up a sweat. Because we sure did.

We ran over a few things until Jillian got bored and stole the puck from me. She dashed to the net and shot it in. I chuckled, swooped, and swiped the puck from the net.

We met up at center ice, faced off—and this time I won the puck and raced to the net and shot.

Jillian grabbed the puck, and we continued on for a while like that.

Until she tried to body check me and take the puck as I was almost at the net. Jillian left me at an awkward angle, and I didn’t want to land on her. I dropped my stick and grasped tightly onto her arms. Try as I might, I

couldn't get my damn balance.

I was going down.

“Oof,” Jillian said as she landed on top of me. Thank God I'd managed to move to the side enough so that my upper half fell onto the snow instead of the ice.

She rolled off me and started laughing. “I can't believe you fell.”

I turned my head and watched her laugh. I breathed in the sound of it along with the cool, crisp Alberta air.

And I wished—I fuckin' wished I could listen to that laugh for the rest of my life.

“Because you gave me an illegal check, and I didn't want to crush you into the ice.”

She kept laughing.

And I kept listening with a smile on my face.

She looked up into the sky and sighed. “There just aren't skies like this anywhere else.”

I nodded and gazed up at the bright, starry sky. “Nope, that's for sure.”

We laid there for a few minutes, silently staring up at the perfect night sky. Until Jillian broke that silence.

“Are you fucking her?” she asked in a voice almost as crisp as the air. At first, I thought I'd heard her wrong.

“What?” My head snapped to the side, and I frowned.

“You heard me,” she stated and looked at me.

I didn't even think about lying to her. And I wasn't sure why. “No.

Marcel, Angelique, and my manager wanted me to fake a relationship with her again.”

Her mouth opened, and her eyes narrowed slightly. “Again?”

I took a deep breath and let it out, watching it mingle with the cold air, forming a cloud in front of me. “Yeah, just like before. When you dumped my ass on national television. My manager thought fake-dating Marissa would be a good way for me to save face. Or try to, at least.”

I turned my head back to the sky and decided not to think about that time in my life.

Not right now.

Right now, I was in my favorite province. Under my favorite sky. Laying beside my favorite person in the world.

I didn’t have to get up early tomorrow.

I didn’t have to pack and get on a crowded bus or plane.

Tonight, I just wanted to—be.

Play hockey with the person I had the most fun with on the ice.

And just.

Be.

“You—” Jillian breathed out her own cloud, “you mean, you weren’t, you never—”

I shook my head and gave the sky a sad smile. “Marissa and I were never lovers. It was all for show.” For some reason, I turned and gazed at Jillian when I said, “Just like now.” Then I stared back at the sky. “Something other people cooked up to make me look less pathetic, I guess.”

A pink glove landed on my chest and Jillian moved over. She laid her

head on my shoulder. “No one would ever think you’re pathetic.”

I sighed but didn’t reply to her comment. Ruining the bubble around us tonight didn’t appeal to me.

I wanted peace.

My brain wanted peace.

And most of all—my soul craved peace.

So, selfishly, that’s what I took. I slid my arm underneath her and pulled her closer. I gazed into her sparkling eyes. “I haven’t slept with anyone except you since the day we met.”

Jillian gasped as her eyes grew wet, “Cash.”

I scanned her face and tucked the beautiful, loving expression on it away in my mind. I never, ever wanted to forget it.

She laid her head on my chest, and we stayed like that for a while. Finally, I said, “We should get up before our bodies freeze to the ground. We’d be bad guests if that happened.”

Jillian giggled and raised her head. “We might not get invited back.”

We both laughed for a minute before her face grew serious. “Two more minutes?”

I nodded.

Because I knew what she meant. Two more minutes in our bubble. And then back to real life.

She snuggled into my side as I wrapped my arms around her. Something occurred to me, so I asked, “Why are you out here all alone? Couldn’t sleep?”

Jillian shook her head and said, “No, I’m nervous about tomorrow.”

I frowned, not understanding. “You’re nervous about Christmas?”

Again, she giggled like the sparkling, twinkling stars above. “No, tomorrow is the day we hear back—” she took a deep breath, “or not, about the Olympic team.”

Ah.

That made sense.

“You’re a shoo-in, sweetness. You know that. They’ll be lucky to have you.” I hugged her tightly and kissed the top of her head.

She gave me a squeeze. “Thanks, but there’s more and more competition every year. Younger, talented women.”

I spoke against her hair, “None with your experience, Jillian. You’ll get a call. Don’t worry about it.”

She didn’t let go. Not for a second. “I hope so, honey.”

We laid there for a while longer.

Holding each other.

Watching our breath escape into the cold, dark night air.

I rubbed her back and sighed. “All right, time to get up.”

With a grumble, Jillian gave in and stood with me. Then we made our way across the rink and into the back porch. We both sat down on the wooden benches and took off our skates. I hung up my coat and Jillian gave me hers.

She opened the door to the pool. The warmth and the smell of chlorine was just too tempting. I stopped at the edge and took off my shirt. I’d left my socks in the back with my skates. They were all sweaty and gross.

Jillian was at the door that went into the house before she realized I

wasn't behind her. "What are—" she asked and then raised her voice, "You can't go swimming!"

I grinned over at her.

Then I pulled my sweats and boxer briefs off in one quick movement.

And then—I jumped in.

My toes tingled at the temperature change. The rest of my body enjoyed it. Wes told me he liked to keep the pool on the warmer side. And he sure did.

I surfaced and sucked in a lungful of air. I spotted Jillian at the side of the pool, staring down at me.

"Come on in, sweetness. The water's warm," my voice echoed in the semi-darkness. The windows let in a good amount of moonlight. Enough so that lights weren't needed.

She looked toward the house. "I shouldn't—"

I stated the truth, "You're not going to sleep, anyway."

She bit her lip. "I didn't bring a swimming suit."

At that, I laughed. "I'm not wearing mine, either. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone." I spun around and swam underwater until I reached the far end. If Jillian wasn't going to join me, I'd get in some laps to tire me out.

Although, I'd rather have her tire me out in other ways.

On my third lap, I looked up just in time to see a very naked Jillian stepping down the ladder at the side of the pool. I motored over there and grabbed her hips.

"Cash!" she scolded me in a playful voice. "Don't, it's cold."

Her hands landed on mine, and I dipped her slowly—but a lot faster than

she was going. “It’s warm, see?”

Jillian let out a little yell until she was all the way in the water. She spun around and set her hands on my shoulders. “You’re a jerk.” And then she dunked me under. I wasn’t expecting it.

I also wasn’t—not—expecting it.

I went down.

But I took her with me.

When we emerged—laughing, breathing heavily, and both very, very naked in each other’s arms—we kissed.

I couldn’t tell you who moved first. It didn’t matter.

Never in my life have I had a kiss like that. She sucked every last bit of oxygen from me. And I wished I could give her more.

Our tongues tangled.

Our hands touched and explored.

Never getting enough.

We finally ended up out of the pool and on one of the lounge chairs. Thank God they were big and sturdy.

Because Jillian rode me for what felt like forever. The moonlight dancing over her wet, naked, glistening body.

Fuck me.

I would never forget that sight.

Afterward, she collapsed on top of me, and I held her.

Enjoying the silence.

Basking in our afterglow.

Feeling so much love for the woman in my arms.

Once our breathing slowed, I slid out of her and carried her to the hot tub. Where we didn't say a word.

I held her.

We kissed.

And just enjoyed the warm, weighted silence.

Jillian found a stack of fluffy towels and we snuggled up on one of the lounge chairs. It didn't take us long to fall asleep.

The morning was a bit trickier. Seeing as it was still wintertime, the sun didn't rise early enough to wake us up before everyone else in the house.

Nobody caught us putting our clothes back on and escaping up to our rooms.

Well, except for Wes.

He spotted us as soon as I opened the door.

His eyes jumped from me—to Jillian—and back again.

Wes' lips formed a flat line across his face as he gave me a stern look.

He gazed into the living room, then over at us. "Jillian," he whispered and waved his hand for her to hurry up. So she did. I watched her tiptoe through the kitchen while Wes kept a lookout.

In the living room, Beau, Gigi, Gigi's parents, and Marianne, were so involved with the twins and their stockings from Santa—nobody saw Jillian sneak through the kitchen.

After she was out of sight, he waved me into the kitchen and held up a cup of coffee. I hesitated, but took it from him and swallowed a few sips. "Thanks." And I meant it. The caffeine was more than appreciated.

In a low voice, Wes said, “I thought Marianne and I would be the only ones to skinny dip in that pool.” He glared at me over the top of his mug. “Guess I was wrong.”

I took one more sip before setting my coffee down. “Ah, sorry about that. I hope this can stay between you and me?” I asked, hoping that he wouldn’t mention this to anyone.

Wes raised an eyebrow and leaned on his cane. “It’s none of my business—but do you know what the fuck you’re doing?” His eyes narrowed on me like he was ready to kick me. With his good leg.

I couldn’t give him an answer.

Mostly because, no, I had no fucking idea what I was doing.

All I knew was that I’d had a hell of a lot of fun with Jillian. And was hoping to do the exact same thing tonight.

And yes, I knew exactly how fucked up that sounded.

But I didn’t care.

Not one bit.

Jillian

My brain was in a constant loop of what Cash and I had done last night.

And this morning.

Skating with him had been exhilarating. Like it always was. Almost as much as our lovemaking had been afterward.

And all of this—from the rink to the pool to the hot tub—floated around in my head continually.

It was an awesome night.

One that I'd never forget as long as I lived.

“Lady, the way you’re looking at my son, I’d think you wanted to eat him up,” Heather said over her cup of coffee. She arrived early this morning. A little after I’d showered and fixed myself up.

My mouth dropped open, and I twisted my head around to make sure nobody else was around. We were out on the back deck. Marianne had been out here with us. But the twins wanted to go try out their brand-new sleds, and she didn’t want to miss it.

That left me alone with Cash's mom on the deck in the midday sun. The wind was non-existent, so that made the day beautiful.

Unless you weren't Canadian. Then you might be complaining bitterly, like Trey had when he walked outside earlier.

"Jillian, that is not the stare of a woman who's engaged to another man." Heather looked me in the eye.

I took a sip of my hot cocoa. "I don't know what you mean," I lied my face off. Because the woman was right. I'd been watching Cash skate on the outside rink. He was the only one on the ice.

And I loved how he moved.

I couldn't help but stare.

Heather took another swallow of her steaming hot coffee. "A mother knows," she said with a look that said exactly that. "I see how you look at him." Her head nodded in Cash's direction. "And I definitely see how he looks at you."

I shook my head and leaned on the railing. "There's nothing going on." I hated lying to Heather. Well, I hated lying to anyone. But lying to Heather somehow cut me especially deep.

She kept on talking as if I'd never spoken at all. "And you sure don't look at your fiancé the same way you look at my son." Heather set her coffee down on the top of the railing. "What's going on?" Her eyes searched mine for an answer.

And everything in me wanted to tell her exactly what was going on.

Right now—I was ready.

Ready to share this heavy load with someone.

Ready to hand it off.

Ready to burn this whole situation to the ground.

But I knew I couldn't.

“Oh, Jillian.” Heather’s eyes got all glassy. “I see the conflict in your eyes. If you’re worried that Cash won’t take you back—” She turned to look at her son. He was still skating on the ice, taking shots. “I can almost guarantee you he would.”

Oh, gosh.

Just the very suggestion of Cash taking me back made my heart explode.

If only that were possible.

I took a deep breath and let the cold Alberta air deep into my lungs.

And my soul.

“There’s nothing going on. Honestly,” I lied for the third time. Good grief. I didn’t know how much longer I could keep this up. “Cash is with Marissa, and I’m engaged.” My eyes floated back to Cash.

Crap.

I really couldn’t help it.

I loved his form when he took a shot.

I also loved his form every other second of the day.

And night.

