



ON *Icy*
GROUND

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KRISTIN LEE

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Campus Stallions

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On Icy Ground is a work of fiction and any resemblance to persons, living or dead, names, characters, places, brands, media, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

It takes a strong man to love someone else's children. Thankfully, there are so many of these men out there.

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Prologue

REED

“**Y**ou little fucker. If you come at me again, you’ll regret it,” my stepfather screams, his fingers wrapped tightly around the collar of my sweater.

Anger rushes through my veins. Spit rises in my throat, and I shoot a wad into his face. “Don’t you touch my momma again, or I’ll kill you.”

He throws me into the kitchen table by my collar, breaking the kitchen chair and possibly my nose. He’s coming at me as I scramble to get up. My mom’s shouting something indistinguishable—I can’t hear her over the blood pounding in my ears.

“Embezzlement... lose... everything.” Momma’s muffled words bounce off the walls, but I can’t comprehend; I still can’t hear everything.

My stepdad’s figure towers over me, looking down at me like I’m Satan. “That’s all you care about is him and his hockey. Do you know how hard it is to look at him knowing you’re in love with his father? The one who wanted nothing to do with you?”

His face is swollen. Is he drunk?

“Shana, you were a puck bunny to him. Nothing more.” He pushes her again, and I try to scramble to my feet, but I’m off balance and slip in my own

blood pooling from my nose and onto the floor. “I’ve given you everything, and you repay me by leaving me? I don’t think so.”

Did he send me to boarding school because they had the best hockey program in the country or so he could get away with hitting my mom? I always thought it was hockey but now, as his hand connects with her cheek, I’m not so sure.

While he turns his attention to my mom, I squirm backwards until I’m completely under the table, wiggling until I come out the other side. He slaps her twice more, and my pulse races.

“You will stand by me, or your precious Reed will never play hockey again,” he screams in her face.

Without thought, acting on instinct to protect my mom, the room goes dark.

Chapter One

REED - 7 YEARS LATER

Out with the boys, getting drunk. I'm sure this isn't what Coach meant when he said, "Keep your head down and your focus on hockey."

McShane's, the local bar where the hockey players hang out, has twenty screens throughout the bar showing the Stallions football game. Everyone's praising Logan Warren, my roommate and star quarterback.

He's been a bear to live with, so I'm not really in the mood to hear it. He doesn't like the relationship I have with Harper, our third roommate and his once-fake girlfriend turned real girlfriend turned... I'm not really sure what they are right now.

From the start, I had a feeling their relationship wasn't based on pretense. Yet, when they finally decided to make it official, it crumbled as quickly as it started. Unfortunately, Harper struggles with anxiety, and being the star quarterback's girlfriend has been hard on her. Which is hard on Logan. Who is then hard on me.

At least Harper and I are fine. She and her twin brother Hagan are my best friends. Harper and Hagan, to some degree, are the only people from my former life. They know me—the one underneath the layers of pain, hurt, hate, and abandonment.

So, I'm sitting here, shoulder to shoulder with a bunch of assholes from the

hockey team when Harper is home, studying instead of watching the man she loves play the game he loves. She believes they can't be together because of her panic attacks. She doesn't want to be in the spotlight and embarrass him again by passing out.

I want them together because I need Harper to be happy. She's the sunshine that pulls me out of my darkness. Unlike Harper, I don't have anxiety, but I've self-diagnosed myself with depression. I know it, but hell if you can say something like that aloud, doctors are quick to put you on medication.

Been there. Done that. The side effects weren't worth the result. So now, I just drown my pain in alcohol.

Flynn and Dawes, my wingmen, bring shots back to the six-foot-long, high-top table where about half of our hockey team is drinking and watching the game. As a unit, we pound the table three times and then shoot the tequila. About that time, Logan throws a touchdown pass, and we throw our arms up in victory.

Flynn nudges me with his elbow. "Three o'clock. That chick is hot."

As I twist my head to see the girl, I can only see her profile and just my luck, she turns, catching me staring. Wanting to make her squirm, I head straight for her, and she darts her eyes around, looking for an escape. I have these eyes people can't look away from.

I wade through people and when she sees me getting close, she turns her back to me. But now, in this crowded bar, my body is wedged against hers. She's thinner than the clothes she's wearing suggests. Baggy, long-sleeve shirt with one shoulder exposed and flowy pants.

My hands touch her arms, and a shock of electricity makes us both jump.

"Fireworks already?" I whisper in her ear. "What I could do to you. Umm."

She huffs, spinning to face me. "In your dreams. Go back to your Neanderthal friends."

"Have you been watching me, cookie?" She has a smattering of freckles reminding me of mini chocolate chips.

“Not if you were the last person on earth.”

“Then how do you know I’m with Neanderthals?”

Jutting her hip out, she folds her lips over her teeth and crosses her arms over her waist. “I know your type.” Her eyes drag over my inked forearms.

“Cookie, if you had ever had my type, you could never go back to guys who wear khakis, who part their hair on side, and only know how to have sex missionary style.”

She inhales before she slaps me, but I guarantee she’s thinking about my words. “I don’t do missionary.”

I cackle, and her perfect little mouth draws up as a drunk Stallion fan loses his balance and bumps into her, pushing her against my body and the wood I’m sporting under my zipper. “Right. Sweetheart, I would bet my life that you’ve never been satisfied. Never had a man pleasure you.” My words are low and quiet amongst the chatter and clanking of glasses against the tables.

Brooke

His words breeze over the goosebumps covering my shoulder, a dead giveaway for the way he’s making me feel. I knew I shouldn’t have worn this off-the-shoulder shirt. With my track record, I need to keep everything covered.

But right now, I want to get lost in this man. I want to know what he means. How he would touch me.

Instead of giving in, I say, “Pleasure me? I’ve found that men who talk big games are the ones with the littlest peens.”

“Peens? I don’t have a peen. It’s called a cock.”

“Yeah, if you’re a Neanderthal.”

There’s a sinful look in his eyes that’s making my core tighten and the more I try to not think about his peen, the more I realize I want to know if he can

back up his dirty words.

“Or if I’m a man.”

“You are a man.” The words slip from my mouth, and he flashes me a wicked grin.

A guy from class yanks on my arm, and suddenly, I’m on the ground. When I look up, the guy I’m bantering with has a fistful of the other guy’s shirt. “Don’t you ever touch her. Did she ask you to touch her?”

He throws the guy from class into a crowd of guys behind us. This guy has a temper, and I vow internally to steer clear of him, even if he does put my body on high alert with his provocative words.

“Like I said... Neanderthal.”

He turns on a dime and disappears into the crowd. An hour passes, and I don’t see him again. Not that I’m looking.

When the game is over, Lettie and I stop by the local chicken shack, and I tell her about my run in with the man so handsome, it should be illegal.

“You should have jumped on that. When will I get you out of the house again?”

My eyebrows raise in agreement. “He’s too cocky and has a quick trigger.”

“But he’s a dirty talker. God, I want a dirty talker,” Lettie fans her face and I come close to laughing chicken nuggets out of my nose.

This is what college should be.

Chapter Two

BROOKE - FOUR MONTHS LATER

Straight-ironed hair? Negative. It attracts guys like bees to honey. If I'm going out for the first time in nearly six months, I'm doing everything I can to keep the bees at a safe distance, or they might sting me.

Ballcap, check.

High-waisted, loose jeans, check.

Chunky sweater, check.

"Brooke, what the hell are you wearing?" Lettie glares at me like I just ate the last salted-caramel brownie.

I check myself in the mirror and see the reflection of a woman who'll be warm at the bonfire. "What?"

"Hot guys will be there. Football players who just won the College Football National Championship, ready to celebrate." She winks at me as she jerks the hat from my head.

I know she's right, but I'm not ready. I mean, do I make out with someone? Then follow it up with the declaration and say, "*By the way, I have a three-year-old son.*" Talk about a cock blocker. Instead of voicing that concern and getting yet another lecture from Lettie, I rip the hat from her hands. "I'm

wearing the hat.”

Lettie throws her hands up, backing away. “All right, I guess getting you out of the house once every six months will have to be enough for me.”

Over the last two years, I’ve learned that January in Kentucky can be tricky. Last year, we had a blizzard with fourteen inches of snow piling up. I grew up in Michigan where my dad was the hockey coach of the Dawson University Destroyers. Up north, they clear and scrape the snow within hours, and everyone would be at work. But here, everything was closed for days.

Not complaining, Caleb and I played in the snow for hours, then came in, drank hot chocolate, and after naptime, we would start all over again. I’ll never forget his red cheeks and cold, chubby hands when I took off his superhero gloves. He wrapped his arms around my neck and said, “Love you, Mommy. Next time, can we build a Daddy snowman?”

Sighing at the memory, I take one last glance in the mirror and grab my purse hanging on the door.

Here goes nothing.

After locking the door behind me, Lettie and I walk next door so I can give my little man a hug and kiss goodnight. Caleb is having a sleepover with my next-door neighbor’s son, giving me zero excuses to stay home.

This is the first time he’s spent the night with anyone except my dad, and that’s rare as he travels for his job.

Caleb barely notices me as they build a fort with large cardboard bricks. Fascinated by his hard-working personality, pride swells inside my heart. I’m a good mother. Caleb wasn’t planned, but he’s the best thing to ever happen to me.

He gives me a quick hug and pecks me on the cheek, then pushes out of my embrace, telling his friend to place the blue triangle on top. It’s a sweet and sour feeling that he doesn’t need me and how fast he’s growing up.

“Don’t worry. He’ll be fine, and you will too. It’s good for him to see a happy, fulfilled mom,” Nicole says.

Giving her a tight-lipped smile, I say, “Okay but call me if he needs anything. I’ll have my phone in my pocket.”

“Go. Have fun.”

Lettie pulls me out the front door, giggling. “We need to stop by the liquor store.”

I shake my head, knowing if she has her way, I’ll be plastered and naked in the back of a pickup truck with some football player tonight.

Not saying I would be opposed, but it turns out that what I thought was a relationship was just hooking up—and I have a three-year-old to prove it.

We pick up two more of her friends. They bring a small cooler and insist on doing shots when we arrive at the farm. Several guys zone in on us as we step out of her velocity-blue Mustang GT, which matches the color of the Stallions logo. Her friend Jules lines up the shots on the hood of the car.

“What’s in them?” I ask.

Jules says, “Fireball with cherry-flavored Jell-O.”

Cherry and cinnamon sounds like a good combination. They’re in clear plastic cups that most people use for wine, definitely more than an ounce of liquor.

Jules counts, “1.2.3. Shoot.” The four of us suck the Jell-O into our mouths, and I have to force the last bit down my burning throat.

“That’ll warm you up,” Lettie says as she tilts her head to the gaggle of good-looking guys approaching. “Incoming.”

“Hey ladies,” one of the guys says, while scanning the car. “Lettie. Jules. Who are your friends?”

“This is Brooke and Tessa.”

He flashes me a smile. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too.” I raise my eyebrow to Lettie as she picks up another Jell-O shot and shrugs. “Lettie, you’re the designated driver, remember?”

The shorter guy places both palms on the car. "If you need a driver, I'll be happy to drive this baby for you."

"We'll be fine, thank you," I say.

Lettie pinches my elbow, and we walk farther into the field party. "Don't worry, my full attention will be on getting you laid. It may be hard in that outfit."

As I survey the party, I'm definitely overdressed. "I'll stay warm."

"The point is to get a man to keep you warm."

Lettie has on leather pants, an ivory crop top, and a tan suede jacket. Tessa is wearing a pink skirt which comes about two inches past her privates, and her legs are bare, with pink cowboy boots. And Jules wears a sweater dress with a blue jean jacket.

"Come on, let's find Dane." Dane is Lettie's best friend from high school and plays on the Stallions basketball team.

I don't know him that well, but she talks about him all the damn time. Dane and his no-dating rule. *Dane aced his statistics class. Dane and I met for coffee. Dane likes it when I curl my hair.*

The four of us weave through the crowd and occasionally, we talk to someone we know. Dane finally comes into view as we near the fire. "Lettie." Dane swings her around. "Damn girl, those leather pants are tight."

She's on the Stallion Equestrian team and her legs are amazing.

She blushes. "Do you like them?"

"Fuck, yeah. So will every other guy here. You're staying with me, got it?" The tone of his voice is teasing, but his body language says otherwise. His arm tightly drapes around her.

What the hell is going on? I've never seen Lettie blush or let a guy take command. She's always *I'll do what makes me happy and make men work for it.*

"Okay," she says softly.

Glancing around the field, there's three huge feeding troughs of alcohol, at least fifty camping style chairs around the fire, and hammocks scattered under trees a little farther away.

"I'll grab drinks. What do you want?"

The girls want White Claws, and the guys want beer. I trudge over the hard winter grass towards the alcohol station and pull my phone from my purse. Just one peek to make sure Caleb is being good. Part of me wants him to need me to come home. It's nerve wracking to have one night to make a connection and then hope to never see them again.

Honestly, neither my heart nor libido wants to do this. When the guy at the car gave me the twice over, there was no fluttering in the pit of my stomach, possibly because I'm scared to get laid even though I want to get laid. My mind knows the pitfalls, but my lady parts are long overdue. Almost four years overdue.

I pack my purse with seven drinks and pop the top on mine.

"A *little* person like you will get drunk fast. Take it easy." The voice is gentle but rugged and low.

I spin my head to look at him, but he's already headed in the opposite direction. The way he emphasized the word little sounded familiar. My gaze fixates on his tight jeans hugging his thick legs and tight butt.

After returning to my group and handing out drinks, my eyes are drawn to the hammocks where mystery man sits by himself. Did he have a poor performance during the game? Is that why he's not mingling and having fun?

Jules and Tess giggle and sit on the laps of our new basketball friends.

Dane's friend asks, "Do you want to roast a s'more?"

"No offense, but I don't date athletes." Why did I blurt that out? He didn't ask me on a date; he asked if I wanted to burn a marshmallow. I'm so rusty.

"Why not?"

I don't know if Lettie has told Dane that I'm a single mom and if he's told his friends. "I'm concentrating on graduating. I'm already on the five-year plan."

The guy nods and takes a pull of his beer. Dane laughs and when his goofy grin spreads across his face, Lettie sighs, aloud. The girl has it bad but won't admit it.

I don't know why I'm not taking the bait. Dane's friend has gorgeous green eyes, black curly hair, and light-brown skin. While stuffing one hand in his pocket, he responds, "I get it. The pandemic messed us all up. I should graduate this year, but I have another year of eligibility because of the lockdowns."

"Yeah, that was the year I had —"

Luckily for both of us, a few girls, smaller than me, probably cheerleaders join the group. "Devon. Are you okay? We heard you and your girlfriend broke up. It's her loss."

He tips the brown bottle, and nods but by the way his eyes fall, he believes it's his loss, not hers.

I feel bad for turning him down, but I'm not interested in dating. I'm here for one reason. Well, two. One is to have an orgasm that isn't self-induced and two, to make Lettie happy. Once in a while, my best friend deserves a friend who will be her wingwoman.

Everyone is nice enough. They make eye contact with me while talking but when they're all engaged in conversation about parties and fraternities, I slip from the group. "Hey, I'm just going to walk around. I see a girl from my theatre class. I'll find you later." I'm lying, but it's a good excuse.

Attracting guys in high school and my first year in college was never a problem. But I haven't met many people since moving here. I go to class, work, and home to take care of Caleb, so I don't feel like I have much in common with anyone.

I stare into the fire, wishing I could be like everyone else. Get drunk and be free. Never would I trade Caleb for any of this, but I wish I could have it all. Have a few experiences so when he's grown, I can give him advice.

When my drink is empty, I walk over to get another one and see the guy with the rugged voice sitting in a hammock with a pregnant girl. He pats her knee and then lies back. Yeah, that's why he's not having fun. He's gotten a girl

pregnant and is feeling trapped. Just like all guys, he wants to dip his stick uncovered but then can't handle the consequences. Actually, I didn't give Caleb's father a choice. I never told him he had a son.

Maybe I should talk to the pregnant girl and give someone the support I needed. And tell him that his little baby will be the highlight of his life.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I trod up the hill to the hammocks. The fireball shots have kicked in, and I'm feeling bold. I can meet new people without showing them one hundred pictures of Caleb.

Her hair is brown with blond edges, and she looks familiar. "Hey, I have water in my purse if you want it."

"Thanks, but my boyfriend set up a feeding station for me." She laughs and points to the table that says non-alcoholic. "Here he comes."

Oh, so rugged man isn't her boyfriend or the baby daddy.

A massive, beautiful man takes a few strides and pulls her hand until she's standing. Gleaming medium-length blond hair and a lights-out smile. He cuddles her in his embrace. She looks to be six to seven months pregnant. She's tall, not round like I was.

"Hey, Princess. Sorry it took me so long to get over here."

She peers up at him. "No worries. I had company," she says, peeking over her shoulder at the guy with brooding eyes and tight jeans stretched across his crotch. Good God, why am I thinking about this bulge in his pants?

"Has he protected my girls?"

Brooding-eyes guy doesn't lift up but squawks, "Always, I knew her first."

As I stare at the couple, I realize who they are. "You're Logan and Harper." My voice an octave higher than normal like I'm meeting the king and queen of England. "I knew you looked familiar. You two are so cute."

The voice from the hammock says, "Aren't they? Logan's fucking whipped."

"You would be too if you had the love of your life carrying your baby." Logan pauses, kissing Harper gently. "Let's get you some food."

What I would give to have someone love me and my baby boy like that. The way he looks at her, the gentleness in his eyes, but it was the possessive way he held her as they walked away that made jealousy lick at my spine. The perfect combination. I'll never be so lucky. No one wants a girl who has a kid.

Not knowing how to proceed, I drop myself onto the hammock beside the glowering individual, causing my pineapple seltzer to spill onto his snug black shirt. While I can't make out his abdominal muscles, there isn't a trace of fat on his physique.

“Whoa, if you want me naked, just ask.”

Naked? Yeah, sign me up.

Chapter Three

REED

Her breath hitches and fuck if it isn't the most beautiful inhale of air I've ever heard. And believe me, there have been plenty of breathy gasps in my ears.