“He’s my son, Jillian.” Her gloved hand touched my arm. “But please don’t forget that I’m here for you, too. If you need me.”

Now that made my throat clog up and I could barely breathe. I felt my eyes begin to water. I blinked away my tears. “Thanks, but I’m fine. Really.”

Good grief.

Lie number four of the day to her.

She squeezed my arm, and then promptly removed her hand. “Okay, let’s talk business. I want to hear more about your summer launch. I’ve been thinking that you should move it up a month and do it early. And I’m going to need all of this on the proposal you’re sending me in the new year.”

I smiled at Heather.

And then we talked about business.

And it was nice to think about something else for a while.

Other than my dumpster fire of a life.

Cash

CHRISTMAS DAY FLEW BY INCREDIBLY FAST. Which was exactly what I needed.

My mom showed up, too.

She and Jillian talked for a long time. They were at the kitchen table with their laptops—and seeing them there like that—fuck.

It fed something so deep inside of me, that I didn’t understand it. Watching them interact and discuss—and laugh together, well, it made me really goddamn happy.

What didn’t make me happy was how many times Stuart the douche canoe tried to interrupt them.

But, Mom, being who she was, finally told him in no uncertain terms, “Stuart, with all due respect, you’re being more of a hindrance than a help.

Would you mind leaving us alone for a while? Maybe grab some cookies and watch the game?”

Trey and Beau laughed, then coughed to cover up their laughter.

And then Marianne sent Stuart out on some other bullshit errand.

After that, the mood in the house improved significantly. The only person who was noticeably absent was Jillian’s mom. I guess she was off on some expedition somewhere. Jillian didn’t elaborate when asked.

It was too bad.

Because during supper, Jillian got her call up to the Olympic team.

And I was so fucking happy for her. I wanted to pick her up and swing her around. And kiss her.

Instead, when nobody was watching, I slid my hand onto her leg and told her how proud I was of her.

Gigi and Lexi got their calls as well.

So, these three best friends would be together, representing Canada in the next Olympic games.

It was a great way to end the day.

We ate too much.

Drank too much.

And yeah—Jillian and I repeated our activities from the night before.

And it was even better.

The next morning at the airport, Marissa and I said our goodbyes. She’d been quiet while we packed up and left Wes and Marianne’s house.

She’d also been quiet during the drive.

I noticed.

But I also didn't.

Skating and skinny dipping with Jillian all night had worn me out. But weirdly enough, it had also filled me up.

“Thanks for agreeing to save my ass again.” I gave her a hug and an obligatory lip touch for any cameras around.

What I didn't expect were the words that came out of her mouth next. “She's a cheater, Cash. She doesn't deserve you. Once you figure that out—” she set her hand on my chest and looked into my eyes, “give me a call.”

And with that—she turned around and walked to her gate.

Jillian

I didn't have long.

I knew that.

I also knew I probably shouldn't have come.

But I had to.

I wanted to share this with her. After all, if it wasn't for her—I wouldn't have gotten where I was today.

“Mom,” I whispered as I held her cool, thin hands in mine.

Hands that I used to think were so strong and able to carry the weight of the world.

Her hair was a bit darker now. But still a pretty blonde. If she were—herself—she'd be disappointed in the lack of style, though.

To me, it didn't matter.

“Mom, I have something to tell you. Can you wake up, please? I don't have long. I'm already late for my flight.” I kissed her hand and touched my cheek to the back of it.

She smelled like my mom.

Roses and a subtle hint of lavender.

But I knew—she wasn't my mom anymore.

Not all of her, anyway.

Shattered parts of her here and there popped up now and again. You never really knew when.

But those golden moments when she was really—back—those were the best.

I was hoping for one of those tonight.

“Please,” I whispered, “I really need you.”

I heard a sigh and then, “Jillian? Baby?”

My head shot up, and I smiled into my mother's startled face. “Hi, Mom. I missed you,” I said, my voice cracking more than a little bit. “I came to tell you that I made the Olympic hockey team.”

She frowned for a second, and then a big smile crossed her face. “Oh, my Jillybean. I'm so proud of you. Come here, baby.” Her arms opened wide, and I bent over her bed and hugged her.

“Thanks, Mom. I couldn't wait to tell you. I'm so excited. Our team is going to be incredible. I think we have a huge chance of medaling.”

She kissed my forehead. “I always knew you'd make it.

Don't I always say that?”

I looked into her eyes and nodded. “You do.”

Her hands cupped my face. “And now you're going to the Olympics.” Her eyes widened. “Did you tell your father, yet?” she asked as I felt a

stabbing sensation sink into my heart. “He’ll want to know right away. When he gets back from practice, you can tell him. Okay?”

I tried my very best to keep smiling. Even though she was asking me to wait for my father—who’d been dead for years.

“I will, Mom. I’ll tell him.” My eyes overflowed with tears, and I sniffled.

“Good, girl. The second he walks through that door. You let him know.”

I laid my head on her shoulder and hugged her again. “I will. Don’t worry.” I squeezed my eyes shut and took a few deep breaths.

“And then tell him to change the bulb in the hallway. It’s burned out, again and he’s the only one tall enough to fix it.” She laughed and hugged me tighter.

I nodded and sniffled again. Then I wiped my eyes before I lifted my head.

“I’ll tell him, Mom. I promise.”

Jillian

“Forget it, that ain’t happening, woman.” Cash grasped my wrists and held my hands above my head.

I had to try really, really hard not to laugh. The look of terror on his face was real.

But it was also extremely cute.

“It’s a couple of spritzes, that’s all,” I told him part of the truth. It would be more than that.

“Jillian,” he stared at me with an extremely serious gaze, “not in a million years am I going to let you spray that crap in my hair.”

Cash Clemens had what we Canadian girls fondly referred to as hockey hair. It wasn’t short.

It wasn’t long.

It was more like—he was late for a haircut. If that haircut had been booked six months ago.

So, his hair was almost on the verge of being unruly.

But not so much that you necessarily wanted to book that haircut for him.

Nope.

Instead, you wanted to run your fingers through it while he kissed you senseless.

“One spray, honey. Please? I have to test this product out tonight and have the review up by tomorrow.” I looked at the bottle of dry shampoo spray in my hand. “It won’t hurt, I promise.”

He frowned at me, but still didn't let go of my wrists. “It’s going to make me smell like a flower shop.”

I bit my lip because he wasn't wrong. “More like a spring meadow.” I tried to sweeten the deal. But from the look on his face, he wasn’t buying it.

“Forget it.”

It was the middle of January. Not that you’d know it in Las Vegas. Back home, there were six new inches of snow covering the two feet already on the ground. Here, the ground was very much snow-free.

“Please?” I asked again, even though I knew the answer would still be no. But his answers at night were always a resounding yes. Things between Cash and I were back to normal.

Well.

As normal as things had been at the beginning of the season.

He helped me out a lot with my filming at night.

When we weren’t traveling.

He also joined me late at night at the rink.

Or at the country bar.

And I was more in love with Cash Clemens than I'd ever been.

He shook his head and turned around, leaving me standing in front of the table. "Let's do a quick run-through before I start the live." Tonight, I was shooting this live on social media.

It seemed like my viewers were responding more to the lives than the pre-recorded sessions. Since I was home now for a few days, and I had a good amount of sessions banked up—thanks to Cash—I figured it would be a good time to do a couple of daily lives a day.

I didn't have to travel to Calgary until Thursday.

And Cash didn't have to travel until Friday.

I was looking forward to three nights at home with him.

"Okay, okay," I said with an exaggerated eye roll. "If you're going to chicken out, there's nothing I can do about it."

He bent behind my phone on the stand and smirked. "Yep, that's me, sweetness. A big chicken for not wanting my hair to fall out."

I laughed and held out the can of dry shampoo. "It won't make your hair fall out, sheesh."

Cash gave me a wink. "I'll take your word for it. Okay, go in three," he said and counted me down.

I did my thing and went on a spiel about dry shampoos. The pros. The cons. I pretended to spray it in my hair—seeing as this was just a dry run, after all.

But something was still bothering me.

My hands waved and I said, "Cut. I really should try spraying this before I do the live." I batted my eyelashes. "You'll help me out, right?"

His head fell back, and he let out a sigh. “Jillian—”

I gave him my best sultry smile. “Come on, honey. For me? You know I’ll make it worth your while.”

Cash’s eyes hit mine and held on. “How worth my while?”

I giggled and set the dry shampoo down.

He stalked toward me. “You know what I want, Jillian.” Cash stood in front of me and bent down. I felt his hands on my behind. He turned and set me on the table. “Come on, you know you want to give it to me, sweetness.” He kissed that spot underneath my ear. It always made me melt.

And he knew that.

I moaned, loving the feel of him.

His lips trailed kisses down my neck.

Which I also loved.

The goose bumps that rose up on my skin proved that fact.

I shivered in his arms. “I only have four left,” I murmured against his lips.

“Four? Then you can definitely give me one.”

We’d had this conversation an hour ago. “But if I give you one—you’re going to want two. And then three. And then four.”

“Well, when it comes to you, I get greedy.”

“No, when it comes to Nanaimo bars, you get greedy.”

“Okay, you and Nanaimo bars.”

I burst out laughing.

And so did Cash.

However, he did not stop kissing me.

I gasped when I felt his fingers on the buttons of my shirt. “Sweetness, you want me to have those Nanaimo bars. That’s why you’re keeping them in your freezer.” He undid two more buttons. “For me.”

I sighed and leaned back on my hands, giving him better access to my buttons.

And me.

“It takes so long to make a batch, though. You’re going to have to make it worth—” his lips touched my neck again. This time, he dragged his tongue down to my shoulder as he pulled my shirt off. “My while.”

He chuckled against my skin. “Oh, I can do that, sweetness.”

His finger curled around my bra strap, and slowly—painfully slowly—slid it down my shoulder.

I could feel my nipples harden, unable to wait for Cash’s attention.

My eyelids closed and—

“Stop!” a loud scream shouted. I turned my head to see Gigi running through my door. “Stop, stop, stop, stop!” She rushed to the tripod and tapped my phone. “No, no, no, oh, gosh, no.”

Then Gigi threw herself onto my couch and covered her eyes with her arm. “Oh, my God. Oh, my God,” she kept chanting to herself over and over again. It seemed like she was trying to catch her breath.

Cash pulled up my bra strap and then my shirt. I re-buttoned myself and slid off the table.

Crap.

Gigi had just caught us.

I bit my lip and gazed at Cash. He had a serious look on his face. Neither

of us spoke.

Not until I walked over to Gigi. “Umm, I know this must come as a shock. And I know I don’t have to ask this. But please, don’t mention what you just saw—” I inhaled a deep breath, “to anyone else.”

And I knew Gigi wouldn’t blab. Still, I had to make doubly sure.

She pulled her arm away from her eyes. “Are you on glue?” she asked, sounding and looking absolutely flabbergasted. “The whole freaking,” her arm stretched out, and she pointed at my phone on the tripod, “world just saw you two making out.”

My heart stopped beating.

My lungs seized.

And something that felt very much like a lightning bolt shot through my head.

Through my heart.

And into my stomach.

“What did you just say?” Cash asked Gigi. I felt him behind me, but I didn’t have the power to turn around and look at him.

Gigi sat up and dropped her legs over the edge of the couch. “The whole freaking world just saw you two! What were you thinking? Doing that on a live video on social media?”

“Oh, my God.” I spun around and headed for my phone. Cash was already there.

“I swear I had it on video. Not on your socials,” he said as his fingers swiped and tapped and—“Oh, fuck.”

And then I knew.

Yeah.

I knew.

My world was over.

Jillian

As it turned out—Gigi was right.

Cash and I had been live on social media.

Either there'd been a glitch—or Cash had pressed the wrong thing—or the universe just freaking hated me.

It didn't matter.

And I wasn't going to lay blame anywhere.

Except where it belonged.

On me.

And my actions.

All of this was my fault.