"Umm, I'm so sorry."

She tries to sit up, but I grab her wrist to keep her lying down. Even through her thick cable-knit sweater, I feel a pulsing current flowing through me, and a low chuckle escapes my mouth. "I've had many drinks spilled on me. Most of them on purpose."

Without turning to look at me or pulling away, she asks, "Why? Are you a bad guy?"

"Hmm, that's a good question. Are you looking for one?"

Despite the fact that I made a mess of my own life while defending my mom, my stepfather and mother see me as the villain. On the other hand, my roommates: Harper, Logan, and Hagan - view me as flawed, but ultimately a good person. As for my teammates, they often push and encourage my more aggressive side. I'm the one who ensures that the opposing team knows better than to mess with us. If someone gets slammed into the boards, you can bet I'm in the middle of the action.

She turns onto her side, placing her big purse between us. Her fingers shuffle around in the dark until she pulls out a pack of tissues, takes one out, and hands it to me.

“Are you always this prepared?” I ask as I press the tissue to my shirt, soaking up the pineapple seltzer. “What all do you have in your luggage?”

“It’s a purse.”

“More like an overnight bag. Are you looking for someone to go home with?” I turn onto my side and look into her eyes.

“No,” she says as her eyes shy away.

“Let’s play a game. If I can guess five things in your bag, you have to take off that big-ass sweater and let me warm you up.”

She thinks about it for a minute while biting down on her perfectly shaped lips. They’re full but not artificially plumped up. She finally answers, “You’re on. But what if you don’t get five correct?”

Her eyes sparkle at my proposal, but there’s a hint of trepidation.

“I’ll give you whatever you want.” Hell, I may fold just to see what it is she wants.

She stops the smile that threatens to stretch wider. “Deal.”

I’ve been intrigued since I first saw her grabbing drinks. Her braided hair is pulled through the hole of a trendy baseball cap, and she’s dressed the opposite of nearly every girl at the party. But now, I’m able to study her face. Usually, the first thing I notice is a woman’s hair, but I don’t have the luxury since it’s under her hat. She has freckles dotting her nose that I can only see when the light from the fire flickers. Her teeth are bright, and her eyes are a shade of green. A feeling that I’ve met her before hits me, but I can’t figure it out.

When I arrived this summer, I partied way too much—temptation was everywhere. Still is, but it’s hockey season, and my priorities have shifted. Less drinking for sure. However, I can’t help but pull her strings and find out more about her. I’ve always been told you can learn a lot of useful

information by playing games with people. Are they competitive? Intelligent? Quick witted?

“Are you ready for me to blow your mind?”

This time, she smiles as she smirks without responding.

“We’ll see. When I name the item, you have to get it out. And put it in my hand.”

“What if all of it won’t fit?”

“Don’t worry, darlin. I have big hands.” Damn, if I don’t love the way she swallows, and her eyes linger on the size of my hands. My mind wanders, thinking about whether my dick would fit easily inside her—she’s not a puck bunny. This woman will need to be stretched.

“Driver’s license or university identification. Hand it over.”

She fishes it out and places it in my hand.

“Tissue pack.”

“Not fair, you already knew I had tissues.”

“I never claimed to play fair.” When she hands them over, my thumb swipes over her skin and floats over the ridge of a ring. I look down, unable to make out the color of the stones, but it’s definitely gold, not silver. “Birthstone?”

She answers, “Rubies for July.”

“So how old will you be?”

Her eyes shift, never connecting with mine, which means she’s lying.

“Twenty-two. You?”

“Just turned twenty-two. Peppermint lip balm.”

Her eyes widen and illuminate, even beneath the brim of her cap and the darkness of the sky. She slaps it into my hand. I have this girl all figured out, except whatever she’s trying to hide.

I bring my head close to hers, seduced by the mixture of peppermint on her

lips and pineapple seltzer on her breath. I touch her bottom lip, tugging it down just a bit, just so I can hear her breath hitch again. She doesn't disappoint, and it damn near burns me alive.

The pad of my thumb dips inside her mouth, and her lids flutter closed. When she closes her lips around my thumb, my cock springs to life. A delicious vibration penetrates my thumb. I can't hear it, but it's like she's humming inside her mouth.

"How about we skip the game and get what you really want?" I ask, mouth over lips.

We don't kiss, but our lips graze in phantom touches. This girl wants me as much as I want her, but there's something holding her back, so as much as I'd like to be buried deep inside her, I'll take it a little slower than knowing her ten minutes.

"And what is it that I want?" she asks, tilting her head and lifting her eyebrow quickly.

"Condom."

She stares at me with impossibly wide eyes, assuming I meant a *condom to use*.

I repeat, "Condom." I know she doesn't have one. The way she's dressed, she may as well have a chastity belt on. But at this point, I'm not sure if I want to win or lose this little game. It would be interesting to find out what she would want from me.

"Don't worry. I have one if we need it."

Her chest heaves, and mine feels like a thundering herd of horses racing through my veins. The last time I felt this kind of tension, I was a sophomore at the other college. I thought this part of me was dead.

"Three out of four. You can only miss one more."

"A book."

My freckled competitor's brows take a deep dive towards her nose, and she chews on the bottom lip I just caressed. "Be more specific."

A gruff laugh comes from the pit of my stomach. She wants to play, we'll play. The fact that she brought a tote bag of a purse to a bonfire where most girls only have their phone and keys indicates she's not a party girl. She's much more serious. The kind of girl who spends most of her days in the college library. But based on the way her breath hitched when I touched her, she hasn't been sexually active.

Will she really be twenty-two? Is she a virgin?

"Romance. The kind that makes you dream of having a man do all the things you're too bashful to ask for. One where the hero is morally gray or maybe dominant in the bedroom." I walk my fingers over the top of her brown leather tote. "May I?"

I may as well have a camera because the look on her face will be etched into my mind forever. Disbelief shadows her pupils as she nods. I pull out a paperback of a hockey sports romance. I laugh, but she doesn't know why.

"Stop making fun of me."

"Baby, I wouldn't dare. I'm glad women are reading this and finally finding the courage to ask for what they want out of sex."

She stammers, "That's not why I... I... read it. There's a plot. Like this one where she's in love with her brother's best friend, and she can't be with him because he has girls hanging on him all the time, and she feels second best. But then he... oh, never mind."

"Oh, I know what we're going to do if I win," I say as I sit up, picking my beer off the glass and taking a long pull out of the dark green bottle.

Now I have to decide which one of us will win. If she wins, I'll do whatever she wants, but I'm hoping it's to read the book. If I win, she takes off her sweater, and I pull her into me. Not wanting to take a chance, on losing her tonight, I say, "Postie notes."

"Did you dig through my bag?" she asks, confused.

"No, but your book is annotated. Any girl who has an annotated book with her, must read whenever she gets a chance, and thus carries the sticky flags or whatever you call them."

“Double or nothing.” She gives me an ear-splitting grin.

“No, Cookie. A bird in the hand is worth two in the bush. Take the sweater off.” As soon as the word leaves my mouth, I remember where I met her before. McShane’s bar, but she doesn’t seem to remember our run-in. Sad really, I was a semi-different guy then, drinking too much, a carousel of girls anytime I wanted. But since the season started, my focus is hockey—until now.

She huffs as she wiggles to sit up. “I should go.”

Does she remember?

“Wait. So, you’re not going to hold up your end of the bargain?” I ask as I grab the hem of her sweater and tug a little too hard. As she falls back on my chest, her braid slaps me in the face, and my nose buries in her neck. Her sweet scent wafts through my nose, and I’m not sure if it’s her shampoo or perfume. “Sorry, I tugged too hard. You’re light under that sweater.”

My hands glide under her sweater, and I’m pleasantly surprised she has on another layer, which adds to her sweetness. She was attempting to be bad, but she knew all along that if she took off her sweater, she would be cold but safe.

She flails her arms and kicks her legs, snickering. I love a fight, ask my teammates, but this is different; this is playful. I part my lips and trail gentle kisses along her neckline.

“You like me touching you.”

She nods, and I want nothing more than to find a spot alone so I can go caveman on her, in her.

Her arms and legs go limp as she exhales. I keep kissing the sensitive skin behind her ear and nudge her sweater out of the way. When I do, I find skin and a small spaghetti strap and realize she has on a camisole underneath. A smile forms on my lips. “Stay.”

They say curiosity killed the cat, and I may die right here if she doesn’t let me touch her. My fingers graze over her cotton-covered stomach and up to her breast, circling her hardened peaks. She whimpers into the crisp winter

air.

Pinching. Pulling. Circling. I'm so hard, there's no way she can't feel it pressing against her ass.

With her cap against my cheek, I lean up to adjust and take one hand out to pull her face to mine. It's an awkward angle, but I kiss the corner of her mouth, tasting the intoxicating mixture of peppermint and pineapple.

I let my fingers wander under the waistband of her jeans. Her fingers glide over my forearm and down to my hand, urging me on. Sliding under her panties, I move slowly from left to right, wanting to build the anticipation. At any time, she could stop, stomp off, and I may never see her again.

Going an inch further, I graze over her clit and then trail up, and she pushes my hand back down.

“Good girl, let go.”

As I indulge in the Garden of Eden, it feels like forbidden fruit, yet I don't know why. There's something I'm missing, but I don't care when she writhes on top of me. Her arousal coats my fingers as I slide through her folds and play with her clit. Thankfully, we're at least fifty yards and shadowed by the trees because I don't want to share her reaction with anyone.

The mini-moans falling from her lips urge me on, having a primal need to give her pleasure. “You're so wet for me. Do you get this wet for other men?” I rasp in her ear.

Her body tenses. “No,” she says as she fights her body not to climax.

I rub faster and harder, then let my middle finger dip into her soaking-wet center. It's like I've entered hell, it's so hot inside her body. My dick wants to be inside her so fucking bad.

“Open your eyes, baby.”

I don't even know if they're closed, but her insides clench my finger, and her juices cover my hand as she shakes her head. Then she groans as pleasure takes over her body. I take my hand from under her sweater and cover her mouth.

“Scream into my hand, my sexy girl.”

Chapter Four

BROOKE

S *exy? Me?*

“Yes,” I scream as he muffles the sound with his hand over my mouth. My cries get softer and softer as I come down from the highest high I’ve ever had. I’m a wet noodle as he pulls his wet fingers out of my pants and glides under my camisole, smearing my arousal over my abdomen.

“Did you see stars?” he growls into my ear.

I nod as he turns me over, so we are chest to chest.

“Next time, I’m going to make you see the fucking galaxy,” he says, oozing with sex appeal.

For a moment, I’m lost in his dark eyes. I realize I just let a man touch me without knowing his name. He stares into my eyes and as a lopsided grin appears on his face, he tugs on my ponytail.

What would it be like to have sex and have him wrap my hair in his hand and take what I wanted him to have?

Escaping reality, having a man make my body sizzle makes me want more and more often. But parties and bonfires, hookups with random hot strangers doesn’t fit into my overpacked schedule or mom duties.

Commotion comes from the bonfire, and he sits up with me on his lap. There's a Ford F150 pulling a trailer with a bunch of the football players on it. They're singing "We are the Champions."

I wonder why my new friend isn't on the flat bed with them. He certainly felt like he had the abs of a football player. Maybe a wide receiver or tight end.

Logan, the star quarterback, gives a speech as his pregnant girlfriend stands by his side. I long for a man to love me and my son unconditionally, and I wonder if I'm wasting my time. I should be looking for an older man who's ready to settle down, instead of getting earth-shattering orgasms from a college student.

The crowd claps and when I pull my hand free from the stranger I just let finger me, he tightens his arms around my waist.

The party is in full swing now that all of the football players are here. Girls are dancing, and their skirts flare out as they twirl. Guys don't let it go unnoticed—they're interested. One guy, number fifty-six, gets between them as they grind against each other. They're free and enjoying every uninhibited minute.

"Why so sad?" he asks. "Want another round?"

Before I can answer, which would have been *no* since we're no longer lost in the moment, and I have a child, Logan, Harper, and another couple walk towards us, both holding hands. "Umm... I need to find my friends," I say, embarrassed we don't even know each other's names, yet he's holding me like I belong to him, and he belongs to me.

This time, he lets me go, and he picks up the contents of my purse from the hammock. He takes a look at my school I.D. "Brooke, I'm Reed." A mischievous grin tugging at his lips.

Harper bounces over to Reed. "You haven't scared her off yet. Proud of you."

Reed rolls his eyes but then she hugs him and whispers something in his ear.

"This is Brooke." He puts his hand on the small of my back. "Brooke, these are my roommates. You met Logan and Harper earlier. This is Hagan and his

fiancée Adalee. She's not officially a roommate, but she may as well be."

Logan says to me, "Surprised you're still here. Girls run screaming in the opposite direction around this guy."

Oh, I screamed.

"Pleasure meeting you," Adalee says, wrapping her arms around me quickly, then releasing me just as fast.

Why is every word someone speaks making me think of having sex with Reed?

"Thanks, it's nice to meet you. Congratulations." I look at Logan, then turn to Reed. "I need to find my friends. They may want to leave."

"I'll walk with you," Reed volunteers.

"It's okay. I've got mace in my purse."

His eyes flicker in the firelight at my suggestion. "That was my next guess. See you around." Reed's mouth draws into a smug grin.

Walking away from Reed leaves me empty. Just minutes ago, I was seeing stars. Not the ones in the sky, but stars, nonetheless. Bright piercing prisms of light shooting in all directions. He made me float in space. That was extraordinary.

Lettie is with the basketball players and when I approach, Dane's lips are tightly folded over his teeth and his body tense. One of Dane's friends is touching Lettie's back and playing with her hair as she laughs. She's drunk.

I walk into the circle. "Hey Lettie, are you ready?"

"Ready for something," Dane mumbles under his breath. I glance between them, but Lettie doesn't notice Dane's upset.

"How much has she had to drink?" I ask. "She's the designated driver."

"Enough to cloud her judgement."

"Great, how am I going to get home?" I ask aloud but to no one in particular. I got myself into this mess. "I'll call an Uber."

The other two girls who came with us, Jules and Tessa, are with the same guys as when we came, so they won't want to leave. And I really want to leave. I want to go home and dream about Reed and how good his fingers felt exploring my center. Try to reenact the scene on my own.

Dane takes two strides to Lettie. "Your friend wants to go home. Where are your keys?"

"No, don't go, Brooke. Stay and party. You need to let loose." Lettie wobbles, and Dane's friend catches her.

"I've had an amazing time, but I have to work in the morning. Dane will take me home and come back to get you three."

I've only been around Dane a few times, but it's obvious he cares about her, and he's upset.

Out of nowhere, Reed comes from behind me, "Hey, I can give you a ride."

I bet you can.

"Are you sure, it may be out of your way?"

"We're in the fucking country."

His deep voice shocks my core into thinking he's dirty talking. My panties, already soaked and dried, feel wet again.

"Dane, this is Reed. He's..."

"We've met," Reed says, not smiling. "I'll take her."

I tug on Dane's arm, and he leans down—he's six foot six. "I would rather you stay and look out for Lettie. She's had way too much to drink. That guy is your friend, so he'll listen to you, even if she won't. Take care of her."

Dane nods. "Okay."

Reed applies pressure to my back, walking me to the large field of parked cars. When we get to the last row, he slips his hand into my back pocket and cages my body against a Jeep Cherokee.

"I wasn't done with you." He takes an angry breath before crashing his

mouth to mine. “Your body was on fire. I thought my fingers may disintegrate inside you. Are you ready to see the Milky Way?”

So bad I can't think, but we're in a field.

“I want to see your wet clit. I want to lick it and suck it until you're a mumbling mess.”

I never thought aggressive dirty talk was my thing. But when it comes out of this man's mouth, I'm aroused instantly. His hands pluck the button free from my jeans. Reed hooks his fingers in them and my underwear and scoots them over my hips while kissing me.

He eats up a moan as our tongues clash, warring for position. I can't get control of the kiss or of my feelings. The burning desire to fuck him right here. To be a bad girl with a bad boy.

My jeans hit the ground and so do Reed's knees. He uses his head to wedge my legs farther apart. “So fucking beautiful. Look at me when I'm talking to you.”

I lift my head from the metal door. Under the midnight sky blanketed with thousands of stars, his pupils dilate, and he seems dangerous. Like I may never be able to go back to a regular guy.

“Keep them on me.”

He bites the insides of my thighs. I yelp. Then he sucks the same places before pulling my lips apart with his fingers. “Cookie, I can't wait to taste you. Do you want me to taste you?” Then he chuckles. “Of course, you do.”

My fingers trail through his hair as I press him closer. I want his lips on me. I want him to swirl his tongue around my aching nub. I want his fingers so far inside me, I can feel it in my throat. I've never desired a man before. Reed brings out the bad girl inside me.

Having never experienced a man giving me oral, I don't know if this is normal, but the more he teases me with the end of his tongue, a burning sensation travels through my veins.

“More... more.” I'm not sure if the words came out until he obeys my

commands.

He pushes his whole face against me and asks, “You want me to tell you how you taste?”

Somehow I act like I’m a bad-ass woman. “Not unless you can talk and lick at the same time,” I pant as he strikes and strokes with his tongue.

I feel his lips stretching wide, smiling. It’s better than any sex I ever had. In my wildest dreams, this has never happened. I’ve watched porn that showed a man giving a woman oral but only a few times, and he must not have been doing it right because I can’t contain my voice.

“Ree... I can’t stand.”

He stops for a half second, then places his large palms on the back of my thighs, and lifts me, until I can lie back on the hood. Then he places my legs around his neck.

“Fuck, we may be here all night. I’m not stopping until I cum all over myself. You got that. If it takes giving you ten orgasms.”

Ten orgasms? That’s more than I’ve had in my life.

And the guttural sound of his voice makes my body coil. So much tension twists and twists as he inserts a finger or two and curls it, hitting a spot. Maybe G or D or whatever, it’s a fucking sensitive spot.

“That’s it. Jesus, Brooke, your juice is sweeter than honey.”

That was my first orgasm, but the second one, I am not prepared for. It comes quickly after the first one. He keeps on with his fingers while sucking my folds with his other hand pressing against my pelvic bone.