And I'd have to find a way to fix it.

Gigi had kicked Cash out—after he deleted the video—of course. She told him to go back to his place and lie low for a while.

Then she grabbed my hands and asked me to sit down and talk to her. And honestly, I really wanted to do that. But my phone rang.

Gigi and I could see the caller notification running over the screen. She looked at me and gave my hands one last squeeze. “You better get that.”

I waited for her to leave before I answered my phone, “What?”

“What?” Stuart’s annoying voice hit me. “Are you seriously asking me—what?” he yelled so loud I held the phone away from my ear. “I just saw my fiancée fucking her ex-boyfriend. Live and in color on social media!”

I didn’t respond.

I mean—what kind of response would have been appropriate? Cash and I weren’t—doing the deed—but we were certainly on our way there. He was right.

“You can say goodbye to our relationship, Jillian. And my fucking money.”

I shook my head and responded, “I never wanted your money, Stuart. You know that.”

He laughed a loud, sadistic laugh on the other end. “Right,” he said sarcastically, “but you sure didn’t refuse it, did you? You’re a gold digger, Jillian. And everyone’s going to know it. Just like they’re going to find out about your dirty little secret.”

I gasped into the phone as my eyes widened. “No,” I breathed out, “you promised never to tell.”

He laughed again. “That was all contingent on you holding up your end of the bargain. Which you obviously didn’t do. And now that you’ve shown the world what a whore you are, you can pay your own bills. Good luck with that.”

And then he ended the call.

Panic filled my brain.

Being seen making out with Cash was one thing.

Having the world find out—everything—was something completely different.

They couldn't find out.

They just couldn't.

Desperately, I dialed the one number I never wanted to call.

“Hello, Jillian,” Phillip’s slimy voice entered my ear. “I was expecting your call. I just finished watching the video my son sent me.”

I inhaled a deep, cleansing breath. “I’ll pay you back. Just please, don’t say anything about my mom.”

His villainous laugh made my blood freeze. A horrible burning set up behind my eyes—but I couldn’t lose it now.

No.

There would be time to lose it.

Later.

“Do you really think,” I heard him lighting a cigarette and taking a long drag of it, “after you just humiliated my son in front of the whole fucking world—that I would bother to keep any of your secrets? If that’s what you think?” His voice lowered, and sounded more sinister, “Then you’re even more batshit crazy than your mother.” He disconnected, and I immediately felt sick to my stomach. I’d promised my mom that no one would ever find out about her illness.

She only asked that one thing from me. “Please, Jillybean. I don’t want anyone to know,” her words echoed in my head.

And that was exactly what I'd been doing the last few years since her diagnosis. When it was time for her to enter fulltime care, I had to buckle down and really start making some money.

Phillip had been my mom's manager for years. And he'd laid everything out on the table for me.

Mom didn't have a whole lot of money left. Certainly not enough to keep her in the luxury, full-time care home that we'd chosen. The owners—and workers—all signed NDAs. They wouldn't blab about my mother's condition.

Yes, it was getting more and more difficult to explain away her absences. But I'd do what I had to do to keep my word to my mom.

Even agreeing to marry a douche canoe.

Even giving my rose to that douche canoe.

Instead of the love of my life.

Yes.

I'd do anything to keep my mother safe. Even if it meant throwing away my dreams of a happily ever after.

When Phillip had first put his offer on the table, I'd actually laughed. Out and out laughed at him.

He'd told me if I agreed to give his son my rose—on National television—and agreed to marry Stuart—that he would make sure my mom was always taken care of.

I still had to make as much money as I possibly could.

I lived cheaply, so that was never a question.

The one thing we couldn't do, though, was sell mom's house. Phillip said

it would bring too much attention to my mom. And people would wonder where she was and why she was selling.

The upkeep and bills from mom's house—combined with the cost of her long-term care—meant that I was barely keeping afloat.

And I made good money with my all of my side-gigs. My bikinis took time to make, but they brought in a nice profit.

I also had a ton of fans for my videos, which equaled some great paychecks for me, from a few different avenues.

Anyone on the outside looking in would think I had it made.

And they'd be wrong.

Really, really wrong.

Now, because I couldn't stay away from Cash, all of my secrets would be exposed. And the world would see what kind of an idiot I really am.

A notification pinged on my phone. It was Gigi. "Lexi and I will be at your place in ten minutes. Do you need anything?"

A sob tore out of my chest that I wasn't expecting—and I quickly stuffed it back in.

This was not the time to break down.

Not now.

Later.

Right now, I needed to get the heck out of here.

I grabbed a backpack and threw in my necessities. It didn't take long. Which was good because I didn't have much time.

I had one stop to make before I left.

I locked up and ran across the dark courtyard. Lexi and Trey's lights were on, and so were Beau and Gigi's. Other than that, everyone else seemed to be sleeping. And none the wiser about what had just happened on my social media.

But soon enough, they would. And I couldn't be here when that happened. Plus, I had a few other messes I needed to clean up.

But first, I knocked on Cash's door.

No answer.

I knocked again, but louder this time.

The door opened. Cash stood there, right in front of me. Silent.

"Can we talk?" I asked in a voice so quiet I could hardly hear myself.

He stared at me with angry eyes. Then he finally stepped back and let me in.

After he shut the door, I turned around and started apologizing, "I'm so sorry. This is all my fault. I—"

He cut me off, "You're fucking right. This is all your fault." The light from the TV was the only illumination in the room. The shadows on his handsome face made him look dangerous.

Threatening.

"If you hate me, I don't blame you one bit," I began saying, but he jumped back in before I could finish my sentence.

With a glowering look on his face, he said, "If?" He leaned in. "If I fucking hate you?" he said in a murderous tone. "There's no ifs about it, Jillian. I do fucking hate you. And I hate what you turned me into. A liar and a goddamn cheater. That's what you've done to me. The whole world knows

it, now. I have you to thank for that.”

I didn’t exactly think he’d welcome me into his place with open arms.

Even still, I wasn’t prepared for this harsh amount of vitriol.

Not from him.

It was then I realized a part of me—a very small part—had hoped he’d be relieved to have our secret affair out in the open. That he’d embrace me, and we’d live happily ever after.

The Cash Clemens standing here right now wanted absolutely nothing to do with me.

Not now.

Not ever.

I’d ruined his stellar reputation.

One that he’d worked his whole life to build.

And in a few short seconds, I’d managed to tear it all down.

He was right.

I’d made him look like a liar and a cheater.

No.

I’d turned him into a liar and a cheater.

And he hated me for it.

I couldn’t blame him for that.

Wyatt moseyed over to me, wagging his tail. I crouched down and gave him a good pat down. “Bye, Wyatt. I’m going to miss you, buddy.” He licked my cheek and I smiled.

Without looking at Cash again, I stood and walked out his door.

Wishing the universe didn't hate me so much.

Jillian

“It would be better if you waited until she wakes up on her own. She doesn’t like to be disturbed,” one of mom’s regular aides advised me. I knew she was only looking out for Mom’s well-being.

But I needed my mom.

I also knew that it was three hours before Mom’s normal wake-up time. And keeping her on a regular schedule was important.

I’d been lucky and quickly got a flight. And if I didn’t at least see my mom—gosh. I was truly going to lose it.

“I’m sorry,” I said, truly feeling bad that I would mess up my mom’s day—and in turn mess up the aide’s day as well. She’d have to deal with my mom the rest of the day. And there was a good chance Mom would be grouchy from an early wakeup call. “I really need her.”

And I did.

I wasn’t sure how far news of my make-out session with Cash had traveled. Or even if it would.

Maybe it would be a high news day, and there’d be a snap royal wedding.

Or an incarcerated celebrity would hog the headlines.

I could only hope.

As quietly as I could, I opened Mom's door. Her body startled slightly, but then she settled back into a light snore. I stood and watched her sleep. Thinking about how unfair life was.

How my father had been taken from me when I was young.

And now I was being robbed of a mother.

Yes, she was here.

In body.

But her mind wasn't.

Most of the time, anyway.

Her eyes suddenly popped open, and I didn't want to startle her. "Hi, Mom. I didn't mean to wake you."

She turned her head and—smiled. "Jillybean," she said in a sleepy voice. Her arms shot up and I ran right into them. "Oh, sweetie," she kissed the top of my head, "what's wrong?"

My body shook with the power of a thousand tears.

Tears that I'd held onto for hours.

And now, I was going to breakdown.

In the safety of my mother's arms.

"Jillian, honey. What's the matter?" She moved over, and I sat in her bed with her.

I sniffled and wiped my eyes. "Can you die of a broken heart?" I asked as a new stream of tears started again. "Because it feels like I just might."

And it did.

My broken heart ached.

Like someone had reached inside my chest with both hands and ripped it right in half.

“No, baby. It just feels like it.”

I shook my head and tried my best to control the sobs that wracked my body. “It hurts so much. I don’t think I can survive this.”

Her thin arms felt amazingly strong at that moment. And I was so, so grateful. “You’re going to be okay. I promise. Oh, Jillian. When did you grow up?” Her lips touched the side of my face, and I moved back a bit.

I watched her teary eyes scan over my face. “Jillian, my baby. You are so beautiful.”

My fingers touched her cheek. “Everyone says I look exactly like you.”

A huge smile crossed her face. “At least I gave you one good thing.” The smile on her lips dropped off, and it looked like she’d just realized something. “I’m so sorry.” She looked away for a few seconds, then back at me. “This is all so much for you. I’m too much. You shouldn’t have to deal with me. Not like this.”

I wrapped my arms around her now. “No, I love you, Mom. It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry, Jillybean,” she cried into my hair and held onto me.

Tight.

I squeezed her harder. “Don’t be sorry. It’s not your fault. None of this is your fault.”

And then we cried.

And held each other.

And cried some more.

Until there were no more tears.

And then we both fell asleep.



“HELP! SOMEONE HELP ME!”

I was awakened by my mother screaming in my ear. Confused, I let go of her and looked into her eyes. “Mom, it’s okay. It’s me. Jillian.”

The look of terror in her eyes shocked and startled me.

She screamed for help again and started pushing me away. I fell off the bed with a thud. “Ouch, shit.” I pushed up from the cold floor and saw three attendants rushing into the room.

They talked to her while one of them gave her some kind of needle. Almost instantly, Mom stopped yelling.

The director of the home walked into the room and sighed. “I think you should come with me.”

I stood and followed her out of the room. She strode down the hallway and stopped at one of the small family rooms in the facility. “Sit, please.”

We both sat down, and she started in on me. “This was very disruptive, Jillian. We know you can’t visit often, but—” Something stopped her. And I’d bet it was likely my puffy, red eyes.

“I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.” I wiped under my eyes, wondering what a mess I must look like. “Please apologize to everyone for me.”

I went to stand up, but she grabbed my hand. “Are you okay?” The concern in her voice made me start to tear up again.

“No,” I took in a deep breath, “but that’s not your problem. I really am

sorry. I needed my mom today—I shouldn't have come.” I pulled out of her grasp and hurried down the hallway and out to my rental car.

Somehow, I ended back at my mom's house. The house I'd grown up in.

I'd always loved it here.

I remembered the good times.

When it was filled with friends and family.

My parents loved to entertain.

And they had some very famous and interesting friends.

If these walls could talk, they'd have plenty of funny, loving things to say.

I'd picked up a sandwich on my way here. But my stomach wouldn't be able to handle it. I knew that.

I opened the fridge and threw it inside. There was nothing else in there except for a few condiments and a bunch of bottled water. I shut the door and briefly wandered around the house.

Everything was neat and tidy and in its place. Luckily, I had cleaners in here once a month to keep it clean.

With my schedule, I couldn't come back here that often. But when I did, it was always fresh and welcoming.

After I bought my sandwich, I made the mistake of turning my phone back on. An absolute deluge of texts and missed calls showed up.

Yikes.

Before I got on the plane, I'd texted Gigi, Marcel, and Angelique. I told them how sorry I was to embarrass the teams the way I had. I said I knew there would be consequences for my actions and that I'd face them.

In a couple of days.

I just had to do a few things first.

After that, I said I would meet them in Edmonton in time for the game. If they still wanted me on their team, that is. I also asked Gigi to please grab my equipment bag I'd set by my door.

I hadn't looked at social media.

And I wouldn't.

My poor heart couldn't handle the shitstorm I imagined going on there.

The fact that I'd spent years building everything up and then—

Yeah.

And then.

This.

The heavy weight of last night, and this morning, finally felt so crushing that I could barely hold myself upright anymore. I dropped my backpack on the counter—Mom would flip if she saw that, and I shuffled into the living room.

My favorite couch was calling me.

I fell onto it and pulled one of the throw pillows under my head. The blanket my grandma made still laid on the back of the couch. I yanked it down and over my body.

Approximately ten seconds later, I was fast asleep.

Jillian

That noise.

It was familiar.

But I hadn't heard it in a long, long time.

What was it?

Some kind of bell?

So weird.

I knew what it was.

But I didn't.

It stopped.

I sighed and felt myself drifting off to sleep.

And then the stupid bell started again. "What the heck is that?" My eyes opened. Or more like they tried to open. My eyelids were heavy and clamped together like opposite ends of a magnet.

I sat up and blinked away my sleep.

Home.

I was at home.

And that stupid noise was the phone.

The ancient, corded house phone that my mom always insisted we keep. No matter how many times I'd told her those phones went out with dinosaurs.

She'd always come back with, "If there's a power outage, what are you going to do? Huh? Smartiepants." And then I'd laugh and roll my eyes at her.

But that was my mom.

Always preparing for the worst.

I reached over to the side table and picked up the phone. Even though I knew it would just be telephone solicitors. "Hello?" My lips didn't fully cooperate, and my mouth felt like a freaking desert.

"Jillian, thank God," I heard Heather's voice say on the other end of the phone. "Are you okay?"

I frowned and looked down at the floor. It was dark in here, but the light from the hallway filtered in enough that I could see.

"I'm fine. How are you?" My frown grew deeper—and then I remembered.

Everything.

It all crashed into my brain at once.

And the pain in my heart came back.

"Oh, Jillian. We've all been so worried about you. Listen, I need you to pay attention to what I'm saying, okay? Careful attention. I don't have time to fully brief you. Shit, hold on," she said and then I heard her muffled voice talking to someone.

"Shit, shit, shit," she said into the phone. "There's just too much to say.

Please, listen carefully. I'll explain everything when you get here.”



I HAD no idea why I was here.

But Heather said this was an emergency situation.

So, if Heather Clemens, kickass entrepreneur and woman goddess, told you to get somewhere fast—you did it.

Although I didn't understand why she gave me a specific dress code and makeup instructions. It wasn't like I was going to be on stage or anything.

This whole thing was crazy.

And to be honest, I think I was still half asleep.

But at least I looked fantastic.

I kept a full assortment of after-cry makeup in my dresser. Heather's cryptic call and instructions had me a bit weirded out. And more than a little scared.

That had the added benefit of completely stopping my tears.

I was too worried about where Heather's driver was taking me. I didn't have time to let myself fall back into a self-pity party.

He drove up to the RCMP headquarters.

And gosh, there were a lot of cars up front where the driver stopped. “Ms. Clemens is coming out to get you. Just stay put for a minute, okay?” He looked at me in the rearview mirror.

I nodded and felt my stomach start to drop.

Why the heck was I at the RCMP headquarters?

Was I in trouble?

My door opened and Heather's smiling face popped in. "Let's shake a leg, come on." She reached a hand to me, and I took it. I stepped out, and cameras began to flash. "Just keep moving. Follow me. Don't stop."

Heather pulled me along behind her, the whole time saying, "No comment. Ms. Parker has no comment at this time."

People—who must be reporters, were yelling at me, but they were all talking at the same time. It was one big, jumbled mess. I heard a word or two, but nothing that made sense.

We walked inside the building. Heather's arm slipped through mine, and we rushed down a long hallway. "We tried looking for you everywhere. I can't tell you how panicked we've all been."

Her eyes were glassy, but the strength, and determination behind them seemed to hold me up. "There isn't time to explain. You just have to trust me. And whatever you do, don't react. Do not show any emotion on your face."

I didn't know how to respond to that.

So, I didn't.

"I'm beside you the whole time. Do not forget that. I'm not going anywhere, Jillian. You are not alone."

I must still be dreaming.

Still asleep.

On the couch.

At home.

Underneath my grandma's blanket.

Two officers opened the doors at the end of the hallway for us.

And we walked through.

A throng of people sat in rows and rows of chairs. And two officers stood on a stage. One behind a podium.

As soon as she saw us, Heather nodded.

The officer nodded back and moved the microphone to the correct level. Heather and I stepped onto the stage. And that was when I saw Cash—dressed in a suit—heading straight for us. He'd been standing on the other side, so I didn't see him at first.

We came to a stop behind the officer.

Heather stood on one side of me.

Cash on the other.

The officer began to speak, "Today, at six o'clock in the evening, Phillip Tricheur and Stuart Tricheur were taken into custody."

I breathed in a sharp breath.

But I didn't so much as blink.

Heather's hand curled around mine.

"They were arrested and charged with—" the officer continued speaking. And my brain tried to keep up. It really did.

But this was a lot.

I didn't understand every word.

But by the time she finished—I more than understood.

Phillip—my mother's manager for years and years—and his son, Stuart—the douche canoe, had been stealing from my mother.

For years.

And years.

And years.

As well as all the money I'd been working my ass off to make.

To pay for my mother's care.

And her house.

They'd been stealing it.

Oh, my gosh.

My head was swirling with all of this information. And honestly, I thought my legs might just give out.

Exactly when I was sure I'd fall to the floor, Cash's arm slid around my waist. "It's almost done, sweetness," he bent a bit and whispered in my ear, "I've got you."

I leaned into him. It wasn't like I had much choice.

The officers exchanged places, and this one spoke solely in French. Canada was a bilingual country, and that was status quo at these briefings.

As he spoke, I thought about how little French I actually remembered anymore. But the easy words I knew. Like *fraude*. Was obviously fraud. And *évasion* was evasion.

And there were more.

After all that schooling, you'd think I'd have retained more than that.

When the officer was finished speaking, the first officer took over the podium again. "Ms. Parker's lawyer has a statement to read. After that, there will be no questions."

My what?

My lawyer?

A tall, bearded man stepped up the stairs to the stage. He gave me a nod and then headed straight to the podium. “On behalf of Ms. Parker, I would like to request your patience and understanding. These new developments have come as a shock, and she needs time to process everything.”

He went on for a little while before he wrapped it up. Saying things—but at the same time not really saying much of anything.

The press in the audience tried to ask questions, but the officers shut them down.

We followed my—lawyer—off the stage.

Down the hallway.

And into a room.

Jillian

The questions still ran through my brain.

All these hours later.

So many fucking questions.

That I answered to the best of my ability.

And I still couldn't believe it.

At one point, Heather—who was true to her word and never left my side—leaned over and said, “Don't worry. We're going to get those fuckers. And we're going to squeeze every last dime from them that they stole from you.”

I'd felt my chin quiver slightly.

She was the best.

And I was sure she believed what she just said.

But as it turned out, Phillip and Stuart were stealing from more than just my mom.

Yeah.

A lot more.

They were being investigated in over a dozen other cases.

So, there were a lot of people who wanted their money back from these douche canoes. I just wasn't sure how likely it was to think we'd ever see any of it again.

After I spent hours and hours at headquarters, my lawyer—who Heather had hired for me, got me to sign a load of papers. Until my hand hurt.

I asked if I was finally done.

And I was.

For now.

The criminal process would take time. Months. Years.

Ages.

At that moment, I really didn't give a shit anymore.

I had no idea how much money I actually had left in the trust account.

I had no idea if I could afford to pay for my mom's expenses.

I just basically had no idea.

Heather excused herself—and Cash. She said they'd be right back.

Cash had hardly said a word to me.

He'd stood beside me.

He'd held me up.

And then he'd sat beside me.

For hours.

And hours.

But he never—said anything.

And that hurt more than learning a couple of douche canoes had been stealing from my mom.

So.

As soon as Heather shut the door behind them—I walked out the other door.

And down the hallway.

I asked a very nice RCMP officer for a ride. And he gladly obliged.

That took me to now.

I wasn't even sure why I was here. Except for the fact that I was pretty sure nobody would find me. And the memories I had of this place were wonderful.

Peaceful.

Loving.

Yes, it was January in Alberta.

But it was beautiful outside.

I could breathe out here in the fresh, cold mountain air.

I'd even started a fire so I could stay out and look at the gorgeous, perfect sky.

When I finally achieved the optimal level of calm—I spotted bright headlights driving up. They stopped moving and then turned off.

A door slammed, and I heard loud footsteps tracking through the snow.

Cash stormed up to the fire and peered down at me. "Did you eat?" he asked in a controlled voice that surprised me.

I nodded. "Yeah. There's leftovers in the fridge if you want."

He swallowed and turned toward the cabin. I watched him go inside.

Then I wondered if he was saving all his angry words for after he ate.

Oh, well.

I guess I'd find out soon.

A few minutes later, he walked out of his cabin and sat on one of the logs around the fire. He alternately stared at the fire and at me while he ate the linguini I'd made.

Still, not a word.

When he finished, he stood up and took his plate into the cabin. When he came back out, he had his guitar in his hand.

Cash walked up to me, set the guitar against my chair, and walked back to his seat on the log.

He wasn't going to sing.

He wanted me to.

He wanted a song.

From me.

To him.

I picked up Cash's guitar and tuned it. Then I started playing the opening chords to Sheryl Crow's, "Strong Enough."

Because I had to know.

I needed to know if he was in.

Or not.

It was a lot to be with me.

It would cost him in more ways than one.

Just like it already had.

And I certainly couldn't guarantee a smooth ride from here.

Probably the very opposite.

I had to be open and honest with him about that.

He and his mom had heard about my mother. I had to explain her condition to the officers.

What he might not know, was the disease that was taking my mother—might be swimming around inside of me, waiting for its time to attack. I hadn't done any kind of testing.

Yet.

So, being with me—might mean we didn't have kids.

Or we adopted.

Or we built our family in some other unconventional way.

And I would completely understand if Cash wasn't into that.

Just like I'd one hundred percent understand if he wasn't into being with someone who—in a decade or two, or three—might not be the person he married.

But one thing this whole freaking Stuart fiasco taught me—was that I needed to know the truth.

Because the truth might hurt.

A lot.

Like—a ton.

But I needed to know where he stood. And what was next.

A life with Cash.

Or without.

The puck was in his end, now.

And he'd have to decide what he wanted to do with it.

After I finished the song, Cash stood and stepped over to me. He held his hand out for the guitar, so I gave it to him.

He carried it back to his seat and started singing "I Would Die For You," by Jann Arden.

Two seconds later—tears fell down my cheeks.

And I watched Cash wipe his eyes more than once as the heartbreakingly lovely lyrics drifted past his handsome lips.

When he finished, his eyes held mine over the fire. We said so much during that silence—I was literally exhausted.

Cash set his guitar against the log pile and rose to his feet. My heart stuttered as I watched him walk to me. This time, his hands reached out for mine.

I gave him my hands, and he pulled me up and into his body. "How could you even wonder if I'm strong enough? I'm here," Cash's voice cracked, and a new rush of tears ran down my face, "aren't I?"

I sniffled and nodded and tried to blink away the fountain of tears falling from my eyes. "I love you, Cash. But being with me won't be—" I took a deep, choppy breath, "easy."

He sniffled and let go of my hand. After he quickly wiped his eyes, he chuckled and said, "Well, is sure as fuck hasn't been a cakewalk so far, now, has it?"

I didn't want to laugh.