I open my eyes, arch my back, and this time, the sky is painted with colors. When my eyes roll back in my head, comets streak under my lids. “I’m com... I’m coming. Oh God. Feels.”

My legs clamp against ears as pleasure washes over me. Sexual desires take over my body and mind.

He picks me off the hood, my boneless body can’t help him. He leans me

against the Jeep, and I fall to my knees. “Perfect. Exactly how I want you. I’m cashing in on my winnings. Take your sweater off. Now,” he demands.

I’m spent, unable to lift it over my head. Why did I wear such a bulky sweater? He jerks it the rest of the way, discarding it onto the dead grass and doesn’t bother with the camisole.

He drops his own pants and fists himself. My face is inches away from one glorious erection. It has a bead of precum glistening in the moonlight. He reaches between my legs, soaking up some of my wetness and smears it on himself.

I swallow hard, it’s so fucking sexy. He’s not asking anything of me. Does he want me to suck him off? Cause I have zero experience, and he seems to have all the answers. His movements get faster.

“Fuck, Brooke. I’m...”

Seeing him unfurl layers of desire has me rubbing myself in front of him.

“Where do you want...”

But I ask, “Where have you been my whole life?” Because I never knew it could feel this way.

His cum spurts all over my black, tight camisole. His head falls back, and he loses his direction. It’s everywhere. Then he drops to the ground, and the inferno is replaced with easy, overlapping kisses.

Chapter Five

REED

Slashing through the ice, my teammates can't keep up with me today. My vision is sharper, almost like I'm anticipating the pass two seconds before it comes. I'm in the right place at the right time. Every. Single Time.

"Bauer, shower, then see me in my office."

The guys tap their sticks against the concrete floor as a show of appreciation of how well I skated today. I'm usually a broody son of a gun, and it feels nice to smile. And although I try to keep it to a minimum, inside, I'm smiling like a fucking clown.

"Did you tap one of the cheerleaders last night?" John Basilio asks. He's the Godfather of the team. When you fuck up at practice or a game, it's his ring you have to kiss. I'm not kidding; it's a real fucking championship ring. His dad is in the NHL Hall of Fame. His dad has so many championships, he can't wear them all, so John wears his Frozen Four ring.

John and I have more in common than he knows. He was kicked off Galena U's team his freshman year for driving under the influence—twice. I recently got my license for the first time. At my former college, I didn't need it. It was an elite hockey program, and we had drivers. Literally, the boosters paid for the hockey players to go out, get fucked up, and had drivers take us home.

And in high school, I never had a chance to practice.

“Bauer?” the Godfather asks, rattling me from my thoughts.

“Oh, no. I’m a little too rough around the edges for that crowd. But I did go to the football bonfire. I thought you assholes were coming.”

“We were walking out the door with Daily, and three other puck bunnies showed up. We stayed at the house and played strip poker. You missed out,” John makes a gesture about getting a blow job.

Don’t worry, I was thoroughly entertained.

“I needed to be with Harper until Logan got there.” Most of my teammates know all of my roommates. We had several parties over the summer up through the first few football games of the season. Then Logan and Harper split, so the parties moved to the baseball house or the hockey complex.

“I really don’t understand your relationship with his girlfriend.”

“That’s because it’s none of your business.” And they’ll never understand why Harper and Hagan mean so much to me. Otherwise, no one would want me as a teammate, much less a friend. If they found out why I left boarding school, it would be the end.

The chatter stops, and the locker room gets quiet. No one snaps at the Godfather. I throw my gear in the locker and close it. “Listen, I need to shower. Coach wants to see me. Harper is pregnant, and I promised Logan and her brother Hagan that I would watch out for her. That’s all.” Harper and I had some long talks before she and Logan got back together.

He nods, squirrelling his mouth to one side.

I take a quick shower, knowing I’ll take another one when I get home, then head into Coach’s office.

“Coach.” He looks up from his black metal desk. Stallions hockey moved to NCAA Division I five years ago, so the coach’s office isn’t nearly as fancy as Broadhurst University where I was playing before. Modest metal bookshelves, one window, and zero championship trophies.

The coach’s office at Broadhurst U was covered in conference championship

plaques, photos with players who are now in the NHL, and countless Coach of the Year trophies.

But the guy was a complete asshole. He wore a mask in front of the administration and the boosters. Or maybe they just didn't care. All I know is I didn't have a choice when he kicked me off the team. There was a zero tolerance policy for me. If I had one infraction off the ice, there would be hell to pay.

And true to form, I got kicked off the team for taking up for a woman.

So here I am, playing for a hockey team filled with three-star recruits other than the Godfather. But after last night with Brooke, I'm exactly where I want to be. I want to explore her body and be balls deep inside her.

"Sit."

I pull the clunky chair out, plop down, and wait for him to address me further.

"Bauer, you've been here for seven or eight months, and that's the best you've skated. Your passing was on point, and I don't think I've ever seen you anticipate like you were today."

"Thank you, sir."

"What do you attribute your success to today?"

Instead of saying *I had the most incredible oral sex last night*, I say, "Finally clicking. My head was a mess when I got here."

"If you can keep that temper under control, you can be one of the first hockey players to be drafted from this university. Keep skating like that, and you'll be moved to first line."

This year, I've spent a fair amount of time in the penalty box. I've been ticked that I'm not on first line when I can take every one of my teammates with my eyes closed. In all honesty, I've only become *good* friends with the guys on my line. Flynn and Dawes. They don't ask questions, just the way I like it.

"I'll do my best."

He curls an eyebrow and taps his pen against his clipboard. “And Bauer, I expect you to pick up your grades. You barely made the minimum GPA to play this semester. Hockey doesn’t last forever; you’ll need a backup plan. Trust me.”

Coach was drafted in the first round of the NHL and then had a car wreck and shattered his spine before he ever played a game. It’s hard not to wince at the thought.

Some people believe in a higher power, but I believe in hockey. There was one thing they didn’t make me give up when I left boarding school—hockey. Monday through Friday, I was able to go to the rink as part of my agreement with the court system.

My biological dad, whoever he is, stepped in and saved my sanity. My stepdad was in jail, and my mom stood by his side. She came to see me a handful of times. Thanks.

What I did wasn’t right and even with hundreds of hours of counseling, I will never forgive the son of a bitch who called me son. Not after what he did to her. And to our family. It’s all his fault.

“Yes, sir.”

Coach picks up a folder and opens it. And I guess that’s my cue to leave.

The empty locker room smells of a mixture of soap and sweat as I gather my gear and head out to my vehicle. When I see the fighter-jet-gray Jeep, I think of Brooke and how I’d love to lay her on the hood during broad daylight so I could fully appreciate her.

Brooke didn’t seem like a girl used to hooking up, and I hadn’t had a sexual encounter in public since I was a freshman at Broadhurst. Maybe it was because I hadn’t had sex in a long time. Yeah... I’ll go with that excuse. Or am I actually interested in her?

Hagan calls while I’m driving home from practice. “Hey, we’re going over to the Campus Café for breakfast. Meet us there.”

“Nah, I’m beat and running low on money. I’ll just eat at home.”

“Sorry, that’s a no can do. The electricity is out.”

“What the fuck?”

Harper yells in the background, “You better come.”

I shake my head, knowing I’ll go. “Only because I just burned at least three thousand calories.”

Why do I feel the need to take care of Harper? To make her happy? There’s no romantic connection, but there is a bond. Is it that she forgave me so easily for the rumor I spread in high school? Is it trust? Is it the baby she’s having and not having a family myself makes me want to be included in hers?

We confide in each other, both the devastating thoughts that eat us from the inside and the ones that make us happy. Until last night, mine were either of my past or hockey and now Brooke—a woman I licked and sucked and only found out her name when I snatched her university I.D. A woman who’s too busy to party or hookup judging by the contents of her purse as well as the way her breath hitched when I touched her. It tells me she’s not used to being touched by a man.

And I have to admit I revel in that thought. Pure, untouched terrain.

Shifting the gear into park, I take a deep breath. The parking lot is shadowed from the rising sun behind the building. I reach into the backseat, grabbing my bubble jacket, putting it on before booking it across two lawns to the Student Center building that houses several restaurants.

As soon as I walk into the café, Logan and Harper wave me over. God, I hate being the fifth wheel.

“Why is the electricity out?” I ask, but no one answers.

Logan shuts his menu. “Does everyone know what they want? I’m starving.”

“You? I’m pregnant and usually eat as soon as my feet hit the ground,” Harper says as she pushes on his biceps.

“Well, Adalee’s feet never hit the ground.” Hagan wiggles his eyebrows and flashes his dimples that help him get whatever he wants.

“That’s not true,” Adalee says, kissing his cheek.

“You two are ridiculous. Do you ever fight? Or are you always so mushy?”

Hagan’s grin doubles. And everyone, including me, stare at those deep dimples. Harper has dimples too, but they’re smaller, more like commas, whereas Hagan’s are like the parenthesis symbol.

“We fight over who’s on top.” Hagan bumps Adalee.

Harper reaches over and covers Hagan’s mouth. “Too. Much. Information.”

I look over the menu, and the waitress stands by me at the edge of the table.

“May I take your order?”

Unsure if I’m imagining the voice from last night, I look up, and our eyes collide. Her face turns ten shades past rosy to the color of fire.

“Brooke, right?” asks Adalee. I think the rest of us are shocked. What are the chances? Fifty thousand people go to this university.

She nods.

“Hey.” We stare until it gets uncomfortable.

Harper thinks she’s jumping to the rescue when she says, “Reed is so hungry. He just got back from pra...”

I kick her shins under the table. “I just went for a run. I’ll have the Slam Dunk and a six pack.”

After everyone orders, and Brooke waits on another table, Harper asks. “Why didn’t you want me to say hockey practice?”

I shrug.

“Maybe because he wants her to think he’s a football player. We get more action.”

Hagan reacts. “Bullshit. Baseball players...”

Adalee gives him the side eye.

“I don’t know if I want her knowing who I am. Scrolling through social media and finding out things about me that won’t give the full story. I don’t know if I’ll even see her again.”

Harper’s eyes twinkle like she’s freaking Santa as she smirks. “You can’t hide from me, Reed Bauer. I know you like her.”

I do like her. I more than like her. Right now, I’m sporting half wood, just seeing her again.

Another waitress accompanies Brooke with all of our plates balanced on their arms. Brooke’s steady hands place each plate in front of us gracefully.

“Anything else I can get you?”

We all shake our heads, but Harper says, “Are you good at English literature?”

“I aced it sophomore year. Why?”

Adalee pinches me under the table.

“Ow.” I clear my throat. “I was headed to the library after breakfast to find a tutor.”

Brooke shifts her weight, and her gold dangle earrings catch my eye. Why can’t Harper and Adalee mind their own business? I transferred here to start over and to stay focused. However, I did perform my best today and even I know it was because of the woman standing in front of me.

Chapter Six

BROOKE

“Oh, well. I have a few minutes when I get off. I clock out in half hour, but I don’t know how much help I’ll be.”

Reed’s damp hair waves at the ends. I wouldn’t mind him hovering over me with drops of his sweat falling onto my hot skin. When we stare at each other for so long, Logan holds up a jar of sauce and asks, “Can I get some hot sauce? This one is empty.”

It takes more time than it should for his question to register. “Of course, I’ll be right back.”

Striding into the kitchen, I lean my back against the wall and cover my heart. It’s beating out of control. Reed is even more handsome in the light of day. His defined jawline and plump, enticing lips make him a prime candidate for modeling. I notice that his eye color, which I had initially thought was blue, is actually a captivating shade of slate gray.

Bonnie, my supervisor, quickly hands me a brand new jar of hot sauce.

“Were you eavesdropping?”

“Hell yeah, I was. Three hot guys and only two girls, which one is single? I’m guessing the one on the end. He was checking you out.”

“I’m meeting him after my shift. I kissed him last night at the bonfire.”

“Oh, girl, he’s an eleven out of ten. Does he know about Caleb?”

It’s like she just stuck a pin in my happy balloon, sucking all of the air out of the room. Shaking my head, I say, “I just met him last night. I gave myself one night to be a normal college student.”

She slaps me on the butt. “Don’t let it go too far without telling him. Now get this hot sauce to Logan Warren.”

“You know him?”

“Everyone knows Logan. Pride of the Bluegrass,” she says as I stride away on cloud nine.

“Here you go. Need anything else?”

What would I do if Reed said *just you*. Oh swoon. When no one says anything, I leave the check. “You can pay at the register when you’re finished. Thanks for coming in.”

As I turn to walk away, Reed grabs my hands, and static electricity zips through us, and we jerk away, but both of us try to play it off. “I’ll wait until you’re off, and we can walk to the library together.”

My eyes scan his friends, and they’re smiling, which can only mean two things. One, he picks up girls all the time, or two, he’s genuinely interested.

“Okay.”

I have three other tables to wrap up before I have to reconcile my checks and tip out. My stomach knots and cramps. Last night, I was tipsy, maybe even drunk. Definitely drunk, or I would never have let that happen in public where anyone could have seen.

The crew shuffles out of the booth, and Reed takes a seat on the other side, I assume so he can see me. Hagan and Logan fist bump him. Adalee gives him a quick hug, and Harper squeezes the life out of him. And the smile he gives her lights up my heart. It’s evident that he deeply cares about her, and she happens to be pregnant with his friend's child.

It gives me hope. If I tell him I have a son, it's possible he won't freak out. Talk about putting the cart before the horse; I need to check my feelings. Or I can tell him right away, so I don't have to suffer through disappointment.

As I continue fulfilling my duties, Logan settles the bill for their table using cash and insists that I keep the change. A surge of happiness washes over me as I am complimented, aware that they regard me as the best waitress they have encountered in months.

Expressing my gratitude, I humbly protest, feeling that the amount left behind is excessive. Logan, however, reassures me. "You're doing us all a favor by tutoring him. He's always breaking stuff at the house." A smile forms on my face, appreciating the recognition and understanding of the additional efforts I put in.

Harper says, "See you soon," as they wave goodbye.

Will they?

Feeling shy, I avoid making eye contact with Reed. I quickly attend to my final two tables, ensuring they're taken care of. Before long, my section is vacant, and I signal to Reed with a raised finger, that I just need one more minute.

I run into the office and change from my Campus Café polo shirt into a sweatshirt that shows my love for reading. *So many books, so little time.* The universe knew Reed and I would be in a library today. I remove the hat from my head, take my hair out of the loose ponytail, and put it into a messy bun. I pull out a few strands, curling them around my finger and letting them fall. Fishing out my peach pearl gloss from my purse, I add a bit to my lips and pop.

I look in the full-length mirror on the back of the office door. It's the best I can do with what I have on me. I never expected to see Reed again. When he brought me home, I had him drop me off at Lettie's so he wouldn't know that I lived in the townhouses reserved for students with families. Lettie and I have keys to each other's houses in case of emergency. I went in, waited for him to pull out of the parking lot, and called an Uber.

Quickly, I check on Caleb and let Nicole know I'll be there in an hour or so.

Making my way back into the seating area, I notice that Reed fails to immediately recognize me. However, as I approach him, he promptly stands, his gaze transfixed on me. With my limited understanding of Reed, one thing becomes apparent—he possesses an unwavering intensity in all that he does. His stare. His oral skills. His commands.

Fuck, his commands are hot.

“Wow. You ready?”

“Yep.”

On the way to the library, we make small talk, mainly in regard to his roommates. “You seem close to Harper.” It’s not a question, and he doesn’t respond, so I let it go. “When is she due?”

“A few months. I just hope Logan isn’t drafted somewhere far away. It will kill her.”

“She would still have you, Hagan, and Adalee.”

“They won’t need me. Harper and Hagan’s family is huge, and Logan’s sister lives twenty minutes away. Where are you from?”

“Michigan. You?”

“South Bend, Indiana.”

We enter the library, taking the stairs to the second level where there are several study rooms as well as couches. He goes to the information desk and asks where he can find *The Outsiders*.

As we snake through the rows, we end up in the corner. The gods are smiling on me this weekend. I run my finger over the stickers with the Dewey Decimal numbers. The book he needs rests on the top shelf. Pointing to it, he reaches above me and removes it, slowly. His chest presses against my back, and I enjoy the heat emitting from his body and breath. I spin to face him, wanting to kiss him and have one more day, no, one more moment to be a college student without any other concerns. Reed seems to live life without worry, doing what he wants when he wants.

“You’re more beautiful in the daytime.”

Blushing, I turn away, but he puts a knuckle under my chin and makes me look at him. “Don’t do that. When someone tells you how beautiful you are, look them in the eye and make sure they’re telling you the truth. A guy could lie to you. Get you in trouble.”

“Oh, *they* could.” I can’t help but crack a crooked grin because Reed is trouble for me, and I’m already wanting more.

“I’m definitely trouble. It’s a word used to describe me over and over.” A hint of sadness slides over his eyes before he catches it and goes back to flirting with me. “Do you want to get into trouble with me, Brooke?” His breath drapes my neck. His fingers curl on the metal shelf behind me, and his other hand caresses my hip.

He makes me feel too much. I want to pounce on him like a tiger and make him mine, but my one night of throwing caution to the wind is over. Skirting under his arm, I say, “We better get started.”

Reed grabs the hem of my sweatshirt. “Last night was... well, let’s just say, I enjoyed myself.”

Unable to look him in the eye, embarrassment consuming my body, I snatch the book from his hands. He chuckles deep and drops his head, before following me from the stacks. I lead him to a small couch, and I watch as he removes his black bubble jacket. Underneath, he wears a branded long-sleeved performance shirt. The blue material shows every nook and cranny of his torso, it’s so tight. His light-gray joggers are loose in contrast. He stands in front of me, and all I can think about is him spilling on me last night. Never in a million years did I dream of that happening or how much it would turn me on.

Reed pushes his sleeves a few inches onto his forearms, then lowers himself beside me. Ink covers his forearm, stopping at his wrist. I’ve never given a blow job, but this man makes me want to get on my knees in the library.

He taps *The Outsiders* against my knee. “You ready?”

I shrug. “Depends on what you need.” It comes out flirty, which wasn’t my intention, but he rewards me with a dark, hesitant grin like he doesn’t know whether to play with his prey a little longer or devour me in one fell swoop.

My insides immediately clench like I'm doing Kegel exercises, fighting myself to stay in control.

After a few sizzling seconds, he says, "Can you show me how to annotate and tell me why in God's name I need to do it?"

Hypnotized by the tone of his voice and the ink on his arms, it takes a moment to register that he didn't serve me a playful pickup line. I finally say, "Teachers want us to annotate so we interact with the story, delve into it, and understand the nuances and shifts in the story. I don't know the exact reasons, but this is how I do it. I underline anything that seems important. Or anything that makes me feel or wonder. It'll be easier to show you. How do you learn best?"

"I'm a hands-on kind of guy. I'm not a reader, but you could convince me to read the book in your tote."

I'll attest to that.

"I wish they would let us read romance novels for school too. I bet everyone would come to class and have lots of ideas in the margins."

A laugh comes from deep inside him, and I love the genuine smile that accompanies it. It's not forced or intended to melt my panties—it just does.

I open the book with the left side laying on his leg and the right side on mine. "Let's read the first few pages silently, and then we'll discuss it."

He finishes and leans his head back onto the couch while his fingers thrum against the pages.

"In your own words, what do think about the main character?" I ask, touching his art-covered skin and for a moment, I become the focus of his attention. I love touching him and judging by his response, I think he agrees.

"The main character knows he's different, but it's hard to escape his circumstances," Reed says as he studies the atrium ceiling.

He's right. That's how Pony Boy feels. Even though he's intelligent, he's still a Greaser, someone from the wrong side of town.

My own situation plays through my mind. The difference is I've always been

middle class, and I do have a father. My mom left my dad and moved overseas. She's an executive for the same company of the shirt Reed wears. I've seen her exactly once since Caleb was born.

Based on the shift in Reed's demeanor, a darkness washes over his features. There are no laugh lines framing his face, and the mischief is missing from his eyes. It's apparent to me that he carries his own share of personal burdens.

Then he continues, "And based on the first few pages, I'm not sure he wants to."

There's more than a sex god inside Reed, but something tells me there are so many layers, a woman may never get to the core.

"That's perfect." I pull out my postie strips that I use for my romance novels. "Use these since this is a library copy."

"What for?"

"To annotate. Pick out the lines of narration that made you feel what you said and write on this transparent strip."

He leans forward. "I'm assuming you have a pen too."

As I retrieve the pen from the side pocket, Reed brushes against my shoulder. Handing it to him, I observe him skillfully jotting down his thoughts with his left hand, slightly slanted on the paper strip.

Lost in thought, I realize I've learned important things about Reed. The most revealing is he is ambidextrous. Last night, he worked me with his right hand. It's a good little nugget to store away for later. When I snicker, Reed says, "What's so funny?"

"Just thinking about this book." Lies. Lies. Lies. "When you get about twenty percent through, we'll talk about it." I fiddle with my pen and go through my purse, anything to avoid his gray eyes or think about what he did to me last night.

His phone rings, and he says, "Studying." Whoever's on the other end must laugh because Reed rolls his eyes. "Now? On my way."

“Sorry, Brooke. I have to go. Thanks for get getting me started.”

For some reason, I blurt out. “I can meet you next Sunday too, after my breakfast shift.”

He shrugs his jacket over his arms and smiles like the native bobcat. “Sure, I’ll let you know. What’s your number?” Quickly, he types my number into his phone. “I’ll call you.”

Hope blooms in my chest.

“Do you need a ride?”

“No thanks, and it seems you’re needed.” I have to get Caleb from the campus daycare center, and it’s not the right time to introduce someone to Caleb, especially when we’re not even dating. “I still can’t believe you never had to annotate a book in high school, but I’m glad I could be of service.”

He bends down with his mouth less than an inch from mine and responds, “There are better ways to service me, Cookie.”

Before I can ask him why he calls me Cookie, he adds, “Ways that pay back ten-fold. But yeah, annotating wasn’t high on the list at juv...” His words lose their power on the last syllable as he leaves.

What was he going to say?.

Chapter Seven

REED

“Fuck, Flynn. What happened between practice and now?”

With his back against the front door of his apartment, Flynn says, “I told Melanie I would be back at noon. I wanted to surprise her with flowers. You know, be a gentleman. I snuck in quietly... fuck. She was in bed with another guy.”

It doesn't surprise me, everyone warned him to stay away from her. Melanie's not only a puck bunny but a cleat chaser of every variety—football, baseball, soccer.

“Let's get you inside.”

“We've been exclusive for two weeks. She fucked me last night, and she's grinding on another cocksucker today?” He shakes his head as I help him to his feet.

Flynn and I are linemates. We play on the left and right wings of Dawes, the center. We spend the majority of practice working together. Coach substitutes us all at the same time, giving the first string a break. And there are two lines behind us that get little playing time.

I was supposed to move in with Flynn at the beginning of the fall semester, but Janik decided to stay for his Covid year at the last minute.

Grabbing a bottle of bourbon from the cabinet, I pour us two shots. “All right, man, we’re drinking to being single.”

“Aww fuck, man.”

“Listen to me. You are not taking Melanie back. I’ll twist your balls so tight, you’ll wish you were dead.”

There’s a knock on the door. “Oh, what’s up, guys?” Dawes lives next door. It’s basically an apartment complex where all the hockey guys live. “I’m bored. I hate when we don’t have a Saturday night game; it makes Sunday seem so long.”

Flynn slurs, “Come drink with us.”

“Don’t mind if I do. It’s been a shit day.” Dawes runs his hand over his jaw before looking at me. “Why are you fucking smiling? You never smile unless you’re already drunk,” he says to me.

“It feels good to be on the other side of brooding, for once. Cheers.”

Dawes takes the bottle, lifts it to his mouth, and swallows about two shots worth of the amber liquid, causing me to ask, “What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing, except Christina just took a knife and stuck it so far into me that I’m bleeding out.”

“And this is why we call you Drama Dawes.” I chuckle and squeeze his shoulder. “Tell us so we can commiserate with you.”

I met Christina once when she came in November for one of our games. Dawes is from North Carolina, and she goes to Duke. She’s studying diplomatic relations and let’s just say, not my type.

“We’ve been together since we were thirteen, and now, she wants...” He pauses and uses air quotes. “A breather.”

Flynn says, “Fuck girls.” As they toast and clink their glasses, I’m left unnoticed, so I discreetly take the bottle from Dawes and pour myself another drink. “And fuck basketball players.”

“Melanie was with a basketball player?” I ask. “Did you kick his ass?”

There's no love lost between the hockey and basketball teams. Our seasons run parallel and on this campus, they're treated like damn superheroes. These apartments were originally built for the basketball team, but now, they have a shiny, new modern building that includes every amenity you can imagine, including a freaking chef. So, we're in their hand-me-downs when they've only won two more games than they've lost, while we are undefeated.

"Yep."

After listening to Dawes and Flynn's heartbreaks, I say, "Let's go to McShane's."

McShane's is the bar where I met Brooke, but she obviously doesn't remember since she's never brought it up. It's where we go after home games and whenever we need to let loose. I check my phone, and it's late afternoon. We're wasted already, so I know I can't drive. Even drunk, my situation is always foremost in my mind, so I text my roommate.

Me: *Hey, can you pick me up at the hockey plex? Drunk and can't drive.*

Hagan: *Adalee and I are at the movies. Let me see if Logan and Hap are home.*

Me: *Don't bother her.*

Hagan: *Logan's on his way.*

Me: *Thanks.*

Hagan: *Proud of you for making good decisions.*

Me: *Tell him Flynn and Dawes are with me.*

He gives me the thumbs up emoji. I'm lucky to have reconnected with Harper and Hagan. There's something about having friends that knew you when you were young. That shared past when we were free and didn't have the weight of the world on our shoulders. Now, everything I do comes with an antagonizing amount of thought of the repercussions. It's hard to just live. I'm guessing that's why last night felt so good. I did what I wanted without thought other than making Brooke feel good.

We slide into the backseat of Logan's Audi.

“Can you take us to McShane’s?”

“Yeah. Do you want to go in or just drop them off?” Logan asks Harper with his hand on her leg. Harper has a better handle on her anxiety now; being with Logan has made a difference in the way she handles it. “I know you have studying to do.”

I laugh. “We all know what that means. He wants to throw your anatomy books off the bed and let you study him.”

Harper reaches around from the front seat and hits me. “So, tell us about Brooke and your little study session this morning?”

Dawes shouts, “Oh, so that’s why you were smiling?”

Harper goes on and on about how Brooke’s eyes met mine, and she’s sure it’s true love.

Pointing to Flynn, I say, “Well, it was cut short because this asshole’s girlfriend slept with a basketball player, but we’ll probably study together next Sunday.”

Harper claps her hands in quick succession. “I knew it. Let’s go in for a bit so I can hear all about it.”

Logan pulls into the parking lot. It’s dark and cold, but I leave my black jacket in the car, so I don’t have to keep up with it or worry about someone spilling beer or throwing up on it.

The bar is replaying the College Football National Championship game so when Logan walks in, the crowd cheers. He flashes them a smile and says thank you. This is why he’s the face of the university. But I’m going to be the face of the hockey team by the end of the year. I’m going to work my ass off to get Dawes and Flynn on that first line.

Dawes and Flynn go to the bar to buy a round, while Harper and I secure a table. The NFL playoffs begin in an hour, so the bar will be packed.

“So, have you and Logan thought any further about getting married?”

She smiles. “We will at some point, but neither of us want any additional stress until we know where he’ll be drafted.”

“It’ll suck if he’s across the country, and you’re here in med school.”

She twiddles a sugar packet and says, “It’s advantageous that my brother is his agent and is informing teams up front that Logan will be with me when I’m in labor and for at least two weeks after we have our little girl. Do you ever think that far into the future?”

I scoff, “Me? I don’t belong around kids.”

Harper’s face falls momentarily, but she musters a faint smile and places her hand on my back. “Your past doesn’t define you. Got it? Besides, I remember you did some babysitting not long ago.”

Why in the world did that lady trust me with her child? “I was doing some handyman jobs, helping with her raised garden, putting in a ceiling fan. I watched her son for a couple of hours because of an emergency. She never called for me to watch him again. He probably told her I was teaching him how to fight.”

“You did not.” She slaps my arm. “Reed, when are you going to let someone see the part of you that you show me?”

The truth? I don’t know. Harper trusted me with her anxiety over Logan. We had long talks while he was on the road, throwing the pigskin around, and I ended up dumping my issues on her. “You don’t want to feel special?” I act like she’s killing me.

The guys are walking towards us, and she turns her head and says, “We’re ride or die, Reed. You’re one of my best friends in the whole world, and I just want you to lose this bad boy image and find a nice girl like Brooke.”

“Ahh. I don’t want a nice girl, do I, boys?” I ask as the guys weave their way back to the table.

Flynn and Dawes shout, “Hell no.”

“Just tell me if you’re going to see her again?”

Knitting my brows together, I say, “I don’t kiss and tell.”

“You kissed her. Logan, he kissed her.” Harper’s eyes widen as she bounces in her seat, while Logan looks at her like he can’t breathe without her.

“Jesus, I literally just said, I don’t kiss and tell. I didn’t say I kissed her.”

Today anyway.

While all eyes are fixed on the playoff game, I think back to my last words with Brooke at the library. Juvie almost slipped from my mouth. It’s a reminder that Brooke and I can’t be together. If she asks about it, I’ll just cut all ties. I quickly type out a message to Brooke. The phone is burning a hole in my pocket, wanting more of her and those freaking freckles.

Me: *You always wear your hair up. Is it red?*

Brooke: *Strawberry blonde but a little darker.*

Me: *I’ve never heard the term, strawberry blonde. (thinking emoji)*

Brooke: *Did you take care of the emergency?*

Me: *I did. Now I’m at a bar with my friends.*

Brooke: *Oh.*

Damn, now, she thinks I jumped at the opportunity to hang out with my friends at a bar instead of studying with her.

Me: *Two of my friends had breakups today. One caught his girlfriend screwing another guy, and the other one’s long-term girlfriend said they needed space to grow or some shit like that. I’d rather be with you.*

Admitting that I want to be in her company is too much. I can’t have that kind of relationship with a woman because she’ll undoubtedly push me away when my darkest day reveals itself. Fear seeps in. Vulnerability strangling me. So, I return to what makes me comfortable.

Me: *I want to dirty you up.*

Brooke: *You already did. (winky face emoji)*

I’m sorry about your friends. It sucks to be cheated on or left feeling worthless.

Me: *Do you ever wonder if we deserve the bad things in life?*

I watch the bouncing dots with anticipation like it's the puck drop of the NHL championship.

Brooke: *Most people don't deserve heartache. Maybe it makes the heart stronger, so when the right person comes along, we can withstand the pressure of it breaking.*

This is getting a little too deep for a first texting session.

Me: *Maybe. Never thought of it that way. Sorry, I need to get these assholes home.*

Brooke: *I know I'm not your type, so thanks for giving me a night to remember.*

Me: *Don't make assumptions Night, Brooke.*

Brooke: *Good night.*

She thinks she's not my type. Smart, prepared, gorgeous, playful. A little shy. It will be rewarding to discover every other adjective that describes her. She's fucking perfection.

Chapter Eight

BROOKE

The week crawls by slower than a one-mile snail race. I haven't heard from Reed except for those few texts last Sunday. I'm continually checking my phone, hoping we meet this weekend to study, and who knows, possibly more. Maybe he will even invite me to his house to witness more of his dirty side.

I'm not naïve or innocent, just inexperienced in sex. I've had straight-up sex with baby daddy on top and with me on top. Sex lasted like fifteen minutes, and that included foreplay. I've never had a man consume me like he couldn't get enough until Reed, and the feeling was mutual.

He hasn't texted me back, so it's possible he was playing me like he was the cat, and I was the catnip. I remember that he said he would call me if we had a study date.

Another mom swings the door open while her three-year-old throws a fit. After she's gone, I grab a pen and sign Caleb out. There's a new receptionist, and she calls back for him. Caleb runs to me. "Mommy. Mommy." I crouch down and kiss him.

"Did you have fun today?"

"Me and Kimmie played in the balls."

I can't even think of the cesspool of germs in the ball pit. But I try not to be overly cautious. When I grew up, we played badminton in the street and kickball until midnight with the neighborhood kids. "I'm glad you had fun."

Kimmmie's mom corners me before I can get away "Brooke. Brooke. Hey, do you have a minute?"

"Not really. I have to get Caleb dinner and study for a test." I tilt my head in apology.

"Well then, you're going to dinner with us."

"Annie, I can't."

"Nonsense. You have to eat, and we have food and wine."

As we're walking out the door, I realize the receptionist didn't scan Caleb's bracelet to match him with his approved list of contacts for pickup.

Caleb holds my hand as we follow Annie. She's married and the same age as me. The difference? Annie married her high school sweetheart, and they're adorable—still madly in love. They live in a little brownstone on the east side of campus, which is a few blocks from the student center.

When we arrive at her house, we take off our coats and leave our shoes by the side door. Kimmmie runs into the kitchen, grabbing two juice pouches from the fridge. Annie gathers the ingredients we need to make homemade pizzas.

I sigh as we spread the dough onto her butcher block island and have the kids standing on a chair in front of us. We hold onto the kids with one hand, while we give them each a spoon. "Spread the sauce in a thin layer. Caleb, is this thin or thick?" I gesture with my thumb and pointer finger.

"Thin."

"Yay, good boy. Just a thin layer of sauce."

Annie smiles. "You're a natural mom and teacher. Speaking of teaching."

"I'm not a teacher. I'm a theatre major."

"Just hear me out. The daycare supervisor approached me, inquiring if I knew anyone with ballet experience. Considering your background as a junior ice

skating champion, I immediately thought of you, assuming that you must be familiar enough with the fundamentals to instruct four to eight-year-olds.”

“How did you know about my figure skating?”

“I did a little digging.” She puts her manicured fingers over mine as I lift my brows. “It’s just I’ve known you for six months and barely know you. Google knows everything.”

My eyes pop out of my head. It’s almost like she’s talking to someone else in another room, and I’m eavesdropping on the conversation. “I can’t teach ballet. My plate is too full.”

“It’s a paying job. They would pay you ten dollars a child for an hour twice a week.”

Kimmie grabs a fistful of cheese and throws it, missing the majority of her pizza. Caleb picks up the shredded mozzarella, placing it on the pie, one freaking shred at a time. He’s a perfectionist. Everything has to be in order. He likes both sides to be equal, not realizing it all melts together.

Annie pours us both a glass of wine, assuring me her husband will take Caleb and me home in a half hour. It feels good to relax and hang out. I’ve been wound tighter than an antique clock. Now that I’ve been given the release of a lifetime, I get stressed over when and if I will have an opportunity with Reed again.

There’s a cozy sitting area where a breakfast nook would normally be. They converted their formal dining room into an extension of the kitchen by knocking out part of a wall and adding an archway.

While the pizzas are in the oven, and the kids are playing on the floor with some pots and pans, I tuck my feet under my bottom and sip the Malbec wine. It’s smooth and pricier than anything I’ve ever had.

“Promise me you’ll think about it.”

I nod. “I will.”

How many kids will sign up? If there are ten kids twice a week that would be an extra two hundred per week. Holy cow, that’s eight hundred bucks a

month. Yeah, I'll think about it. But when do I have time?

"So how do you do it, Annie?"

"Do what?"

"Have sex with a kid in the house. Caleb is always rolling out of his toddler bed and coming into my room." All I've thought about since last weekend is when, where, and how I can have sex with Reed—not that he's still interested.

"Well, we try to do it when Kimmie's asleep but sometimes, Dan has to cover my mouth." She snickers. "Why? Do you have a boyfriend?"

I scoff, "No. I just need to get laid."

Her husband Dan appears in the archway, and a red wave of embarrassment covers his face. "Am I interrupting?"

I bury my face in my hands, and Annie pushes on my shoulder, laughing. She skips to him, giving him a chaste kiss. The simple gesture makes me a little jealous. Somehow, they're making it work. It just takes love.

"Ladies, can I refill your glasses?"