But I couldn't help it.

He laughed right along with me—wet eyes and all.

His hand rested on the side of my neck, and he gazed down at me. When his thumb pushed my chin up, he said, "I'm going to say this once. And then I never want you to ask me this fucking question again."

I nodded and agreed.

"Jillian Parker, I love you so fucking much—" his eyes looked into the darkness for a brief second before coming back to mine, "I can barely see straight sometimes. There is no goddamn doubt in my mind that we were born for each other. And once—" He stopped for a minute to compose himself and it broke my tiny heart to see him struggle.

He took a deep, deep breath and continued. "And once all this shit is behind us, we are going to live the best lives in the world. I guarantee it. Do you know how I know that?"

Cash's gaze and his voice—and his hold—had me so entranced, all I could do was shake my head.

He exhaled and said, "Because I'm going to make sure of it. That's how. Every fucking day. I promise you."

His lips touched mine.

And I kissed him right back.

Under the most perfect sky.

In the most perfect place.

In the strongest arms on the entire planet.

I'm not going to lie.

Moments of doubt crept up.

Like later that night. We were in Cash's bed when he said, "I didn't protect you from that asshole. I'm so sorry, sweetness." He kissed my lips so tenderly I surely would have fainted if I wasn't laying down.

"You didn't know, Cash." My fingers gently touched the side of his face. His skin was hot from our exertions, even though the air was cool. The candlelight flickered over us—and the room, making the most romantic of settings.

"I should have known." He sighed so deeply I felt the pain in his words. "How the fuck do we get to the other side of this mess?"

And this time, surprisingly, it was me who answered the impossible question.

"We just do, I guess. If you really want to, I mean."

He kissed me again. "Of course, I want to."

Gosh.

That one sentence.

That one sentence floated out of his mouth and swirled around my heart. I didn't understand how he could simultaneously squeeze my heart—and make it grow at the same time.

I gave him as brave a smile as I could muster. "Then that's what we do. We get over it."

His eyes scanned my face as though he was looking for answers—answers I hoped he could find. "Can you forgive me? For not looking after you? For not digging deeper? And for all the shitty things I said to you?"

Oh.

This man was breaking my heart. I set my hand on his chest, feeling his

heartbeat. “There’s nothing to forgive. You didn’t know—you couldn’t have known.” I took a deep breath and asked, “But can you forgive me? For not telling you. For not choosing you.”

His fingers slid into my hair. “Sweetness, there’s nothing to forgive. You were protecting the only family you thought you had left. What you didn’t realize was—I’m your family now, too. I’m here. For you.”

Yeah.

See?

He was definitely strong enough.

Cash

It didn't take her long to fall asleep in my arms.

In my bed.

In my cabin.

I didn't sleep for more than an hour. Maybe two. Any time I drifted off, I startled awake, making sure she was still here. With me.

Christ.

The burning pain behind my eyes forced me to slam them shut. For so long, I thought this would never happen.

Jillian.

Here.

With me.

When she woke up, we'd have a difficult talk.

A really difficult talk.

But there was no hurry for that. The sun was barely getting ready to rise. And the most important talk had already happened last night.

Technically, it started off with a song.

Or two.

I had no idea what she was going to play. And when her fingers began to strum that familiar tune—I'd wanted to stand up, grab the guitar, and pull her into my arms.

How could Jillian even think of asking if I was strong enough to be her man? How did she not know I was?

The words we shared afterward were meaningful, heartfelt, and true. And I was more than fucking relieved to hear Jillian say that she loved me.

Really fucking relieved.

“How long have you been awake?” Jillian asked in a sleepy voice. Her hand slid up my chest.

I dropped my chin and peered at her. “Not long,” I lied through my teeth. I rubbed her arm and sighed. “Fuck, it’s nice to wake up with you in my arms.”

She grinned and nodded. “Yeah.” Her fingers trailed up my neck and to my cheek. “I say we make this a regular thing. How about you?” Jillian asked in a teasing tone.

“Sounds like a great fucking idea. Now, give me those lips of yours,” I said, and she did what I asked and kissed me. A warm, naked, sleepy Jillian was exactly what I was in the mood for.

Just as I rolled her over and began touching some really great parts—she pushed me back a little. “Cash, we need to talk,” her sexy, breathless voice stated.

I nodded and kept touching more really great parts of Jillian. “Yeah,

later.”

She giggled and grabbed my hand. “As always, I like your enthusiasm, Clemens. But I have questions about yesterday. And I’m sure you have some for me, too.”

I laid on my side and leaned my head on my hand as my elbow dug into the bed. “Okay, sweetness. Fire away.”

Her eyes stayed glued to mine. “How did you know where I was?”

I closed my eyes for a few seconds as I remembered the hours-long panic of trying to find where Jillian had run off to.

Fuck.

She’d scared the shit out of me.

Out of all of us.

After I sighed, I opened my eyes. “Gigi and Lexi showed up at my door shortly after you’d left my place. We all figured you’d gotten a hotel room for the night or something. But then an hour later, Clara from the show knocked on my door. And she had—”

Fuck.

My head nearly exploded all over again. Just thinking about what Clara shared with me made me want to—

“She showed me a collection of video and audio files. Many, many conversations between you and—” I sighed again and shook my head. “Stuart. And you and Phillip. Clara has been sharing everything with the RCMP for months. Since she started with the show.”

Jillian’s eyes grew wide, and she bit her bottom lip. “I thought I was careful about those conversations,” she whispered, and from the look on her

face, I could tell she'd tried. But not enough. Because it couldn't be enough.

“You're gonna be pissed at what I say next.” She frowned a bit, but I continued with my story. “Clara said they often kept the cameras on—” I cleared my throat, “after hours.”

Her mouth opened and those perfect lips formed a round “o.” “What?”

I nodded and gave her lips a quick peck. “Yeah. That will be a fight for another day. And the show knows it. Beau and Trey were not happy about that shit.” I touched the side of her face with the back of my fingers. “But there were a few instances where you must've forgotten what time it was.”

She shut her eyes briefly. “I believe you.” Her eyes opened and she said, “It didn't take much for them to rile me up.”

I really had to work on keeping my mouth shut. Because that was putting it mildly. The language—and the yelling I heard on the audio and the video was—

Fuck.

It was something that would haunt me until my dying day. Every time I thought about what I'd seen and heard, I also thought about how I wasn't there to protect Jillian.

How I should have known.

I should have fucking known what was going on.

Instead, I acted all butthurt and slunk away to my corner.

Fuck.

“I called my mom, and she jumped all over this with her people. And in less than an hour, she found out the RCMP had been involved for months. Collecting shit on Phillip and Stuart. And searching for more shit.”

Jillian's hand slid up my chest. I set my hand on hers and squeezed. "And you know my mom. She hurried them up. Threatened to go to the media if they didn't move faster."

Her eyes grew wet, and she blinked a few times. "She didn't have to do all that."

It was my turn to frown. "Yeah, she did. Mom called their bluff. They had enough crap on those two to bury them for years. She just pushed them along a little."

Jillian's head shook from side to side. "It turned into such a—"

"Clusterfuck?" I finished for her and lifted her hand to my lips. I kissed the back of it. "Because that's exactly what this was. They even had you under investigation for a while."

The expression on her face dropped. "What?" The shocked sound of her voice told me she had no idea about that.

"It didn't take them long to figure out you weren't involved. Mom was pretty pissed that no one brought you into the loop. And when none of us could find you, she hired a P.I. to do it. And after that—you know the rest."

And she did.

The RCMP had sworn us to secrecy. For obvious reasons, they didn't want a word of Phillip and Stuart's impending arrests to leak out. After months and months of work, the last thing they needed was for them to get the hell outta Alberta and never be seen again.

They had to act fast.

Mom and her team agreed to wait. But she made it more than clear she had her own timeline.

“Your mom’s a force of nature,” Jillian said with a small, sad smile on her face.

“At this point, it’s debatable who loves you more—me or my mom.” I grinned at her, but I also felt my eyes getting wet. I wasn’t sure how to drive this point across, and I really needed Jillian to understand how much she was loved.

Her fingers ran up and down my chest, then to my shoulder. “Cash, I don’t know when,” she looked off the side for a second, “or if,” her eyes locked back on mine. “I’ll be able to pay you and your mom back. But I’ll—”

My hand covered her mouth, and I rested my forehead on hers. “Honest to fucking Christ, Jillian. You need to shut the hell up about money. You’re not paying a dime for any of this bullshit. Those two idiots are going to pay for what they did to you and your mom. And to all those other innocent people.”

I shook my head and gave her a gentle kiss. “And I’m paying for everything else. You concentrate on hockey and your businesses. And,” I kissed her again, “us.”

She blinked and tears slid out the corners of her eyes, down her temples and into her hair. “Cash, I—”

As I shook my head, I also wiped away a couple of tears of my own. I wouldn’t let Jillian finish her sentence. Mostly because I knew it was going to be some kind of bullshit about money. “We’re on the same team, now, sweetness. And you’re going to have to get used to that.”

More tears escaped her beautiful eyes. “Cash, it’s too much money.”

I sighed and really laid into her. “Jillian, I make a shitload of money. And I’ve made and saved an even bigger shitload of money.”

She gave me a small grin. “I know that.”

“Yeah, but what you don’t get is that I’d give up every goddamn penny of it to be with you.” My fingers slipped over her cheek, and she let my thumb wipe the trail of tears falling. “Every fucking cent, Jillian. I mean it. I’d give it all away if I could turn back time and have you hand me that stupid rose.”

She sniffled and shut her eyes while more tears flooded out. I placed feather-like kisses on each of her eyelids. When she opened her eyes, I said, “They’ve stolen years from us. But that’s all they get. Nothing more. They never get anything else from us, do you hear me? What started last night for you and me—”

Jillian wiped my wet cheeks and I swallowed. “no one takes from us. Ever.”

And then—because I’d had enough of her tears, and mine—I took those perfect, plump lips of hers and really kissed her.

And then we made love as the sun rose and filled our little cabin with light.

And joy.

And hope.

And so much promise, I could barely see straight.

Later, during breakfast, there was a light knock on the door. Jillian and I looked at each other and frowned. I walked to the door and opened it.

“Oh, thank God,” my mother threw her arms around me for a second and squeezed. After that, she practically ran to Jillian. “Up,” she ordered, and Jillian set her fork down. The second Jillian stood—Mom grabbed her.

“Oh, my girl. I was so damn worried about you.” Mom’s arms wrapped

around Jillian and yanked her in for a huge hug. “Cash texted when he found you, but I had to see you with my own two eyes.”

Jillian hugged her back. “I’m sorry for making you guys worry. I just needed—”

Mom pushed away a bit. “Hush, it doesn’t matter. All that matters is that you’re here. In one piece. I only wish we’d found you sooner, so that shitshow wouldn’t have been the shock it was.”

I watched as Jillian’s shoulders slumped. Her mouth opened, but nothing came out. Mom turned her head to me. “Go find a moose to wrestle or something. Give us a few minutes, will ya?”

My eyes darted to Jillian’s. She smiled and gave me a quick nod. “Maybe skip the moose and start my SUV? Please?” she asked unnecessarily. I was going to start both vehicles after breakfast, anyway. I’d plugged them in last night just in case. It wasn’t cold cold out. But it wasn’t exactly balmy either.

“Text me when you’re done.” I threw on my coat and boots and took a few more pieces of bacon before I headed out.

Jillian

“Okay, sit down with me for a minute.” Heather grasped my hand and pulled me toward the small couch on the other side of the wall. It was more like a large loveseat than a couch, to be honest.

I followed along behind and sat down with her. She held both of my hands. “Are you all right? I can take you home with me if you need some time away from my son.”

That actually cracked me up.

But at the same time, it also made me cry.

It was one of those awkward laugh/cry moments. I wiped under my eyes. “Thanks, but I don’t need less time with Cash. I need more.”