"Yes. It's been a long week," Annie says as she throws back her head.

The kids have gotten out at least ten costumes from her play chest. Caleb is a pirate, and Kimmie is a princess. Their swords are drawn, and the clinking of plastic begins when Kimmie says, "Walk the plank. Princesses don't get their hair wet." I have to fold my lips over my teeth.

"What if he ends up being her knight in shining armor? Like Dan was mine."

"Please, girl, let me find a man before you go marrying off our three-year-old children."

My phone buzzes, and I find myself praying it's Reed. No luck. It's my dad.

Dad: *See you and Caleb on Sunday when I get back in town. Don't forget.*

Me: *I have to study for a while after work. Let's do dinner.*

Dad: *Perfect. Love you both.*

Me: *Love you.*

Dad keeps hinting at buying Caleb a pair of skates. He goes on and on about how it teaches balance and coordination, which would be good for any sport.

How am I going to tell my dad that Caleb will never have a pair of skates? Not after what his asshole biological father did.

Chapter Nine

REED

The visitor's locker room at Galena University is devoid of any decoration, its once-white walls now a nauseating shade of cream. The absence of pictures on the walls highlights the true color they should be. The bathroom stalls lack doors, and the metal benches show signs of rust. Nevertheless, we place our bags down and proceed with our pre-game routine.

Our coach appears on the edge of the locker room and claps his hands. “I want you dressed in ten.”

There are a few shouts in agreement as we all dig into our bags. The trainer tapes a few ankles, and then we're all in semicircle, waiting on Coach.

As he walks in, the Godfather says, “This is the worst locker room I've ever seen.”

Coach says, “We don't need the best. We need to do our best. Let's keep our eyes on the prize. I coached their center for a year and believe me when I say he's an ass. He doesn't score. Got it? I want to shut them out.”

It's not often that your coach lays out a goal of a shutout. I make a mental note to research the firing of our coach. The Godfather taps his stick against the concrete floor, and the rest of us follow suit.

“Stallions. Stallions. Stallions.”

Coach claps three times and attempts to motivate us. “Stallions, show them what men are made of. Men who stand up and admit their mistakes. Men who play to the buzzer. Men of substance, not of money. Men who succeed past their circumstances.”

While performing our warmup stretches, one of the Flyers skates past us, talking trash. He circles us several times before one of his teammates drags him away. I check his number and realize it’s their center forward, Erik Bratt, notorious for getting under the opponents’ skin—the one coach was talking about.

Dawes, Flynn, and I sit on the bench and watch the referee drop the puck as our center, Wynward, gains control of the puck, and the game begins. Our first line skates fast and smooth—their passing impeccable. Within the first minute, we have our first shot on goal, but it bounces off the goalie.

Both teams battle for the puck, and Bratt checks Wynward into the boards, then as the referee comes to break it up, Bratt skates away and trips another teammate with his stick. Their crowd erupts, cheering. Hockey fans love this stuff. This game is eight hours away, so we have a few fans in attendance. Parents, siblings, a few girlfriends, and a few puck bunnies, even though they know we’re not in a hotel. Tonight, we take a long bus ride home.

The game continues, and the score is tied zero to zero. Coach sends my line in, and the first line comes out. Wynward looks at me. “Take care of him.”

He doesn’t need to explain—it’s time to put Bratt in his place. I bide my time, seeking an opening to slam him into the boards and get in a cheap shot or two.

Dawes passes the puck diagonally, and I skillfully maneuver across the ice. I’ve been doing this since I was a tot; it’s where I’m at peace. Eyeing the net with determination, I release a powerful wrist shot, and it swiftly sails past the goalie’s outstretched glove.

Celebrating, my teammates skate around me, patting my helmet. I glance over at our bench and Coach waves me over. “Good goal. Don’t let up.” He looks over his shoulder at Wynward, one of the top three centers in our

conference. “You have two minutes, then first line is back up.”

It’s the third period and this time, we lose the face off. Our defense holds, and the goalie keeps the puck from entering the net twice. Bratt’s frustrated and playing sloppy, so now’s my chance.

He’s furiously trying to catch up to the puck and as he gets past the red line, I hit him with the force of a truck. He takes off his helmet and says, “What the fuck, juvie criminal?”

His words knock the wind out of me, but it doesn’t stop my fist from connecting with his nose. He laughs as he swings back and hits my jaw. All hell breaks loose, and both benches clear. Fists are flying, and blood spatters over the ice.

I’m sent to the penalty box. The game ends in a shutout. We win one to zero.

We shower quickly, and Coach says, “We’ll do our post-game talk on the bus. But men, you fought for each other, and that’s how we become a team. When someone knocks one of us, they knock us all. I’m proud of you.”

He doesn’t mention me by name and when we get on the bus, I take a seat on the inside, next to the window, wanting to shut my eyes.

Back-to-back road games mean an excessive amount of time to think—about what Bratt said.

Juvie? Criminal.

Juvenile records are supposed to be sealed.

Men who succeed despite their circumstances.

So many incomplete thoughts race through my mind.

“Can I sit?” Dawes asks.

“Not if you’re going to talk.”

“We won, and the whole team knows you have their backs. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

I snap, “I want everyone to leave me the fuck alone.”

It doesn't matter what I do on the ice or how many times I go to bat for my teammates. The past will never be far from my mind. Cynical laughter reverberates through my head, laughing at me for thinking I will ever be free from who I am. What I did.

Then there's Brooke, always seen in her oversized sweaters with her hair neatly pulled back from her face. Once she discovers the extent of the trouble I'm facing, she'll likely want nothing to do with me.

But it doesn't delete the taste of her on my tongue or keep me from wanting to be deep inside her. Brooke prefers studying over partying and carries sticky notes to annotate her romance books. But I'm the bad boy you use for revenge sex or just for some excitement, not the kind of guy someone like Brooke would want to date.

As I watch more and more Dollar General stores pass outside the bus window, my mind bounces between my past and seeing Brooke tomorrow. Studying has never been my forte, but Brooke makes it worthwhile. How will I explain the bruises on my face without telling her I'm on the hockey team and got into a fight?

She doesn't seem like the type attracted to athletes but then again, she was at the football celebration. Regardless, I don't want her to see me with a split lip and bruises.

Brooke makes me feel normal, and I need that right now. I don't want to feel like a monster. I want to be a college guy who enjoys talking to a girl even if I know it won't go farther than it already has.

A girl like Brooke will never want me for who I am, so I hit send.

Me: *Hey, can't make our study date.*

She takes a whole hour to reply. What kind of girl doesn't keep her phone with her at all times? Clearly, someone whose priorities aren't on dating.

Brooke: *I was looking forward to reading the next chapter and getting your insights. I find it interesting to see if men and women read the same passage but interpret the meaning in different ways.*

Thinking of her sitting around contemplating this stuff makes me smile.

She's different.

Me: *I read a few chapters this week. Two of the characters get into a fight. Do you think there is ever a good reason to fight?*

Brooke: *Yeah. If you're protecting someone who can't protect themselves.*

Pretty sure that Wynward can defend himself.

Me: *In the book, the other guys started it.*

Brooke: *Did they try NOT to fight?*

Me: *They did, but they ganged up on them.*

Brooke: *Back up. What did you say in your annotations?*

Me: *I didn't have my strips with me, but I put notes in my phone.*

Brooke: *Send them to me.*

As I pull up my notes, I forward them to her.

Why do bullies exist? What motivates bullies to target individuals who are weaker? In the book, the Socs, the people society deems acceptable, enjoy unlimited privileges, and face no consequences for their actions, even when it comes to causing harm to the Greasers, the low-income part of society. It's unfair that they feel the need to flee and hide, but they believe it's their only means of escape. In certain situations, there may be only one available solution, and regardless of the potential repercussions, one must make that choice. And when the weaker one fights back and kills someone, is it justified?

A few minutes later, she texts back.

Brooke: *Wow, I'm impressed. Your thoughts and questions are deep. How are you feeling about the book at this point?*

Like art imitating my life.

Me: *I didn't expect to really think about it, to be honest. It's as if I'm there with them, like I could be one of the Greasers. What do you think?*

Brooke: *I think you have a good heart.*

Me: *Don't give me too much credit.*

Brooke: *Until you prove otherwise, I'm going to see the good in you.*

It won't take long for me to disappoint you.

Me: *You just want more orgasms ;)*

I can see the blush rushing like rapids over her face in my mind, and I want to see it in person. What I would give to see her reddened face from having another earth-shattering orgasm by my hand, tongue, or dick.

Brooke: *You have a pattern of changing the subject to sex whenever we're talking about something serious. Just pointing it out. And I'm glad you can't see my face right now. I need a ceiling fan.*

Me: *You're a smart cookie. So, tutoring for orgasms?*

The Godfather reaches over the seat and pulls my phone from my hand. "What or should I say who has gotten the attention of our resident broody mother fucker?"

"Give it back." Luckily, I have Brooke saved as Cookie, so it doesn't show her real name.

"Oh, look, Cookie says she wants more orgasms."

At this point, I don't care who the hell The Godfather is. He needs to stay out of my shit. Flynn reaches for it, and Godfather drops it, and I'm able to pick it up.

Brooke: *Are you always so forward? Let me know if you change your mind about tomorrow.*

Me: *Gotta run.*

I'm such an asshole. After that goodbye, dots bounce until they disappear. Of course, what is she going to say to gotta run?

When we arrive at our rink, the bus comes to a stop, and Coach asks to see me. Everyone departs, and it's just Coach and me on the bus. He squeezes my

shoulder. “Put some ice on your face.”

Chapter Ten

BROOKE

The Campus Café is dead, giving me too much time to think about Reed abruptly ending our text conversation but also the insightful and thoughtful questions he had written in his notes.

As I fill the salt and pepper shakers on each table, the bell sounds. When I look up, Reed's roommates file in. Adalee and Harper are bundled up with coats and hoods, while Logan and Hagan have on long-sleeved t-shirts. Guys like these two have nothing to prove, so why not put on a coat?

"You can sit anywhere," I say.

Logan takes the big booth in the corner.

"Oh hey, Brooke. Can you join us?" Hagan asks.

"I've already eaten but thank you."

Harper interrupts, "Are you in a sorority?"

Technically, once a Chi O, always a Chi O. But I've taken a hiatus. "Not anymore."

"Oh, us either. But we're having a fundraiser for kids with cancer in a few weeks, and we would love for you to come. It's the First Annual Evy Brown Cheer-Off. I'm a med student and volunteer at the children's hospital and we

met Evy there. She was a bright, courageous and...she passed away.” Harper takes a deep breath. I notice her tugging on her shirt. “The Greek sororities and fraternities are choreographing cheer routines to perform at the downtown theatre. I thought if you were in a sorority, you could put together a cheer routine.” Logan strokes Harper’s hair who is obviously still grieving her little friend.

Logan and Harper have made multiple social media posts about Evy before and after she passed away, and I love that they’re putting their energy behind helping the families pay their bills while they’re off work.

She slaps the blue vinyl, and I sit beside her. “I’m so sorry for your loss, and I would love to come if possible.”

“Are you and Reed studying today?” Harper asks.

“I don’t think so. He texted me late last night and said he couldn’t then... well, he said he had to go.”

Harper rolls her eyes and mumbles, “Good Lord. I’m going to kick him in the...”

“Don’t take it personally. He should be home soon,” Hagan speaks as if he’s redeeming Reed, but it does the opposite.

Naturally, someone like Reed wouldn't be home from partying so early on a Sunday morning. Given his attractiveness, it's likely that he brings a different woman home each night, subjecting them to the same treatment he inflicted upon me—robust orgasms. A knot forms in the pit of my stomach thinking about how many women are thinking about him right now. Hoping he'll call them. Longing for the stroke of his tongue.

Instead of responding, I push to my feet. “I better get back to work. This isn’t my section, but I’ll get your waitress.”

Logan asks, “Okay, but do you mind getting Harper some orange juice? Her sugar is low.”

“Of course.” I rush back to the counter and pour a large glass from a pitcher. “Here you go.”

My coworker takes their order and when we drop off their breakfast, I notice that Logan and Harper always eat whatever, but Hagan and Adalee always order poached eggs and avocado toast. I guess because Harper's pregnant.

"Reed's home," Hagan speaks loud enough for me to overhear their conversation. "But he says he's going to sleep until at least three, so don't wake him up."

Harper feigns innocence. "Me?"

"Yeah, you."

As they depart, my thoughts linger on Reed.

The cafe is so sluggish that my supervisor allows me to leave ahead of schedule. I decide to spend the extra time at the library. Regardless of Reed being here, I still have to cram for my test tomorrow. Now I have an additional hour before I need to pick up Caleb.

I read through my notes for history of theatre class. When I'm finished, I plug my earphones into the laptop and have the Read Text function read my notes to me. The more ways I receive the information, the easier I retain it.

The alarm on my smartwatch sounds, indicating it's time to pack up and head over to the daycare.

Caleb resists when I try to pick him up, reluctant to leave his friends. "I wanna stay and play."

Typically, I don't resort to bribes, but today, I mention, "We're going to visit Grandad."

"His birthday is in six months. I think it's time for skates," my dad says as he cuts his New York strip steak. He doesn't look me in the eye because he knows I don't want Caleb playing hockey.

"Caleb doesn't even know what hockey is, and I want to keep it that way." Glancing at my son, he's working hard getting the peas onto the spoon. Every

time he takes a bite, the peas spill and pop all over the table. Some even bounce to the floor. The days go by slowly, but the years go by fast.

“Dad, I know this is hard on you. Hockey is your life. I just want Caleb to grow up and choose who he wants to be and what he wants to do. Maybe he’ll love football or art.”

Caleb says, “Football... winners.”

My dad laughs, the bumps bounce along his throat like he’s choking. “Well, he’s heard football from someone.” He raises a brow.

“It’s kind of hard not to know about it when Logan Warren’s face is plastered everywhere. I met him and his girlfriend at a party.” Dad’s expression changed, but I can’t discern what it means. It’s almost blank.

“Brooklyn, we played Erik’s team last night.”

I don’t even look at the hockey schedule, and the mention of Erik’s name sends a creepy feeling up my spine. “He doesn’t know—does he?”

“No. I was hesitant to keep Caleb’s dad a secret, but Erik proved last night that he’s an asshole.”

Caleb mimics him, “Asshole.”

If you only knew, baby boy.

Dad and I can’t contain our laughter, so Caleb says it repeatedly. When I catch my breath, I look into his eyes. “That’s a grownup word. You can’t say that word.”

“Okay, Mommy.”

“He put an illegal hit on our center, and the refs ignored it. Luckily, there’s a new guy on our team who needs to take out his aggression on the ice, and he’s willing to stand up for his teammates. It got a little out of hand, and he’s banged up. But at least Erik was taught a lesson.”

My mind races as I chew my food. The mention of Erik’s name has me spiraling. What if he found out about Caleb and took him from me? His family has enough money and connections to bury me in legal fees and my

dad too. I struggled with whether to tell him or not but eventually decided that it was for the best. He couldn't be faithful to me for five minutes. And when I caught him and my sorority sister in his bed, he was angry with me like it was my fault.

But what happened next was where I drew the line.

"Dad, will you play his team here? At home?" My voice sounds like sandpaper, suddenly dry.

He places his napkin on his plate and leans back in his chair. "Yes. I told the athletic department that we didn't want the home game. His team offered the university two million dollars to play home and away. I don't know why."

I move my peas in circles on my plate. "Maybe because you were the best college coach in the country. You recruited him and promised him you would get him to the NHL, then you left him, because of me. His family probably personally paid the university, thinking they would kill the Stallions."

"Baby girl, none of this is your fault. I decided we needed to move." He reaches for my hand and covers it with his. "If playing them was in my control, I would have stopped it, but the administration said the hockey team needed the funds. But you will always come first. I may have missed birthdays and figure skating competitions, but no one loves you more than me."

"I know, Dad."

"Why didn't you listen when I said no hockey players?"

"I don't know. I'm learning when you tell a kid not to do something, they do the opposite. And then there was this pretty boy, a jock paying attention to me... I just believed him."

Dad stuffs his mouth. He chews and chews some more before out of the blue, he says,

"I think it would be best to stay away from your new friends."

"Who? Logan and Harper?" Why did discussing Erik Bratt turn into talking about the campus "It" couple? "I didn't say we were friends, but I met them,

and they asked me to come to the Evy Brown Cheer-Off in a few weeks. Maybe the hockey team should do a cheer skit for charity.”

“No.” He pushes back from the table and walks into the kitchen, visibly bothered by two of the nicest people I’ve ever met. I unstrap Caleb from the highchair, clean him off, and set him down. “Go play with your dinosaurs.”

“Dad? Did I do or say something to upset you?”

“No, baby. I’m just worried about my player. He’s a loose cannon, and I’m having second thoughts about having him work Erik over. He’s been known as the bad boy in the hockey universe. You know the type. *He’ll hurt you before you can hurt him*, but I think it may be his way of protecting himself.”

“Maybe you should apologize.”

He throws the dish towel over his shoulder. “Yeah, maybe. He’s been through so much, and I hope this doesn’t bring back all those memories.”

“He’s a hockey player; I’m sure you’re overthinking it.”

Chapter Eleven

REED

Lying on the couch with an ice pack on my face, Roscoe, Harper's emotional support Aussiedoodle, sits by me with unwavering focus. I never truly believed in emotional support animals, thinking it was a way to take your animals on to planes or to the grocery store. But Roscoe feels changes in your heartbeat, your temperature, and senses when something is different. And it's obvious I'm fucked up, so he stares at me, waiting for a command.

"Go away. Roscoe, go."

He sits there without barking. His brown eyes bore into me like he can hear my thoughts churning. The quiet from no one being home is deafening. I haven't had a chance to look at the whiteboard but I'm assuming everyone is in class except for Logan who is probably training.

Hagan comes in from class. "Still hurting?"

"Yeah, can you tell Roscoe to leave me alone?"

Hagan laughs. "You know he only listens to Logan or Harper's commands. I think they trained him to make the rest of us suffer." He pauses and says, "I take that back. Roscoe is the second best thing to happen to Hap other than Logan."