She sighed, and I watched her eyes get all glassy. “If you start crying, I’m going to start, too. Are you sure you’re okay here with Cash? Just because he’s my kid does not mean I don’t know how difficult he can be.”

I blinked away my tears and squeezed her hands. “I don’t think he’s the difficult one in this relationship.” And just saying that last word made me all squishy inside. Knowing that I could finally admit to being in a relationship

with Cash—gosh, it meant everything.

“Then you really do have blinders on,” Heather said with a grin. “He’s a pig. Leaves his clothes everywhere. And if he spills something—” her hand fluttered out to the side, “he just leaves it on the floor.”

I couldn’t help it.

My eyes filled back up with tears. “Heather?” I said, getting her attention. “I missed the clothes on the floor. And the spills.”

Heather sighed and used her fingers to brush away the tears on my cheek. “Oh, sweetie. You do have it bad, don’t you?”

I laughed and cried at the same time. “Yeah.”

She hugged me again. Her hand rubbed my back, and she said, “I’m so sorry about your mom. I wish you would have told me. I could have helped you guys out in some way.”

I held onto her tightly. “She didn’t want anyone to know.”

Heather nodded. “I know. And you did everything you could to protect her. But you’re not alone anymore. We’re here and we’ll help.”

Her arms were so comforting. It felt like she was absorbing all my crappy feelings and replacing them with happy ones. Cash’s arms did the same, but in a different way. His made me feel like I was made to be there.

Like I fit perfectly in the crook of his arm.

And every bad thought or feeling seeped out of me and into him.

“Thank you. And thank you for all you’ve done. There’s no way I can possibly pay you back for everything. But I’ll try my best.”

Heather moved back and swiped away her tears. “You’re not paying me back for anything. I did what I did because it was the right thing to do. And I

love you. You know that already, though. Even if you dump my son's ass—I'm still here for you. Day or night.”

We chatted for a while longer. And it was nice. She even insisted on making plans to visit Las Vegas and staying a few weeks.

The door opened, and a whoosh of cold air entered the cabin. Cash shut the door and his eyes landed on me. “You okay?” he asked in a very, very, very concerned voice.

“Yeah, I'm good.”

Heather huffed and stood up. “Did we text you to come back? You're supposed to be out wrestling a moose.”

Cash looked at his mom as he unzipped his coat. “Couldn't find any.”

She laughed and walked over to the small table. “Good, then you won't be too tired to cook your mother some breakfast.”

I warmed up food for Heather while we all talked.

About normal, regular stuff.

The weather.

The roads.

The repairs Cash needed to do on the cabin in the spring.

A new design I had in mind for my bikini line.

And even though I wasn't related to either of these people—from the top of my head to the tips of my toes—it felt like I was part of their family.

Because they did their best to make me feel that way.

After Heather ate, she said a teary goodbye, hugging the crap out of both of us. “It's good to have you back, sweetie,” she whispered in my ear before

running off to make deals and rule empires.

“Let’s go for a hike,” Cash suggested as he leaned on the closed door. “It’s beautiful out there.”

So, that was exactly what we did.

And he was right—the sun was shining in the bluest of skies. Not even a lick of wind to speak of. The packed snow crunched under our steps.

About half an hour later, Cash handed me my phone. “I checked social media when I was starting the vehicles. I think you should take a look, too.”

My jaw dropped open, and I stood there.

Frozen.

But it had nothing to do with the weather.

“Come on.” He jerked his head at my phone. “Trust me.”

I took a deep breath and pulled my mitten off. Then I turned on my phone and started scrolling.

What I read took my breath away.

Comments like, “Omg, I can die happy now that Cash & Jillian are FINALLY together!!” and “I KNEW these two would find their way back to each other.”

So, so, so many comments.

And from what I could tell—ninety-nine percent were positive. Which was pretty unbelievable. “I thought they’d hate me for being with you while I was still engaged to—”

Cash’s arms circled me from behind and he said, “Don’t.” He kissed my cheek. “Please don’t say his name while we’re up here. Okay? Or his father’s. There’ll be enough of that once we get back. But right now,” his

arms hugged me tight, “I want the time we spend here to be about us. Just us.”

I turned my head and smiled at him. His lips touched mine. “Deal.”

He grinned and said, “As for your fans,” his head nodded toward my phone, “they’re more than happy for you.”

I felt my eyes sting, and I smiled up at Cash. “For us.” He smiled and kissed me again. Then I had an idea. “Let’s give them something.”

Cash looked a little puzzled, but he went along with it. I took his glove off and slipped my hand in his. Then I snapped a picture of our hands.

Just our hands.

His big, manly one holding mine.

The sun up ahead, shining on the snowy, tree-lined trail.

Then I wrote the shortest post—ever—to go with it. “We’re good.”

I pulled my mitten back on and Cash yanked his glove on.

And we took a nice, long hike.

Just us.

And the snow.

And the birds.

And it was the most peaceful I think I’d ever felt.

Jillian

“As most of you can probably guess, Cash has been my assistant quite a few times behind the scenes.” I peered up at the most handsome assistant ever. Cash smiled his smexy, movie star grin at me and winked. Then he smiled into the camera.

“And today he’s going to help me with a brand-new segment—Cooking with Jillian & Cash,” I said into the camera.

“I thought it was Cooking with Cash & Jillian,” Cash stated.

I peered up at him with a narrowed gaze. “You’re pushing your luck, Clemens.”

He laughed and slung his arm around me. Then he bent down and kissed my lips.

Obviously, I kissed him back, but I stopped and pushed away after a few seconds. “Okay, I think our fans have seen that enough times.”

Cash shook his head and kissed me once more. “I don’t think so. Maybe we should ask them?” He tilted his head and looked into the camera.

To that, I rolled my eyes and shoved his arm off me. “Anyway.” I pointed

to the ingredients on the table and named them all one by one. “Do you want to guess what we’re making?”

I had to give him credit. It seemed like he was legitimately thinking about it. “I have no idea.”

I nodded and told him and our viewers, “Nanaimo bars.”

Cash’s jaw dropped to the floor, and his eyes opened wide. “You really do love me.”

It was my turn to burst out laughing. I slipped my arms around his torso and looked up into the most handsome, loving, forgiving eyes I’d ever seen. “I really do love you, Cash Clemens.”

His lips found mine and this time we kissed for a bit longer than was proper. But to tell you the truth, I didn’t care. And Cash was right—our viewers couldn’t get enough of our PDAs.

Most likely, they’d tuned into my social media channel to see exactly that. Although I hoped some of them might actually get some baking advice they could use, too.

In the end, it didn’t really matter why they were watching. Just that they were.

And cheering us on from the sidelines.

Finally.

Jillian

Had I ever been this nervous?

I didn't think so.

Not that I could remember, anyway.

The show had flown us out here last night.

The Single Girl Show.

And they'd flown us separately.

I wasn't allowed to see Cash.

No contact until the show.

But, in Cash Clemen's style—he found his way to my cabin. When I told him that was against the rules, he'd said, "Fuck the rules. I've spent enough nights away from you. And besides, I can't sleep unless you're next to me."

And that was that.

This morning, he had to climb out the back window when one of the show's assistants showed up. He barely had time to throw on his shorts.

I smiled to myself, remembering how he'd leaned back in the window

and grabbed my head with both his hands. “I love you, sweetness. See ya tonight.” He’d kissed the crap right out of me and left me breathless.

And now it was—now.

After a day filled with interviews, and hair and makeup.

And wardrobe.

Holy cow.

The wardrobe.

I had on a long white slip dress. The silk clung to my body in the most delicious way. And I loved the way the material shined in the moonlight.

The producer gave me the hand signal.

I gasped and held my breath.

What if Cash didn’t show up?

What if he jumped out my window and took the next flight back to Las Vegas?

That was when I saw him.

Wearing a white suit.

Looking cool as crap.

Oh, my gosh.

Cash Clemens.

Would he ever stop stealing my heart?

I hoped not.

His eyes locked on mine, and he grinned while he walked down the narrow sandy pathway. A zillion red roses sat in a zillion vases on top of neat, white columns—lining the aisle.

Cash's eyes sparkled as he made his way to me.

When he stopped in front of me, I took a deep, deep breath. "Cash Clemens, it was always you. I knew it. You knew it. The whole world knew it. And tonight, I want to make it right—and do what I should have done in the first place." I shook my head. "I mean, what I wanted to do," I corrected myself.

I held out the rose to him with my slightly shaky hand. "Will you accept my rose?" I asked him while my eyes burned with unshed tears. Every inch of my skin tingled—and didn't stop. The air around us felt electrified with—

Anticipation.

Excitement.

Hope.

Love.

And redemption. A crapload of that. This was how I'd atone for my actions all those years ago. Or at least, this was how I was going to try.

I wasn't sure I could ever make things completely right. But, like Cash, I was going to spend each and every day trying my best to do that.

Cash gave me his signature smexy grin. "Sweetness, I would love to accept your rose." He took the rose from me. "But honest to Christ, if I ever see another rose again in my life, it'll be too soon." And then he tossed it—tossed the freaking rose—over his shoulder.

What the heck?

My entire body froze as I stared at him.

I didn't know what to do.

On television.

People all over the world watching.

Cash didn't seem bothered at all. He'd just chucked my rose. Away.

What the heck?

He continued talking. Which was good because I'd lost the ability to speak. "But I do have something for you, and I hope you'll accept it." His smirk grew and I frowned.

What the heck?

And then.

Oh, my gosh.

And then.

He grasped my hands and—

Oh, my gosh.

And then.

He went down on one knee.

Holy crap.

Cash Clemens.

The man of my dreams.

The keeper of my heart.

Smiled up at me.

"Jillian Parker, I fell in love with you the instant our eyes met. And the second you spoke to me—" he cleared his throat, "I knew I'd met my match. There was no doubt in my mind. Everything just—" he gazed to the sand for a second and then back up to me, "clicked. The time we spent together only solidified the fact that you're—the one."

His hands squeezed mine tighter. “And then when you left, it felt like nothing in this world made sense anymore. Because I knew—” he inhaled deeply, “I knew I was supposed to wake up beside you every day for the rest of my life.”

My poor heart.

It was breaking.

Yet it was also being glued back together.

I nodded and swallowed over the dry lump in my throat.

The look on his face grew more serious now. “And I vow to keep you safe.” His voice was raw and rough. “I promise, sweetness. I’ll do everything to make sure of that.”

My knees started to wobble. I felt the power behind his words, and it made me weak.

But it also made me strong.

“Cash, honey,” I gripped his hands harder, “I know you will.”

It was his turn to nod.

And then he did something really strange.

He whistled and let go of my hands.

I frowned again because I thought it was quite possible my boyfriend/almost fiancé might just have gone over the deep end. When I heard the sound of bells tinkling in the distance, I turned my head.

Oh.

My.

Heart.

It was Wyatt.

With a ginormous red bow tied around his neck. Cute little bells jingled on his collar. Cash patted him on the head and then I saw him untie something very—

Big.

And sparkly.

And oh, my gosh.

I really was going to fall right over.

“Good boy,” he said to Wyatt with a smile. Then Cash looked up at me and took my left hand in his. “Jillian Parker, will you make me the happiest man in the world and marry me? Finally?”

I smiled.

And I knew.

No one had ever smiled this big before.

No one had ever felt this wonderful before.

They couldn't.

Because no one had ever had Cash Clemens propose to them.

So how could anyone possibly know the joy I felt?

Tears flowed freely down my cheeks, and I said, “Cash Clemens, I love you more than you'll ever truly know. And I'll spend the rest of my life proving that to you.”

There was a small silence, and he asked, “Is that a yes?”

I giggled and nodded my head. “Of course, it's a yes. Yes, I'll marry you. Yes, I'll wake up every morning beside you. Yes, yes, yes—”

Cash quickly slipped the huge ring onto my finger and stood up. His mouth covered mine, stealing one more “yes” from me.