He calls his twin sister Hap instead of Harper. I look up from the ice and then move it to my other jaw. “Yeah.”

“Have you rescheduled with Brooke?”

“No, that’s over.”

He sits in the bean bag across from me. “Oh, that’s too bad. Harper invited her to the Evy Brown Cheer-Off in a few weeks.”

“What? Why?”

“Harper likes her. We all like her.”

Swinging my feet from the couch to the floor, I snap, “Then you go out with her.”

Immediately, Roscoe lays his paws on my legs. I’ve seen him do it to Harper dozens of times when she’s getting anxious.

Hagan chuckles. “See, even Roscoe knows this girl has your hackles up.”

“When did you become a Southerner? Feathers, hackles, cackles... whatever.”

“Adalee is from Alabama and uses words that I have no clue what they mean,” he says, shaking his head. “Well, if it doesn’t have anything to do with Brooke, it must be about the fight you got yourself into.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.” I go to the kitchen and grab a new ice pack. I feel Hagan’s eyes following me as I climb the steps to my room.

The first thing I do is shut my blinds and pull the dark-gray drapes closed. My head hurts for the third straight day, but I don’t dare tell Coach or the training staff. It’s not a concussion; there hasn’t been a time since it happened that I wasn’t absolutely sure of my name, whereabouts, the year, and all of the other things they ask to indicate a concussion.

After napping, I grab *The Outsiders* from my backpack, turn on my bedside lamp, and get lost in the characters’ problems instead of my own. But I end up realizing that my life is worse than Pony Boy’s. I don’t have older brothers to try to protect me. My parents didn’t die—they either didn’t want

me or they didn't choose me.

Instead of annotating the chapter, I write my biological father a letter in the notes of my phone and maybe one day, I'll get the nerve to handwrite it and send it to him. Then I do the same to my biological mom. Neither of them wanted me, but at least my bio dad didn't pretend to.

My alarm goes off, letting me know it's time to eat and head to practice. The smell of fresh baked bread wafts through the house. Inwardly, I laugh because Harper must be making popovers. It's the one thing she's learned how to cook perfectly.

"Hey, smells good. Are there enough for me?"

"It's just me and you. Logan is having dinner with the coach and offensive coordinator of the Bengals tonight in Cincinnati." She points to the whiteboard. "I made some chicken pot pies to go with the bread."

I bend down and say to her belly, "You better be glad your mom has another year before you have to rely on her to cook for you." She swipes me with the kitchen towel. "You and Logan are going to have to eat better when you start breastfeeding."

"I know. He's already prepared me. He promises we won't be like Hagan and Adalee, but I can't make popovers every night."

She throws me one, and it's piping hot, so I alternate it from hand to hand until it cools off, then tear a piece off. It's flaky on the outside, moist and dense on the inside. Add a pat of butter and damn, biscuits or rolls don't compare.

"So, Hagan tells me you've called it off with Brooke."

"It was never like that. We simply studied together... nothing more. It's not about Brooke. I'm angry at myself for losing control during hockey. It's the one place where I find solace, and now, my initial thought is that I'm a monster, incapable of managing my own impulses."

"Lie to yourself all you want, Reed Bauer, but you can't lie to me. Brooke and this incident are intertwined. You think she deserves someone better than you, and that's simply false. You're a good guy, but she won't believe it until

you do.”

“Brooke wants to tango with a bad boy, not date one.” Digging into my chicken pot pie, I scrape the crust from the edges. I love the crispy parts. We eat in silence before I kiss her cheek. “I’ll be back after practice.”

“Not going out tonight?”

“Not tonight. I have to read.”

She laughs. “That’s a sentence I never thought I would hear. I have to study for bio chem too. I’ll make some snickerdoodle cookies.”

“Yeah, sounds good.” I grab my bag from the front door and head to practice. Shaking my head, I think about whether I should stay an extra half hour to work off the extra calories Harper will make me consume. Or maybe I should call Brooke and see if she wants to *workout*.

Practice goes as expected. I’m getting yelled at by my teammates for not being aggressive. If they knew how much my head hurt and how many Advil I’ve popped, they would understand. Coach hasn’t said a word to me, and that scares the hell out of me. He thinks I’m a monster too.

On the way home, I make a detour. I knock on Brooke’s apartment door. Her roommate answers. “Well, hello.”

“Is Brooke home?”

“Brooke? Umm, no. And who should I tell her stopped by.”

“Reed. We’ve been studying together, and I was going to head to the library. Thought she might want to go.”

She slips her phone from her pocket, types out a message to someone, then says, “She said to call her.”

“Okay.” I walk down the sidewalk and call Brooke.

“Hey, can you meet me at the library? Wait. No, it’s cold. I can pick you up.”

“That would be great, but I only have an hour.”

After receiving her location, I rush back to my car, which has already cooled

down during the mere five minutes I was away. I activate the heated seats and contemplate the possibility of studying in the car instead of the library. Thoughts of her slender figure straddling me flood my mind. Damn it. Earlier today, I assured my roommates that there was nothing going on between Brooke and me, yet here I am, surreptitiously following her. Why am I even here when I know, deep down, that I'll ultimately face rejection?

When I enter the building, I shake off my insecurities and see the door sign engraved with Stallion Daycare Center. The entrance is a wooden door into the lobby, but when I follow the voices, I turn to see glass doors. Brooke is a vision in a black leotard, pink tights, and a little see-through black skirt that covers the crescents of her ass.

Delicate. Feminine. Sexy.

Those three words pop into my head when Brooke does some sort of turn, extending her leg and pointing her toe.

Of course, her hair is up in a tight bun. My mind drifts to imaginary images of her hair hanging over her shoulders while she's riding me and peering into my eyes.

Watching Brooke teach ballet to little kids confirms she's out of my league. One curly brown-haired beauty makes big gestures. Brooke gets on her knees behind her, taking her arms and putting them in the right place. The smile widens on her face as they look into the mirror, and a smile tugs at the corners of my mouth as well.

Soon, the parents are bundling up their babies, and Brooke is alone. "You've been keeping secrets, Cookie," I say, leaning against the doorframe, looking at her reflection.

She doesn't look directly at me either, choosing to respond to the image.

"What fun would it be to tell our life story all at once?" she asks with a soft lilt to her voice.

I can't help but walk towards her, like there's a string connecting us, and I'm being reeled in.

"True."

“It’s more interesting to find little nuggets of information along the way.”

She’s speaking the truth, but I don’t have to worry. Brooke will have her fill of this bad boy way before I need to share my secrets and pain.

“How long have you been doing ballet?”

“From age four to sixteen.”

“Why did you quit?”

The edges of her lips shrug with her shoulders “Didn’t need it anymore. I was a figure skater and took ballet to develop my graceful side.”

“Did you compete?”

She nods.

“At what level?” I ask, realizing that we have ice skating in common. A fact I’m not ready to reveal.

A smile doubles as it spreads across her face. “I was the U.S. Junior Champion.”

“What? Wow. That’s incredible. It explains why you’re so responsible and prepared at all times. So, when did you start teaching ballet?”

“They asked me last week. It’s not rocket science, just something fun for the kids to do after hours when their parents are still working.”

My hands slide into hers as I walk her back into the mirror. Her waist hits the bar they use to stretch, and she takes a deep breath. “I need to kiss you.”

Her cheeks pinken, and she whispers, “Then kiss me.”

Brooke is the opposite of every girl I’ve ever liked or had sex with. She’s quieter than most, yet honest. She’s unashamed that she wants me but at the same time, she’s bashful. Like she’s afraid to say it too loud, or it will change my mind. Nothing could change the way I’m drawn to this girl.

Our eyes lock, suspended in time, before mine fall to her freckles, and then to her lips. Her chest rises, touching mine. The leotard material clings to her skin, and my hands caress the slight curve of her waist. She unzips my jacket,

and her fingers climb my chest.

Her lips quiver as I get so close to them, I can smell her peppermint lip balm. In this moment, I take her lips in mine—hard and demanding. Her mouth parts, and I chase her tongue. God, how would her tongue feel sliding up my shaft, swirling around the tip?

Grabbing her ass, I lift her onto the wooden bar.

She breaks the kiss with her eyes still closed, then her fingers trail over my neck. Brooke hesitates before her lips slide down my neck. Her tongue peeks out, tasting me before she sucks gently below my ear. “Fuck,” I grunt. “You’re going to break me.”

It feels so good, someone taking their time with me. She moves around until she finds a spot that leaves me shivering. A soft giggle escapes her mouth, and the muscle making my blood flow stops. There’s no air to breathe; she consumes every particle.

I pull back. Why does she unthaw every frozen piece of my heart?

“I need to study.”

“Oh, right.” She slides off the bar and feels my erection as I hold the indentation above her hips until her feet hit the floor.

She walks over to the desk in the corner and sits, rendered speechless. I have no explanation for why I interrupted her. As Brooke uncrosses the pink satin ribbon delicately wrapped around her ankles, I witness a moment of sheer beauty.

“It’s late. Now that we... we wasted time, I can’t.”

“Wasted?” I bite my lip. Maybe this is the best. Clean break. “That’s not how I would classify that kiss.”

Her head hangs between her knees while she laces her tennis shoes. “Listen, I’m not used to attention from guys. Especially smooth ones who can guess what’s in a woman’s purse and can light their bodies on fire with a simple smoldering grin. I’m sorry if I don’t know what I’m doing or how to make you feel good.” Her voice fades into silence.

I'm not sure how much I should trust her with. Admitting I want to spend more time with her and getting rejected will destroy me. The ground shakes beneath my feet. My emotions are all over the place, and I need to get a handle on them before I ruin everything.

"You're doing everything right. That's why I stopped because I was ready to rip off that leotard, shove you against the mirror, and watch your fingers try to grasp the glass while I memorized your expressions each time I drove inside you. But that's not the kind of man you deserve."

She raises her chin, and once again, her blue-green eyes collide with mine. Her voice strains to push her words out. "You don't know me well enough to know what I deserve."

"Cookie, it was a compliment."

"Thank you, I guess. If you still want to study, call me at ten. If you don't, that's fine too." She lifts to her feet, slipping her arms through her pink puffy jacket. She snaps it closed and says, "And quit calling me Cookie."

So, it's fine if she never speaks to me again? Screw that. What just happened? I was being a gentleman. Some guys aren't meant to be gentlemen, and I must be one of them.

Chapter Twelve

BROOKE

Nothing works out for me. I don't usually succumb to the woe is me attitude but after Reed rejected me, I was humiliated. In the days since, I've eaten two boxes of Apple Jacks without Caleb's help.

Dating Reed isn't an option anyway. Inwardly, I mock myself for wanting to have a normal relationship with him when I know it could never be anything more than a sexual experience. No getting to know each other because I can't introduce someone into Caleb's life unless I believe the relationship has legs.

I've worked from sun up until way past sundown—the café, then classes, teacher conference, teaching ballet, and then back to the café. Two people called in, and I couldn't say no to overtime pay. I refuse to take money from my dad, wanting to make it on my own. It took a while for us to get back in a good space after he found out I was pregnant with one of his players donating the sperm.

It appeared that Dad was disappointed, or at least that was my impression. However, now I realize that parents desire for their children's lives to be perfect. I no longer harbor any resentment towards him of being gone all the time, which I thought was why my mother left.

It's nearing midnight when I walk into my dad's house to pick Caleb up, only to find a note and a Stallions hockey sweater laying on the kitchen table.

Exhaling a boatload of air, I read the note.

Sweetie,

Had to leave for the midnight game. Caleb is with me.

Wear this sweater and make your dad happy. One game, that's all I ask.

Love,

Dad

Frustration consumes me as I snatch the hockey sweater and run to the bathroom. Why didn't he tell me he had a hockey game tonight? I wouldn't have picked up the late-night shift at the café.

Doesn't he understand I can't be around hockey players? They're the cockiest group of men on every level. Even in elementary school, they walked around school like they were better than everyone else. Newsflash. Not.

But they are my weakness.

Thank God Reed isn't a hockey player.

One reason we moved here was because hockey is not king. Dad was trying to protect Caleb and me. Hockey in Kentucky is like the fourth prince in the royal family—never going to be king—or get anywhere near the throne. But since my dad took over, the hockey team has improved, and this year, they're undefeated.

I wash my face and take my hair out of the ponytail to brush it, having not been touched since this morning. There are three large creases running horizontally, so I put it back up and wrap a strip of hair around the ponytail, so you can't see the yellow elastic band. Smoothing concealer on my face and a few strokes of mascara to hide my tired eyes. It's all I have in my purse. It makes me think of Reed. All the things I have in my luggage and other than makeup, none of it is what a normal college student would have. No boogie wipes or children's pain medicine.

Throwing the jersey onto my body, I head to the arena, my stomach churning with nervous energy. I know I'm not going to see Erik because Dad would have warned me.

I show my student identification, which gets me into the game for free. When a security guard comes in sight, I pull the coach's daughter routine and ask where the locker room and his office are.

"They're already on the ice, so I can't let you in," he responds. It reminds me that he doesn't know me. My dad doesn't share that he has a daughter, although his players could find out. I asked him to not display any photos of Caleb or me. I don't want any hockey players knowing I'm his daughter.

As I peek into the rink, I look at the bench, and Dad stands by himself. Where is Caleb? He better not be asleep in the locker room by himself. I walk further up the steps, scanning the crowd, which is half full. I'm not sure if that's more or less than usual. Finally, about ten rows up, I see a woman, not much older than me, holding Caleb in her lap.

"Mommy, Mommy," Caleb shouts when he sees me. The music is blaring like it has at every hockey game I've ever been to. I prefer the soft music of figure skating to the pump-you-up, almost violent songs they play before a hockey game. How can they be one with the ice listening to this?

"Hi, I'm Kandy. You must be Brooklyn."

I nod, pondering who my father entrusted with the care of my son. And how many people actually know he has a daughter and grandson?

Caleb gives me a kiss and wiggles his way between us.

"I'm sorry Coach pawned him off on you. How do you know my... coach?"

She pushes her glasses up to the bridge of her nose. "I'm working on my PhD in kinesiology, so I'm hanging out with the hockey team." Her voice is soft and unassuming.

"Oh, wow. That's impressive." She shrugs her shoulders. "How long have you been working with them?"

"A couple of months."

"Thanks for watching Caleb until I got here."

"He's a sweetie and knows a tremendous amount about dinosaurs." She chuckles to herself.

“Obsessed doesn’t begin to describe his dinosaur fascination.”

I peer over at my dad standing in the coach’s box, talking to his assistant. His arms are folded over his chest and occasionally, he makes hand gestures towards the players.

Warmups are over, and I have to admit, I’ve missed this. The smell of the arena. The crisp air inside. Watching the players do their groin stretches. And instantly, my mind wanders to Reed. What would it be like to be underneath him as he pumped into me?

The game begins, and the other team wins the face off. The crowd yells when one of our defensive men steals the puck and passes it to our left wing.

It’s back and forth for the first period but still tied at zero. Caleb needs snacks to stay awake, so the three of us go down to concessions for popcorn and candy.

By the time we return, Dad shuffles in a different line. They’re fresh and hopped up on energy. You can see it in the bounce of their skates.

I realize this is the first time in my life that I’ve been to a hockey game where the only person I know is my dad. My life used to be spent with his players. When I was a pre-teen with braces, his college players would play goalie, and I would try to score. When I was fully developed at sixteen, the players flirted with me, especially when I was in my figure skating clothing, similar to the way Reed reacted to me in my leotard.

And in college, I was finally old enough to date his players, but wow, did I pick the wrong one.

The Stallions winger grabs my attention. He skates flawlessly like he’s one with his blades. His finesse reminds me of a figure skater but with immense power. He’s the same player that made my breath catch when he was stretching out his groin. Everything he does looks intentional. And when his line is taken out, I find myself staring at him.

Hockey is a fast-paced game, and lines come in and out all the time, but the game seems to drag without him. Finally, my dad puts in *his* line again and when they switch out, the mysterious left winger skates in a big circle to the side where I’m sitting before looking up in the stands.

His gaze seems to be on me, but why? I glance over each shoulder, seeing if he has a puck bunny blowing him kisses. But only middle-aged people are sitting behind me. Possibly his parents.

He gets into the action and after four minutes, the right winger passes to the center. He passes it back, then there is a flurry of activity as the opposing team wrestles the puck away but loses control, and our left winger executes a no-look pass to the center. The center drives in, shoots, and the puck bounces off the metal bar. Out of nowhere, number nine slides the puck around the back of the goal and flicks the puck into the back of the net. The buzzer sounds, and the crowd erupts.

Caleb jumps up and down with the rest of us, thoroughly awake from the candy and the energy zooming through the arena.

The Stallions gather around him, offering pats on the helmet and words of congratulations. As the game resumes, one of the opposing team's defensive players trips him with their stick.

With "Bauer" emblazoned across his broad shoulders, he rises slowly before charging towards his opponent, engaging in a fierce conflict. The atmosphere is electric and when Bauer's helmet is knocked off, my heart stops.

That is Reed. My Reed. The Reed whose lips controlled and enveloped me. Reed plays hockey. For my dad. My luck never changes.

Punches are thrown, and both players sit in the penalty box for the rest of the game. He shakes his head, and his eyes lock onto mine from across the rink. It's intense. He must think I knew he was a hockey player and assumes I'm here to watch him play. Reed looks ten shades beyond angry. Like I'm stalking him or that I lied to him.

I don't realize that Kandy has Caleb on her hip.

When the game is over, he goes straight into the tunnel. He doesn't shake hands with the other team or the referees.

Quickly, I collect Caleb in my arms and make a mad dash to my car. I need to get Caleb in bed and away from hockey.

Chapter Thirteen

REED

Who's fucking sweater was she wearing? I didn't talk to a single teammate after the game.

And all Coach said to me, "Mentally, you're letting them beat you." My head dropped into my chest. He slapped my bare shoulder and continued, "But we won because of you."

It's three in the morning. Students love these midnight games because it's a party, but it's the one part of Stallions hockey that I'm not in love with. My roommates can't come because Harper is in med school and pregnant. Logan is training for the NFL and wants to be home with Harper in case something happens. Hagan's in South Carolina for a three-game away series.

It's Friday night, or Saturday morning, and the hockey complex will be hopping but instead of going there, I head home, wanting to forget this night ever happened. Better yet, erase the memory of kissing Brooke, tasting her, or knowing how her lips quiver during an orgasm.

Sinking into the couch, I can't comprehend Brooke wearing one of my teammate's jerseys. My puck bunny radar must be off.

After kissing her in the ballet studio, I got scared. Frightened of the feelings I was having for the ballet-loving, hair-in-a-bun Brooke. Women make it hard to understand them. I thought a responsible girl like Brooke would want to

take it slow, but I guess that's why I've never had a girlfriend, one that truly cared about me anyway.

Heavy footsteps come from the kitchen. "Hey. Heard you won," Logan says.

"Yep."

"Why aren't you at the complex with your team?"

"Why aren't you upstairs, cuddling Harper?" As soon as it slides off my tongue, I realize how snide it sounds. Expelling a huge breath, I say, "Sorry."

I don't lift my head, but he ignores my harsh words and tone. "Harper's having some reflux, and it scared her. Roscoe is keeping her company while I grab a ginger ale."

He hangs out for a minute more, but he stops under the archway. "Do you want to come up and talk with Harper?"

Logan has gotten used to my relationship with Harper, but I can still hear a twinge of uncertainty in his voice. He knows Harper loves him, but he's still skeptical about where I fit in.

He takes a step, but I blurt out, "Wait. She doesn't need me getting her riled up. And I don't need her advice right now."

He glances over his shoulder. "Let me take this up to my girl, and I'll be back down once she's settled."

I nod. Hopefully, I'll be asleep by the time he returns.

It sounds like a stampede as Logan runs back down the stairs and sits in the chair next to me. "You won. You hit the game winning goal. You fought. Sounds like par for the course, so why are you brooding?"

Lifting my head, my hands tent my nose as I sigh. "Brooke was there wearing a one of my teammates' jerseys."

"Are you a couple because..." He runs his hand through his shaggy blond hair. "Hagan and Harper say you're not."

"No. And she didn't know until tonight that I was on the hockey team. I never even told her my last name."

“So, who was she there to see?”

“Don’t know. I waited until everyone left because if I saw who she was with, I would be in jail, and you know that’s not something I can afford.”

Logan blows out a deep breath. “Hmm... I didn’t take her for a puck bunny.”

“Me either.”

“But wouldn’t you know if someone had a new girl? Even as big as the football team is, who’s dating who spreads like wildfire.”

I just shake my head.

“Why don’t you go to the café on Sunday. Maybe she’ll be working, and you can ask her. You’re welcome to Sunday brunch, but we’re having it at my sister’s house. I know you have practice in the morning, but of course, our families would love to see you.”

“Thanks, but brunch is a big no. I have her number, so maybe I’ll text her and feel her out.”

He leans forward, placing his elbows on his knees. “Reed, I’m in my first and only relationship, so take my advice with a grain of salt.” He pauses, rubbing his hands together. “Unless something major happened, she’s totally into you. She blushes when you look at her. But texting can be misconstrued, and it’s not a replacement for looking her in the eye and letting her know how much you care about her.”

“Fuck, it is way too late or too early for this conversation. I’m going to try to get some shuteye.” I stand and grab his hand, pulling him out of the chair, and we turn off the lights.

As he opens the door to their room, I hear him asking Harper if she’s feeling better, but she is more concerned about me. “Is everything okay with Reed?”

At least someone cares about me. Who knew the girl I spread rumors about as teenagers would become my rock and best friend.

Saturday comes and as far as hockey goes, I have a day off. Not really, I was playing until nearly three a.m.

The guys and I go to McShane's to watch the baseball team and NHL games. Some girls meet Dawes and Flynn here. Without raising suspicion, I ask my teammates if anyone is dating someone new. All have the same answer, "No." Most of the guys hook up but aren't willing to give someone their jersey.

If you give a girl your jersey, it means something.

Hands. Fucking. Off.

Hockey players are primal beings. In hockey, there are firm rules about where you can be on the ice and when, or you're offside. If you make a play for a teammate's girl, it's the same way offside, and I may not be able to comply.

A girl wearing a tank top in the middle of winter yanks on my shirt. "Hey, great game last night," the raven-haired girl says as she scrapes her nails over my arm.

"Thanks." I turn my attention to the big screen, Hagan's up to bat and hits the pitcher's fast ball to left field and makes it safely to second base.

"My apartment isn't far. Do you want to party?" She's a persistent little crow.

"Nah. I'm beat. Plus, I'm off the market."

Flynn and Dawes snap in my direction. They don't say anything, but they know I'm lying.

"Oh, well, if you change your mind, your goalie has my number."

As she sways her hips and walks away, I mumble, "Right, because I love being where my teammates have been."

The puck bunnies with Flynn and Dawes lift their eyebrows. Yes. I'm talking about them too.

"Have fun, boys. I'm out of here." I'm in a state of I don't give a shit about this life anymore.

Amidst a few protests, I walk down the street to my parked car. It's early

evening and when I pass a bar that's known for its country music and dancing, I decide to go inside. Not my style, but maybe I need to shake things up. Get outside of the puck bunny circle. And quit thinking about Brooke.

I'm not that out of place; I only see one cowboy hat. Most of the guys are in jeans and a shirt similar to mine. After ordering a beer, I lean against a pole. No one here recognizes me. At my boarding school, everyone knew me. At my other college, I was a hockey god until I was kicked out. Here, unless I'm hanging with the team or wearing team garb, I'm just another person.

The dance floor is shoulder to shoulder, and I catch a glimpse of the girl I think is Brooke's roommate. She's dancing with Dane, the basketball player.

They part ways, and she brushes past me, but I tug on her shirt. "Is Brooke with you?"

Her eyes are glassy. "Brooke? No, she had her one night out. No two. She went to the hockey game last night."

"Do you know where I can find her?"

"Home." She spins and jumps into another guy's arms. "You came."

Dane stands behind her, and he's fuming. It's the same look I gave Brooke at the hockey game when she was wearing another man's jersey. If he could deck her friend, he would. Maybe I should help him out, and then we could be friends. Unfortunately, I can't be hitting people outside of the arena.

My phone buzzes, and I slip it from my pocket. It's Brooke, and I don't know whether to be pissed that she's texting me when she has a boyfriend or happy because maybe it's not serious. Maybe she has a brother on the team. Nope. That would have come up in conversation.

Brooke: *Are you awake? I didn't intend for you to find out like that.*

Me: *Yep. Whatever. At a bar. I saw your friend.*

Inside my blood boils. I'm still in shock that she's dating one of my teammates.

Brooke: *Who? Lettie?*

Me: *The one who hangs out with basketball team.*

Brooke: *Do you want to study tomorrow?*

Should I say yes? Or no? I need to find out what kind of games she's playing and who she's sleeping with on the team?

Me: *I'll be at the café after practice.*

Brooke: *But do you want to study?*

Me: *Depends.*

Chapter Fourteen

BROOKE

If I wasn't nervous before, I was as soon as Reed answered my message. Judging by his texting demeanor, he knows about Caleb and is upset that I didn't tell him I had a son. When he looked into the stands and saw the little boy with me, I could see the disappointment fury in his body language.

Suck it up, Brooke. You had no reason to tell him. So, what if he gave you a few orgasms? And if you helped him study? Who meets someone then lists their autobiography? I flip flop between believing I should have told him and thinking we weren't at that point. Hell, I didn't even know his last name until the hockey game.

Since I needed to be here at six in the morning, Caleb comes to the café with me and sits at the counter eating French toast until the daycare center opens at seven.

Caleb gives Bonnie and Chuck a hug when it's time to leave for daycare. Everyone loves my child. He's funny and mesmerized by anything with syrup.

The morning passes slowly. It's been five days since Reed and I kissed at the studio, and he consequently rejected me. I wipe the tables down for the third time before he strolls into the café. Damn him for being so ruggedly handsome. His hands are buried deep in the pockets of his black Spyder

jacket. He looks left, then right, and our eyes connect.

I give him a thin-lipped smile and motion for him to sit. He takes heavy, hesitant strides and then stops in front of me.

“Hey,” I say.

“I’m not here for small talk. How could you do that to me?” His voice sounds scratchy like he’s sick. His nostrils flare, and I feel sick.

Is he serious? Under my breath, I say, “I’m allowed to come to a hockey game. Besides, you humiliated me... rejected me.”

He turns, running his fingers through his hair. It dawns on me that he came here straight from practice. His hair is still damp, and the cold air doesn’t help dry his thick mane. Why I never put two and two together is beyond me. He has the body of a hockey player, certainly has the confidence of one, and he came in here after Sunday morning practice with his hair damp the day after the bonfire.

“This is a prime example of how men and women process the same situation differently.” He lowers his voice. “I told you that I would have taken you right there if I didn’t stop. That wasn’t rejection... that was me taking it slow. I thought you were different. In a million years, I never took you for a puck bunny. But I had it all wrong, didn’t I?”

My eyebrows surge up on my forehead, blindsided by his accusation. “Excuse me. Did you just call me a puck bunny?” My voice is so taut, it feels like a harp string that’s been strung too tight and might pop at any moment. A burn in my gut tells me I misjudged Reed Bauer, so *sayonara*.

Our chests rise and fall at record speed. I close my eyes and realize I don’t even know what all this has to do with my three-year-old son. Reaching for his hands, he lets me hold them for a second before jerking them away.

“Are you on break so we can deal with this?” he asks.

Nodding, I go to the table in the back corner and slide into the booth.

“I can explain. I wanted to tell you,” I admit.

This time, his eyes widen, and his jaw clenches. He places his hands on the

table and interlaces them. “Two weeks ago, you were kissing me, wanting more. Asking me to get you off, and you have the nerve to be mad at me for wanting to take things slow, and you... you...”

Here it comes. You have a kid that you didn’t tell me about. I open my mouth, but before I can speak, he vomits his words all over me. All my insecurities are back in full force. Before he made me feel powerful, sexy, and wanted. Now, I know he reserves that side for women without kids.

“You show up at *my* fucking hockey game wearing one of my teammate’s jerseys. What the fuck?”

What the fuck is right? What’s he talking about?

While trying to process the incoming information, it finally occurs to me why he’s angry. He walked away from me the other night. I just wanted him to continue touching and kissing me. Is that so wrong?

Maybe he doesn’t know anything about Caleb.

When I don’t say anything, he says, “I thought we had something to build on, but you were already sleeping with one of my teammates.”

I scoff. Then it becomes a chuckle until I’m laughing so hard, I’m crying.

He grits his teeth. “Is it funny you made me feel like a fool?”

“Of course not, but you’re going to feel like an even bigger asshole than you already are when I tell you whose jersey I was wearing.”

He leans back against the tufted vinyl, and one hand skims over his jaw. “Is that right?”

Shaking my head, I grab a napkin from the box and fold it into a square. Suddenly, I feel self-conscious and realize it’s another secret and more than likely a deal breaker for both of us.

“Don’t be shy now. You have my undivided attention.” He takes off his jacket and pushes his sleeves up to his elbows, revealing intricate sleeves of art.

“I was wearing Coach Sweet’s jersey.”

He grits his teeth, and his nostrils flare. “Fuck. I’m out of here. You’re sleeping with a forty-year-old man.” He rises from the booth, and I wind my hand around his wrist and tug him back down.

“Forty-six.”

Thousands of daggers shoot from his eyes, wishing me dead and thoroughly disgusted with me, and as upset as I am, I realize I shouldn’t keep him hanging.

“Coach Sweet is my father.”

Fear flashes in his eyes like Luke Skywalker’s when Darth Vader breathed heavily through his mask and said, “I am your father.” His breathing deepens, and his eyes search mine. For truth or lies, I don’t know.

Reed’s mouth twists to one side, chewing on the unexpected information. “I don’t know what to say.”

He covers my hand with his, and I slip it from his touch, placing my hands in my lap. “Maybe an apology,” I say, almost inaudible.

“Wait. I saw your I.D., and your last name isn’t Sweet.” He pulls his hand over his face, scratching the scruff he hasn’t shaved off.

“You’re like all the rest of them, and now that I know you’re a hockey player, you should know—I have a rule about dating hockey players—I don’t.” Standing, I pull out my order pad and scribble on the paper, then throw it down on the table.

I’m done.

Chapter Fifteen

REED

Dulce is another word for sweet. Brooke Dulce. Brooke Sweet. I focus on the rectangular piece of paper for several minutes. Why does she have a different last name? And why am I obsessing over this? Lots of people have different last names than their parents. Hell, I do. I carry my mom's maiden name.

When my mom married my stepfather, my name didn't change. I should have known by the time I was a teenager that it was because he never wanted me, but Mom and I came as a package deal. He sent me to boarding school when I was old enough. Of course, it was under the pretense that it was the best preparatory academy in the Midwest and a hockey team that turned out NHL players in record numbers.

Finally, I have gathered my thoughts and walk to the counter. I catch a glimpse of Brooke through the kitchen door. One of her co-workers has his arm around her. It's an older man, probably of retirement age. She sees me and turns her back to me.

I need time to figure out my next move or if there is going to be a next move, so I file out the exit behind three giggling girls. One trips over her untied shoe, and I help her up.

"Hangover breakfast?" I ask.

The girls snicker and nod. Then one with the pretty auburn hair says, “You’re Reed Bauer.”

“I am.” A smile tugs at my mouth. It feels good to be recognized.

“Oh my God. You’re amazing. I used to watch you at Bennington Prep. You were two grades ahead of me. What happened? You left, and no one heard of you until you started playing for Broadhurst U.”

My smile slips. “Just working on my game.”

“I bet you were.” She trails her fingers down my bare arm, and there’s not one flicker of interest from my dick or my mind. “I live in Kirwan Dorm. 313.”

Glancing over my shoulder, Brooke has her arms folded over her waist.

Fuck it. I’m going to brunch.

The drive to Versailles, where Logan’s sister and her family live, is about twenty minutes away. I try not to think about Brooke, but no matter what song is playing, it reminds me of her. She’s my coach’s daughter. The universe is against me. The one person I’ve ever been interested in as more than a friend, or a hookup is my coach’s daughter.

If he ever finds out what I did to his daughter, in public no less, he has the power to make sure I don’t play another minute. And what do I have without hockey?

Nothing. The answer is nothing.

As mad as I was when I saw Brooke in the stands wearing a hockey sweater from one of my teammates, this is worse. Worse that she was wearing a Stallions jersey with her dad’s name on the back. There’s no going back to her.

I make a U-turn on the busy highway. I’m not going to brunch; I’m going to the arena. After I stop by the house and grab my gear, I’m on the ice with a bucket of pucks within a half hour.

The rink serves as my sanctuary, even in my darkest days, I’ve always felt my true home is on the

ice. This is my second or third chance at finally getting it right, and I can't blow it no matter how I feel about his daughter.

First, I skate the perimeter to get focused. I place the cones out in a zigzag pattern, slashing through them. I place the bucket beside on the right hand side and start with wrist shots into the goal. Moving to the center, I hit slapshot after slapshot with the last two hitting the cross bar, and I can't contain my anger at myself—at her—at the situation, so I scream obscenities so loud, my body vibrates.

“Bauer.”

Coach's voice calms me down. He skates to the goal, scooping the pucks and placing them into a bucket. He reaches over the board and places it on the bench. He leans his back side against the boards, tapping his stick against his chest.

“You wanna tell me why you're back.”

Biting my tongue, I say, “Can't be the best unless I practice to be the best.”

“Okay, true, but you need to rest your body after the amount of energy you used at practice this morning, not to mention at the game less than thirty-six hours ago.”

I skate across the center line.

“Bauer, we can either talk here or in my office. I took a chance on you, and you're on thin ice that could shatter at any moment. What you've been through is awful and...”

I cut him off by breaking my stick over my knee. “Don't pretend to know what I've been through. You couldn't possibly understand how hard it is to function every day knowing what I did.” I didn't put my pads or helmet on, so I don't have anything left to throw or snap.

Coach Sweet slowly skates to me. It's probably a good idea not to charge a bull. He opens his hands and folds them over my shoulder, forcing me to look at him. “You're right. One thing I know is you're one of the most talented players I've coached or watched for that matter. You can talk to me.”

No, I can't. He'll kick me off the team if finds out about Brooke. "Coach, sometimes I feel like I'm worthless. No matter how hard I try to make a new life, it never works out." I shake my head and pop my gloves off. "Hockey is all I have. No mom or dad. No siblings."

"Bauer, you have a father, and it's your choice if you want to contact him. He helped you once."

I throw my head back and burst into maniacal laughter. "Yeah, he supposedly convinced them to let me play hockey while I was in juvie. But did he ever call? No. Did he bother to care when my mom chose my stepdad? No. Did he ever reveal his identity to me? No."

My vision blurs as tears threaten to fall. I pinch them and shake off the emptiness inside. I look at my coach and see his eyes are similar to Brooke's, but her freckles must be passed from her mom.

He pulls me into an awkward embrace. Hockey players only hug during celebrations, but I relax as he rubs my back for a second before pulling away.

"I know him."

"Who?"

"You're biological father."

My mouth hangs open. "No one knows who he is. My mom never told me, and there was a lawyer who negotiated for him anonymously with the court to allow me to play hockey."

"Come on. There's something I want to show you."

We walk into his non-descript office, and he grabs a wallet from the metal desk drawer. He fingers through a pocket, dislodges a photo, and hands it to me.

It's an old photo of Coach and a friend when they're close to my current age. After staring for what seems to be hours, I look at Coach. "Who is this?"

"Eldrick Cross."

"My dad is..."

He nods as I watch his throat bob. “You really didn’t know?”

“No.” My jaw tightens. “So, you didn’t take me as a transfer because I was an asset to this team? You had me transfer here out of some sense of duty or obligation to a former friend?” I hit my fist against the wall out of instinct. “This weekend just keeps getting better.”

“You have an opportunity to be better than him... on the ice. It’s up to you whether to rein in your anger and use the talent you were born with.”

“Yeah, cause there’s no way I can be better than him as a person,” I say, fuming in disbelief.

“Because evidently, the NHL commissioner is a piece of shit. He says and does all the right things in front of the cameras, but when it comes to supporting the girl he got pregnant and his son—nothing.”