His arms circled my torso, and he kissed me.

Not just any kiss.

It was the kiss to end all kisses.

No one—ever—needed to kiss anyone.

Ever again.

Because Cash had perfected it.

He gave me the best, flawless, most incredible kiss.

It righted so many wrongs.

And I swear—I heard—and felt—the sighs of the millions of viewers watching.

Or

A Couple of years-ish Later...

Jillian

“So, we did all of the genetic testing. As I stated on the phone, the results are back,” the doctor said, looking over her glasses at us.

Cash squeezed my hand and leaned over to me. “We don’t have to find out. I mean, there’s not even a reason to find out—yet.”

My eyes got watery as I smiled a wobbly grin at him. “There’s a reason.”

He shook his head. “Sweetness, there’s not.”

“There is.”

His head tilted slightly. “What do you mean?” he asked with an overly cautious look on his face. I swear he stopped breathing.

I knew I had.

“I took a test this morning. I’m pregnant.”

Cash had the biggest, best smile I’d ever seen in my life. Every time that

man smiled, my heart grew.

And right now, it was bursting.

His eyes welled up with unshed tears. Which only made mine do the same thing. “You—you’re sure?”

I nodded, and then his big arms were around me. “Best fuckin’ news—ever,” his voice stuttered out as he let out a long breath.

“Yeah,” was all I said—all I could get out before my body started to shake.

And so did Cash’s.

We held each other while we cried tears of joy.

And tears of sorrow.

And tears of uncertainty.

When I could finally sort of speak, I said, “I don’t want to find out the results of the genetic testing.”

He pushed back just far enough so he could see me—and my tear-streaked face.

And I could see his.

“Okay, whatever you decide is fine with me. You know that.” Gosh, his voice was so loving and sincere. I loved this man so much.

“I’m still scared, but,” I said, taking in a deep breath, “even if it’s—bad news—there’s still lots of good.”

Streams of tears slid down his cheeks. He nodded. “Absolutely. So much good news.”

“And even if I do—have it,” my eyes gazed down briefly, “and I turn out

like my mom.” I sniffled and found my backbone. “Her life was still worth it. She wasn’t here for as long as I’d have liked. But she was here. And the world is a better place because she was in it—no matter how long she was here.”

Cash wiped his cheeks. “Damn right.”

“I’m sad that she’s gone—but I’m glad she was here. I’m thankful she had me.”

My husband smiled and said, “Me too.”

I nodded and grinned through my tears. “And in some strange way, this is a gift.”

Cash smiled again—like he understood what I meant. “Every day is a gift.”

Yeah, he understood.

“It is. Everyone should live like each day is a gift. Don’t you think?” I asked my husband.

“I do.”

I grabbed his hand. “We might not have as many years together as some families—”

Cash interrupted me, “But we’ll be grateful for every second.”

My shoulders suddenly felt incredibly light.

The weight had lifted—not because it was gone.

But because it was shared.

“Yeah,” I said staring dreamily into his wet eyes. “Nothing’s guaranteed, anyway. So, we live—life.”

Cash stood and pulled me with him. “We live life, Mrs. Clemens. Now, let’s go celebrate. Mom’s in the waiting room, and I’m guessing you two—three,” he said, his eyes falling to my stomach, “will have some serious shopping to get started on.”

The most incredible tingles traveled through my body. A sensation I’d never had before. “Oh, my gosh, we need a nursery,” I said in a whispered voice. A million design ideas suddenly popped into my mind.

“We need a nursery,” Cash repeated back to me, then his mouth found mine, and he kissed me sweetly. “Best fuckin’ news. Ever.”

“Yeah.”

Cash turned and said, “Thanks for your time, Doc.” Then he swiftly tugged on my arm.

Then we ran out of the office to tell a grandma-to-be some really, really great freaking news.

Or

And Then There Were Three...and Four...and...More???

Gosh.

Those faces.

The two most important faces in my life.

Watching Cash hold his—our—sleeping son on his chest was truly the best thing ever.

We hadn't slept much last night.

Cash was already in bed when I'd walked—waddled—on over.

Except halfway there—my water broke.

It wasn't a few slow drips.

Nope.

It came out like a waterfall.

I swear we both heard a popping sound.

Or—maybe that was just the sound my brain made when I'd figured out

what happened.

Cash had a stunned look on his face. Then he quickly smiled at me. “Showtime, sweetness,” he’d chuckled while jumping out of bed and rushing to my side.

I wanted to stay and get the carpet cleaner out.

Cash out-and-out refused that idea. He insisted we leave immediately for the hospital.

R.I.P. bedroom carpet.

I had a feeling we’d be replacing it once we got back home.

I’d argued with Cash and reminded him that first babies usually take their time. He’d just frowned at me and looked at the mess I’d made. “He doesn’t seem like the patient type. We’re going. Now.”

Thirty seconds later—when the contraction to beat all contractions hit me—I agreed.

And it was lucky I had.

Cash was right.

Tucker Clemens was on a mission to exit my womb as quickly as possible.

Half an hour after we arrived at the hospital—and exactly three pushes later—he was born.

There was a tense moment or two.

And then...

Pure bliss.

Unbelievable happiness.

And not a dry eye in the room.

Luckily, Heather—grandma Heather—had been on baby watch with us. She was so adamant about not missing the birth that we'd suggested she stay with us.

I mean, there was more than enough room in our house for her. And to tell you the truth—having my mother-in-law around helped me out in more ways than one. Yes, she cooked and cleaned. But she was also a huge source of moral support.

Heather had hired on more employees for her many businesses and was “taking a step back” to be a grandmother.

Cash and I told her she didn't have to go to such extremes.

All she said was, “Of course I do. I have to be all four grandparents to this baby. And I don't intend on missing one hockey practice or soccer game. Life's too short.”

That had made me cry.

Well, everything made me cry these days. But her little speech had hit me hard.

Because it was true.

She was the only grandparent left.

Although—I swear.

After my first push—I swear.

I swear I heard my mom's voice inside my head say, “Push, Jillibean. I'm right here with you.” And right after that, I heard my dad say, “Come on, kid. You can do this! Dig deep, and get it done.”

Honestly.

I felt them with me.

And it gave me strength I never knew I had.

When the doctor told me I had to get Tucker out with the next push—I knew I could do it.

Because I wasn't alone.

And then—he was here.

Our sweet, impatient, wait-for-no-one baby—was here.

He screamed.

And we cried.

All of us.

Cash was too busy wiping his own eyes to wipe mine.

And Heather was practically jumping up and down while she cried tears of joy.

It was such a wonderful moment.

I hoped like heck I'd never forget it.

I knew one day I might.

But right now—today—I remembered. And that was what mattered.

Today.

Always.

Today.

I'd live in the day. In the present. Because that was all we had for certain.

I looked from my son's content, sleeping face to his father's.

My husband blinked his eyes open.

Then he smiled at me.

And I grinned back.

“You okay?” he mouthed to me from across the room, trying to be quiet. There was a sleeping baby on his chest, and a sleeping grandma in the chair beside him.

I nodded and remembered the look on his face the first time he saw Tucker. The look of love on that man’s face made me feel things I’d never felt before.

It made me fall in love with him all over again.

I kept doing that—falling in love with Cash.

More and more every day.

And I knew that would continue because Cash Clemens was just that kind of man. He worked hard at building our marriage and our life.

So, so hard.

And I worked equally hard, staying in the moment and trying not to let my mind go to dark places.

But when it did—Cash was always there to pick me up and drag me out. Back into the land of the living.

“I love you,” I whispered to my husband. The most handsome man I’d ever met.

His smile widened. “I love you, too,” he said in a low voice.

After the nurse plopped Tucker on my chest, she said, “I bet you’re glad you won’t have to do that again for a while.”

The only thought that had immediately shot into my brain was, “I can’t wait to do that again.”

And it was true.

I really couldn't.

I'd had a wonderful pregnancy.

Wasn't sick for a minute.

I'd felt energized and full of life.

Even though labor had hit hard and fast—I'd handled it.

No.

I'd freaking owned it.

Right now, I felt like I was on top of the world.

Tomorrow, I might feel differently.

But today, at this very moment—I'd never been stronger.

I wanted to do that again.

Grow more babies and push them out into the world. If for nothing else than to see the looks on my husband's and mother-in-law's faces.

Even just for that—it would be worth it.

Cash gently and very, very carefully kissed the top of Tucker's fuzzy blonde head and—my heart exploded. It had done that a few times since I'd given birth, and I was pretty sure it would happen more.

My husband's eyes held mine. "Thank you."

I suddenly did a weird sort of laugh/cry and shook my head. "Thank you."

Heather's steady snore came to a stop. She yawned and stretched for a minute before standing up. "Give me my grandson," she said to her son, and he obliged.

The new grandma picked up her new grandson and kissed his cheek. “You and I are going to be great friends, little guy.” My heart exploded. Again.

Heather walked over beside my bed and placed Tucker into my arms. I hugged my son and touched his incredibly soft skin. He moved his body slightly and settled.

“You pushed that baby out like a freaking pro. Which was no small feat considering he’s got his daddy’s big head.”

Cash had wandered over to the other side of my bed. “Hey, that’s not true.”

Heather rolled her eyes and sighed. She brushed my hair away from my forehead. “And you didn’t even break a sweat.” Her lips brushed the side of my head. “I’m so proud of you—”

She started before Cash interrupted. “We’re so proud of you.” He kissed the other side of my head. I was surrounded by the most important people in my life. And I could feel myself glowing from the inside out.

“Your mom and dad would be proud, too. I’m sure they’re looking down on you right now,” she sniffled and looked over at her son, “just like I know your father is, too.”

Cash swallowed and nodded his head. He wiped his eyes and then he wiped mine. “Yeah, I almost thought I could hear him—” his voice trailed off, and he cleared his throat. “Anyway, mom’s—grandma’s right.” He smiled. “We’re all proud of you.”

I nodded and said, “We’re going to need new carpet in the bedroom.”

He laughed and snorted. “I’d bet on it, sweetness. Tucker did quite a number on it, alright.” The back of his hand grazed my cheek. “I can’t think

of a better reason to get new carpet.”

I nodded again. “Maybe we should put in hardwood.”

His eyebrows rose. “You sure?”

I bit my lip and thought about it for a second. “Yeah, I mean, what if it happens again next time?”

My husband and mother-in-law stared at me.

Neither of them said a word, but their jaws hung open.

“Next time?” my husband asked with his head slanted to the side.

“Yeah, next time. I mean, I had no idea my water was about to break, and I don’t want to keep ruining carpet every time I have a baby.”

My husband blinked.

And then my mother-in-law blinked.

“You want to do this all again?” Cash asked in a low voice.

I felt a huge smile cross my face. “Of course. I feel fantastic. I wish I could do this all again tomorrow.”

Heather closed her mouth and widened her eyes. “I’m in.” She clapped her hands together and raised them. “I’m so in.”

I had to giggle at their responses. Heather looked like she was ready to start doing laps around the room. And Cash seemed a little—shocky. I stared into my husband’s eyes. “How about you? Are you in?”

He took a deep, deep breath. “I’m in, too.” Cash let out his breath. “But maybe not tomorrow?”

I laughed again and reached for his hand. “Deal.”

His normally warm hand felt a little clammy. And that made me smile

even wider.

The three—well, technically four—of us talked like that for a long time afterward.

We rehashed the events leading up to Tucker's arrival. And I thanked my husband for being so level-headed and not allowing me to steam clean the carpets before we left.

As he put it, "You might have cleaned them only to give birth on them an hour later."

That made us all laugh. When we settled down, I said, "Yeah, next time we'll leave right away. We'll keep my bags in the truck at thirty-five weeks." I thought that was a good idea. A full-term pregnancy lasted an average of forty weeks. But just in case I went early—I should be prepared.

I couldn't really decipher the looks I received from Cash and Heather.

After a minute or so, Heather retreated back to the chair she'd been in. It didn't take her long to fall back to sleep.

Five minutes later, Cash whispered, "Move over. I've fuckin' wiped." He looked at me with his gorgeous, kind eyes—exhaustion returning to his face.

I turned onto my side and placed Tucker in between us.

Cash tenderly touched his brand-new son's head. "I can't believe he's finally here."

I nodded slightly. "I know, me either." My eyes found Cash's. "Can you believe how perfect he is?"

He chuckled silently. "I was just thinking that same thing."

We spoke quietly to each other for a little while longer, fawning over our baby.

Our baby.

“Have you posted yet?” My husband asked with a yawn. He stretched as much as he could within the confined space.

“No,” I told him, “Not yet.”

His eyebrows rose. “Why?”

I shrugged one shoulder and gave him a small smile. “I don’t know. I think I just want to keep him our little secret for a bit longer.” A huge yawn hit me out of nowhere.

Cash grinned at me. “I understand. I haven’t messaged anyone yet.” He sighed and leaned over to kiss my lips. “You were a fuckin’ dynamo last night. I’ve never admired anyone more in my life. The way you took over and—” he shook his head and laid back down. His hand laid on my hip. “You were amazing.”

Tears played in my eyes. “I felt like I could do anything.” I took a deep breath. “It was so empowering, honey.”

His eyes got all watery. “I’m in awe of you, sweetness. And I can’t quite believe you want to sign up for another round already.”

Tiredness seemed to seep in through his touch. I yawned again. “I think I need a nap first.”

He chuckled and agreed. “Great idea.” His body shook with the next yawn that exited his mouth. I watched him fall asleep, and it made my heart happy. So many of my dreams came true because of this man.

I couldn’t believe how lucky I was.

“You have such a good daddy,” I whispered to my son. My lips touched the top of his deliciously perfect baby head.

And then I fell into the world's best sleep.

Serenaded by my mother-in-law's soft snores.



SOMETIME IN THE LATE AFTERNOON—AFTER a few naps, and a few feeds—I grabbed my husband's hand. I set my hand in his.

Then I laid Tucker's hand in mine.

Then—I took a picture.

After that, I posted it to my social media accounts.

“And then there were three...” was all I wrote.

Five-ish or Six-ish or So years later...

Cash

“**B**ut Daddy, I wanna have a trailer like yours,” Tucker whined once he saw my trailer.

“Tuck, you can’t pull my trailer,” I explained to him again—for the seventy-fifth time. His grandma bought him a battery-operated kid truck for his last birthday. And when he’d asked for a trailer, I’d actually looked it up online.

And they were all crap.

The way our kids played with stuff, that cheap plastic trailer wouldn’t make it to noon.

“But I wanna trailer like yours.” My first-born son pouted with his arms crossed. Stubborn as the day is long.

I tossed the branches in my arms into my trailer and caved. “Okay, kid. Let’s go build you a decent one.”

His eyes widened right before a huge smile spread across his face.

My smile.

“Really?” he questioned, just to make sure he’d heard me right.

I nodded and waved him over. “Yeah, really.”

A few hours later, we emerged from my workshop. Drill in hand, I attached the brand-new kid-sized trailer to the kid-sized truck.

With a loud whoop and a hug, he ran and jumped into his truck.

I watched him drive up to one of many piles of leaves and stop. Then he got out and started filling up his trailer, using his little shovel.

“That is the cutest freaking thing I’ve ever seen,” my wife said from behind me. I turned to see her taking some pictures of Tucker. “You’re a genius.”

I turned around and pulled her into me. “It didn’t take long to make. And he helped me.”

She shoved her phone into the front pocket of her overalls.

This late in her pregnancies, these were pretty much all she felt comfortable in. Her large, rounded belly dug into my stomach. I felt our latest creation punch and kick in protest.

Apparently, so did my wife.

She giggled and said, “I’m thinking this one might be a soccer player.”

I shook my head. “Impossible.”

She laughed loudly and tossed her head back. “You have to admit, she’s got a heck of a kick on her.”

I leaned down a bit. “That’ll come in handy in net.”

Jillian’s eyebrows raised, and a thoughtful look crossed her face. “Hmm,

a goalie, eh?” Her lips pressed together. I fucking loved when she let her Canadian out. “Maybe. I could get Penny to give her some tips.”

I kissed my wife’s plump lips. “How about we wait until you give birth before setting up a training schedule?”

Jillian shrugged. “Minor details. We should book Penny now. She’s a great coach, and it’s tough to get a spot with a gold medal Olympian.”

I frowned down at my wife. “You’re a gold medal Olympian.”

She rolled her eyes and huffed. “I’m not a goalie. But Penny is.”

I swallowed and interrupted her as I cleared my throat. “Just sayin’, I’m a gold medal Olympian, too. This kid will have—”

A loud shriek made us let go of each other and swivel around to see —“Oh, shitballs,” Jillian said while we took in the sight in front of us. Tucker and his sister were in his truck. He was driving, and Julia was beside him.

That wasn’t the concerning part.

The concerning part was their upside-down baby brother in the trailer. A few seconds later, the shrieking stopped. And Fynn started laughing along with his older siblings.

All that rowdy laughter was a common occurrence in the Clemens’ household. And I fuckin’ loved it.

I worked hard for it.

For them.

For all of us.

And it was worth every second.

“We should probably stop them,” Jillian whispered, not taking her eyes off of our three oldest kids tearing around the yard on a mini-truck and trailer.

I thought about it for a second and said, “They’ll cry if we stop them.”

She nodded. “And they’ll cry if we don’t. Eventually.”

I nodded and made an executive decision.

Enjoy the laughter.

There wasn’t much that fed my soul more than hearing my family laugh.

Unless it was my wife telling me she was pregnant.

Again.

Or one of my kids snuggling into my arms and saying, “I love you, Daddy.”

Or my mother taking a minute to hug me and say, “You did good, son.”

Yeah, life was crazy.

Busy.

Lively.

And better than I could have ever imagined.

“When the crying starts, I’ll take Fynn.” My wife was already planning and divvying up duties.

“Alright, I can deal with the other two.” I gazed down at Jillian. “So, after that one pops out, they’ll outnumber us two to one. Are we—” I cleared my throat, “done?”

My wife’s jaw dropped.

“What?” She had a flabbergasted look on her face that told me we were, in fact—not done.

Fynn had broken her perfect birth streak.

The little turkey was breech. And no amount of coaxing got him to turn.

Which made the fact that he was still ass-over-tea kettle very appropriate.

I thought after needing a c-section—and the recovery required after a c-section—that my wife might want to call it quits on the baby-making front.

And that was why, exactly nine months to the day after Fynn was born, she'd really surprised me. She'd planned a weekend getaway to the cabin.

But just for us.

Grandma watched the kids.

And Jillian and I spent the entire weekend in bed.

Making number four.

It was a great fucking weekend.

Literally.

“Sweetness, I was just asking. You know I’m along for the ride, right?” I set my hands on her shoulders and leaned in for a kiss.

“Do you—want to stop?” she asked me cautiously.

I shook my head and chuckled. “Nope. But I’m not the one who has to do the hard part. That’s all you.”

She hugged me as tightly as she could and said into my chest, “You help out.”

I wrapped my arms around my wife’s growing torso. “I’m only involved in the fun part.”

Her head nodded up and down against me. “Yeah, you’re good at the fun part.” She gave me a squeeze. “Really, really good.”

We held onto each other for a while.

The laughter behind us getting louder and louder until—

The crying started.

“It’s always fun until someone loses an eye!” Grandma came marching outside and gave me a dirty look. “Honestly, Cash.” She shook her head and raced to her grandchildren.

The grandchildren who she spoiled rotten.

Jillian looked up at me. “It was nice while it lasted. I’ll see you again in a few hours?”

I grinned and kissed her. “Deal.”



And the life they lived—was the life they lived.

Ups.

Downs.

And inbetweens.

Wonderfulness.

Horribleness.

And just being-ness.

But most importantly—it was their life.

Their love.

Their world they created together.

One they walked, side by side.

Hand in hand.

Every day.

Until very the last.

So yes, they all lived happily ever after.



Omigosh, can you STAND how wonderful that ending was?

Or should I say, beginning???

Sighhhh...

I love a good happily ever after.

Sooooo, guess who's story is next?

It's one you've been waiting for.

Yay!!

Dr. Barnes is NEXT!!

Trey's handsome, fabulous brother—and smexy veterinarian!!

Go grab, [Puck Worthy by Jessa York](http://Books2read.com/puckworthy)—<http://Books2read.com/puckworthy>

AND IF YOU want a SNEAK PEEK at their story—you can grab it here
—<https://BookHip.com/MQGMBNJ>

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Carla VanZandt, Jennifer Christy, Jennifer Shiflett, Kelly Green, Angie Hallock, Shelly Charlton—THANK YOU for your beta help. I love that I can always call on you at a moment's notice and you're there to help.

A BIG thank you to my hubby. There are too many specifics to thank you for—so, I'll just say—you are the reason I can get these books written as quickly as I do. You've picked up my slack, and I thank you.

A HUGE thank you to the readers of my Las Vegas Angels series. I am so, so, soooooo grateful for your support and kind words. And I absolutely LOVE that you're enjoying this series as much as I do. It's a pleasure beyond belief to craft and write these stories for you.

Gosh, this one was a doozy!!

Cash & Jillian's story has been on my mind for YEARS. I've lived with them and all the twists and turns they had to take.

And they broke my heart.

Like—literally.

Busted it.

I've shed so many tears over these two.

But in the end—they find their way.

And omigosh. It's sooooo satisfying.

This is one of my favourite books—and also one of the most difficult to write. It took me loads longer than I thought it would.

But I love it.

And I love these characters.

Saying goodbye to Jillian & Cash has been—horrible.

So, I decided not to.

Don't be surprised if you see some extra bonus material pop-up from time to time.

As always, you will see these characters in the next book—"Puck Worthy." Dr. Barnes' book (Trey's veterinarian brother).

See?

It's not goodbye.

Just—see ya later.

I can't wait.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jessa lives in a very non-descript, unassuming town filled with the best kind of people. Most days, she can be found in the stands of various soccer fields, cheering on her Youngest, or discussing books with her Oldest (who is an English Honors student).

At night, if she's not up burning the midnight oil, Jessa enjoys snuggling up to her real-life chef hubby and watching his latest pick for a cheesy romance movie. He always chooses the best ones (after he cooks supper, of course).



ALSO BY JESSA YORK

Love In Santa Lena Series :

Book One: Falling For Jack

Book Two: Convincing Harper

Book Three: Waiting On Jason

Book Four: Healed by Chelsea

Learning To Love Series:

Book One: Mr. Marshall's Method

Book Two: Professor Richter's Rules

Book Three: Dating Doctor Deveraux

Christmas At The Sugarberry Inn Series:

Book One: A Holiday Homecoming

Las Vegas Angels Duet Series

Book One: Zero Pucks Given (Gigi & Beau duet #1)

Book Two: Zero Pucks Left (Gigi & Beau duet #2)

Book Three: One Night Puck (Lexi & Trey duet #1)

Book Four: Pucked Up and Married (Lexi & Trey duet #2)

Book Five: Hate Puck (Jillian & Cash duet #1)

Book Six: Love Puck (Jillian & Cash duet #2)

The Rosetti Crime Family Series

Book One: [A Billion Desires](#)

Book Two: [A Billion Secrets](#)

Book Three: [A Billion Reasons](#)

Book Four: [A Billion Lies](#)

Book Five: [A Billion Consequences](#)

Book Six: [A Billion Decisions](#)

Book Seven: [A Billion Regrets](#)

Book Eight: [A Billion Vendettas](#)

The Sovrano Crime Family Series

Book One: [Tempting the King](#)

Book Two: [Resisting the King](#)

Book Three: [Forsaking the King](#)

Book Four: [Despising the King](#)

Book Five: [Forgetting the King](#)