Coach opens his mouth but changes his mind, and I don’t stay around long enough to find out how he knows my dad or how he knows Eldrick Cross is my father. I leave my gear inside as I slam his office door and walk out of the arena. And right now, I don’t know if I’ll step back inside—ever.

Chapter Sixteen

BROOKE

Taking a seat in the last row, I acknowledge my inability to focus today. Ever since Reed departed from the café, there hasn't been a single word from him. Not that it holds any significance now, but he was clearly furious about the jersey, leaving me to wonder if he even knew about my child. If he became enraged over a jersey and even more so when he discovered it belonged to my father, the mere thought of me having a three-year-old would set him off without a doubt.

We're discussing a picture that the National Space Administration took of the dark side of the moon in my art theory class.

How does it make you feel?

Does the absence of color make art feel more somber?

As the class responds affirmatively, the professor clicks to reveal a new slide displaying the iconic portrayal of a military man, donned in uniform, embracing, and kissing his loved one upon returning home.

"Does this feel sad?"

Students shake their heads, and some say, "No."

The professor talks about how color has changed our perceptions. Even

though we live our lives in color, photos seem to have a different life. Black and white makes us feel nostalgic. It takes me back to some photos my dad has hanging in his home office of his old college teammates. Some are on the gray scale, and some are in full color, and I need to practice this theory on his photos.

When class ends, my phone rings as I'm headed to my next class. I slip it from my backpack, hoping it's Reed or at least not an emergency call from the daycare.

It's my dad.

"Our game tonight is at six. I'd love for you and Caleb to be there again."

"We can't."

He sighs heavily. "Okay, can't blame a dad for trying."

I believe he assumes it's my distaste for hockey, rather than a certain hot head forward on his team. My dad's mood seems different today, almost pained.

It catches me off guard when he asks, "Do you know Reed Bauer?"

I swallow hard, hoping he hasn't heard that we were making out at the football bonfire. "We've met... through Logan and Harper. Why?"

"Oh, umm... he missed practice. Just wondering if you have seen him around?"

"Dad, we've met. We're not friends." When he remains silent, I ask, "How do *you* know Logan and Harper?"

"Logan has a knack for helping people acclimate. Last summer, the hockey complex was full, and I knew Logan owned some off-campus housing and asked if he had a room for Reed."

"I wondered how the two of them became roommates. They're totally opposite."

My father is concealing something. I've learned to recognize when he is troubled—it's as clear as day. This went on for months before my mother

left. It continued when he found out about my pregnancy. Now, it seems to be connected to Reed in some way.

“Okay, kiddo. I’ll call Logan.”

“Good luck tonight.”

Now, I’m left to wonder why Reed wasn’t at practice. I didn’t want to pry any details from my dad, not wanting him to know of my feelings for another one of his asshole hockey players. He was supposed to be an orgasm, not a boyfriend. So, why am I reeling from the rejection? Upset over his reaction to wearing my father’s jersey?

Harper offered me her number in case I wanted to attend the Evy Brown Cheer-Off, a charity event aimed at raising funds for families facing financial hardships while their children are in the hospital. I can’t just call and ask if Reed is okay? Or ask if he came home after he blew up at the café?

What I need is to talk to Lettie and see if she can get the basketball team to sign up to do the fundraiser, then I’ll have a reason to contact Harper.

Me: *Can you come over before I go to work tonight?*

Lettie: *Sure. Be there at four.*

After classes, I pick up Caleb, and we play a game of Hi Ho Cherry O’s that helps him learn to count, add, and subtract. He cackles whenever I spin and have to remove cherries. He’s competitive like his mom and his asshole father.

We curl up on the couch and watch a movie with talking cars until he’s fast asleep. He’s snuggled into my arms, and I lie there, wide awake, my emotions mixed and thoughts running.

Is Reed in trouble? Is he hurt?

Is he at home just telling my dad and the hockey team to fuck off?

Then a thought pops into my head that I want to erase permanently.

Is he shacked up with another girl and lost all track of time?

Stop. Just stop.

I wake up to Lettie pounding on the door.

“Coming.”

When I open the door, Lettie says, “You wish.”

“What? Oh... I’m coming. I get it now.” We both smile. Lettie is everyone’s favorite friend. She’s a bundle of energy and never runs out. Talkative, sarcastic, and lovable all rolled into one.

She heads straight to the fridge and grabs a yogurt. She can’t talk unless she’s eating or drinking.

We sit in the kitchen while I pull up details of the fundraiser on my laptop. “I’ll call Dane. His cousin had cancer, and I remember how hard it was on the family.”

I lean over to hug her. “Did his cousin make it?”

She purses her lips, and her eyes fill with tears. “He did, but it was touch and go for many months.” She sits up straight and tugs at her shirt. Lettie doesn’t like to show any clinks in her armor. “He’s graduating high school in May.”

“Then Dane has to speak. Call him.”

She wastes no time and dials his number. Lettie paces around the house, anxiously nibbling on her thumbnail as they converse. After she hangs up, she rolls her eyes and remarks, “He’s going to get some sorority girls he knows to do the skit with the basketball team.”

“Awesome, but did you say you would be in it too?”

“No, I’m not pretty enough or coordinated enough.”

I push her arm. “Are you kidding? Dane drools over you, and you don’t seem to notice.” Dane is probably sulking, wanting her to feel what he feels when she’s flirting or going home with different guys.

“We’re best friends. He’s not into me like that.” She turns around, grabbing a banana from the counter and stuffing her mouth immediately to ensure she doesn’t say anything she’ll regret.

“Whatever you say. Thanks, I’ll call Harper and let her know his contact

information and yours. You're going to be the coordinator of Dane's little routine."

Lettie's eyes sparkle, no doubt thinking of driving Dane crazy. She's flirtatious with him, and he lights up every time. But neither of them will make the first move.

I messaged Harper before ballet class, and she asked if I could come over. I'm not nervous, knowing that Reed will be at his hockey game. At least I hope he shows up. My dad is concerned, which makes me worry too. Reed wasn't in the best state of mind when he left the café.

Instead of taking Caleb to daycare again, Lettie agrees to stay with him so I can go to Harper's house. Reed's house.

Logan opens the door. "Harper's excited you wanted to help. Come in."

"I love your painted door hanger."

Logan furls his lips, and I hear girls laughing.

"See, we needed a door decoration," Adalee says to Logan.

Wearing a shirt with the sides cut out, he gestures for me to come in, but his eyes narrow at Adalee. "Little A, it's not even your house."

"It's a stallion because my two favorite Stallions live here."

"Aww, I knew you loved me." Logan grabs Adalee and swings her like she's boneless.

"Having a baby hasn't humbled you."

Harper waves at me from the couch. "Thanks for coming. After being on my feet all day at med school, I need to put my feet up."

The four of us sit in their living room as they explain how they envision the fundraiser. They're excited about the basketball team being involved, knowing they'll attract more donations with their swagger and a much wider reach. The basketball team is normally at the top of the pecking order, but since the football team has been so good the past two years, they've fallen a little.

With everyone being able to transfer and the name, image likeness contracts, basketball is the most affected. Combine the transfer situation with several Stallions players going into the NBA after one year, they're unable to build a team that stays together. At least that's what Lettie tells me.

"Do you have a director or stage producer?" I ask.

Logan looks at Harper. "Umm... do we?"

Harper plays with the hem of her royal-blue Stallions sweatshirt that's probably Logan's. "No, do we need one?"

I shrug. "I'm a theatre major, and I'd love to be able to put a charity event on my resume." I explain what a production and or stage manager is responsible for and how it would help them be able to enjoy their event.

"Oh my God, yes. Logan?"

"Babe, if it will help take a load off you, then I'm all for it."

Harper's gorgeous caramel eyes sparkle, formulating a plan and for some reason, I don't think it has anything to do with the fundraiser.

"I'm not sure if you all know, but my dad is the hockey coach. Maybe I can get..."

Harper cuts me off, lifting her eyebrows in quick succession. "Oh, we know."

I tuck my lips inside my mouth, I guess Reed told them about me being his coach's daughter.

Chapter Seventeen

REED

A rival team from Louisiana snapped our winning streak, and we're no longer undefeated. At least we're still undefeated in conference play. It was a foregone conclusion when we were losing five to zero by the end of the second period.

My teammates looked at me differently after not showing up to practice the past two days and not letting anyone know of my whereabouts. All the goodwill I built up with my teammates dissipated when I barely made it to the game, in fact, I missed all but three minutes of warmups.

Coach slid me to the fourth line for disciplinary reasons, which I completely understand. I'm not asking for special treatment just because he knows my *real* father.

Fueled by anger and a desperate need for clarity, I embarked on an overnight drive to my *anonymous* father's office building, but as I pulled up to NHL headquarters, an overwhelming sense of immobility took hold of my feet. The words I had written on my phone suddenly felt inappropriate now that I found out his identity and profession.

My words were way too nice, and I will not thank him for the one thing he did for me in my life—negotiating with court for me to be able to play hockey. He's the one who owes me an explanation.

I'm so fucking angry, and that prick doesn't deserve my anger. Instead, he deserves to see that the kid he didn't want is more than a kid who went to juvie. He's talented, successful, and has his shit together. But I'm not there yet. There's more work to be done. I'm not going back until he can see with one hundred percent clarity that he fucked up, and I'm everything he would have wanted in a son.

As I pull into the driveway of my house, an older vehicle is pulling away from the curb. The last thing I need or want is company. I push the gear shift into park and grab my bag, slinging it over my shoulder.

As I step onto the porch, the door is cracked open, and Harper is chattering a mile a minute. "I'm so glad she came. It was cute how she kept hinting around about Reed."

I push the door open. "Who was here and why was she asking about me?"

Logan whistles for Roscoe, and he comes bouncing down the steps and jumps up beside Harper.

"Good boy," he says to the curly doodle. "Brooke Dulce or should we say Sweet?"

Just the mention of her name sends my heart racing. "Was that Brooke who just left?"

Logan and Harper nod in unison, and I dart out the door. I need to talk to her and apologize for calling her a puck bunny. I don't have many people in my life other than my roommates and teammates. I have no idea what I'll say to her. For the past forty-eight hours, I spent trying to convince myself that she didn't matter to me. Just another girl who was on the receiving end of an orgasm. But she was here and asked about me. That's all the incentive I need to—well, I don't know what I'm going to do. I'll figure that out when I see her. She's still my coach's daughter.

After speeding through the neighborhood and running a few stop signs, her car comes in sight.

I slow down, keeping a couple of car lengths between us. At least I hope it's her.

Following her to the other side of campus, she turns into a complex that isn't where she lives. My grip tightens on the steering wheel, thinking I've followed the wrong car. The red compact pulls in between two white lines, parking.

I do the same but from five spaces away. The girl walks up the sidewalk towards me. I get out and go behind her. It's all very stalkerish, but I need to make sure it's her before I unintentionally scare her. It's her; the tight bun is a dead giveaway. The sound of a car alarm resonates through the air. She spins around, bumping into my chest. Yes, I got that close simply so I could feel her body against mine one more time.

Startled, she asks surprised in a husky, dick-erecting voice, "What are you doing here?"

"Me, what are you doing here?" I practically growl. I'm certain this complex is for married students. Anger flows up my core. Is she screwing a married man? Has she moved on? We're not a couple, and my anger is irrational, but it is what it is.

Brooke's eyes soften with what seems like concern. The insides of her brows trail up, and the corners of her eyes droop. I grab the keys from her and turn off the fucking car alarm.

"Are you good?" The volume is so low that I strain to hear her.

When I stare at her a little too long, wondering why the hell she's asking me if I'm good, she attempts to escape by going around me. I take a step in her path.

She huffs and jerks her arm from me. "I thought we could at least be cordial."

"Is that what you want, Cookie—to be cordial?"

My head drops so close to those heavenly lips that I've been unable to erase from my memory.

Those forbidden lips.

She hums. "I want you to be happy."

Her words are like a blistering wind to my lungs—a force that causes me to

drop my keys. After how I treated her, she wants me to be happy.

I'm speechless, which is different from choosing not to speak. I admit I'm temperamental and sometimes quiet, not wanting to have a conversation, but right now, there are no words I can string together.

My breathing quickens, and her lashes flicker with her sight still trained on me.

I grab her with my thumbs on her neck and my fingers under her hairline. While I decide how to make her mine, I sweep my nose over hers. It's cold, redder than Rudolph's nose, and adorable. The forecast is calling for snow, and the temperature has dropped.

Unable to wait another moment, I crash my mouth to hers, tasting peppermint lip balm. Our lips glide and slip in erratic movements as I try to gain some semblance of control. I can't have sex with her on the sidewalk of an apartment building. But make no mistake, I plan on giving her everything I have.

She wants me to be happy.

I'm trying to go a hundred miles per hour, and she's letting me control her tongue. It's soft and rolls over mine, but I can't get enough of her pretty, sweet-talking mouth. Drawing away, her eyes are shut, so I move my thumbs over her neck, up to her chin, then cup her jaw in my palms.

"I know a way we can both be happy," I say, dragging my thumbs up to her warm, supple lips.

"I bet you do, but there's something I need to say."

Instead of letting her continue, I remember how she reacted when I touched her lips at the bonfire. So, I do it again. I pull down on her bottom lip and caress it with my thumb, and she melts into me.

We kiss until my dick is so hard, its sticking out perpendicular to my body. Unable to control myself, I pick her up and walk her to my car. Her legs are hooked around my waist, and my hard-on is nestled between her ass cheeks, with my clothes on. Which needs to be rectified.

Her palms push against my chest.

“God, you’re beautiful.” The crescent moon shines a sliver of light, allowing me to watch as a rosy blush blooms over her face. I can’t think of a single woman I’ve been with who blushed from a compliment or a touch.

Her lips move as I cover them with mine. “Shhh. Tonight, we’re going to explore this.” I peck her lips gently.

“I can’t. I have plans.”

“Cancel them. I promise to give you multiple orgasms.” I skid my teeth over her ear.

There’s that blush again.

Behind her ear is perfumed with a light, fresh scent. I reposition myself and when I do, I feel her juices dampening what I think is a leotard. I press against her harder and move my fingers in circles over her center.

Breathy moans make my erection grow, and Brooke gives herself to me, wallowing in the pleasure. She’s grinding against my finger and drops her head, biting my shoulder.

“Fu... fuck. Come with me.”

“Where?”

I slip her phone from her coat pocket, set her feet back to the ground, and hand it to her. “Cancel your plans and find out.”

Brooke chews on her bottom lip as she darts her eyes between me and the phone. “Give me a minute alone.” She walks to the barren tree and holds the phone to her ear. I can’t hear what she’s saying or who she’s breaking a date with, but I use the time to text a big hockey donor. He gave me a key to his guest house, saying I could use it anytime, but I want to make sure if I’m taking her somewhere that no one else is using it tonight. He says only one player has a key per year.

She strides down the sidewalk in boots, pink tights, and a little black, see-through skirt over a leotard. It’s a good thing she has a coat.

“Whoever he was, he won’t make you feel as good as I will.” I pull her into my chest, and I drink in the look in her eyes. The insecurity. The need. The innocence.

“No one compares to him,” she utters into my mouth as I’m kissing her. But if that’s true, why is she coming with me? Maybe this is where Coach lives. No, he’s not married.

I make a mental note to ask her how he compares after she’s worn out from having orgasms. Swiftly, I exit the parking lot, driven by the urgency to reach the guest house as soon as possible, so I can fulfill my commitment. Using my hand, I gently shift her lengthy puffy coat aside and apply pressure to her thigh, first in one place, and then at the midpoint of her thigh and center.

She tries to speak but between each word is a raspy breath. “Did you... win... tonight?” Her delicate fingers fold over my forearm, wanting more. “Did... you... you... score?”

Thank God the drive is short. At the iron gate, I punch in the code and wind back to the guest house, put the car in park, and push the button so the seat scoots back. She crawls into my lap and even though we have a whole house, we’re in my car making out.

Her mouth slides over my neck, biting as she gets close to reaching the next level, but then I slow down, wanting to memorize how her mouth feels sucking and biting my skin. My finger crawls under the leotard and digs into the tights until I’m able to poke a hole through the material. My finger slides through her slick folds, chasing her orgasm with her.

While still working her swollen lips, I push a finger inside her tight walls. When her muscles clench, they suck my finger in deeper, and she mumbles something to the effect, “I tried. I tried so hard. Reed. Please.”

I do love when a woman begs. “I can’t wait to get these clothes off and taste you again.”

Then I kiss her hard, dominating every movement, and she shatters on my hand. I slip my fingers to her mouth and as she takes them in, she closes her lids as her lips fold over my finger. I continue to twirl my finger around her tongue, listening to her moans.

Opening the car door, I throw her over my shoulder and slap her ass. “Why can’t I stop thinking about being inside you?”

A high-pitched laugh escapes her mouth, and the darkest corners of my heart inflate. Filling the tiny crevices that have left me lonely and destructive for far too long.

Chapter Eighteen

BROOKE

Reed unlocks the door and squeezes my butt this time instead of slapping it. He kicks the door closed and turns the lock. His gray-blue eyes smolder. He rakes the coat from my shoulders, and you can barely hear it when it hits the floor. Then he shrugs out of his coat, leaving a long-sleeved, tight, Stallions performance t-shirt that stretches across his chest.

But when he grabs the hem, pulls it over his head, and throws it to the side, I'm close to hyperventilating. He's what I've dreamed of. What I've read about. He must work out all the time to have a body like this.

I hesitate to touch him, knowing I may never be able to stop, but he rasps, "Touch me."

When I don't and just peer into his eyes, he pushes his pants down, and his erection reaches for me. "Touch me wherever you want."

Hesitant, my hands begin their journey on his sculpted abs, tracing their way up to his well-defined chest before trailing back down. My eyes meet his, and I can't help but praise him, "You're flawless."

He chuckles as the pads of his fingers tenderly caress my cheek.

"And I've been burned by a guy who possessed far fewer... skills," I add, reflecting on my past relationship with Caleb's dad.

Damn, I need to tell him about Caleb before this goes any further.

He moves his fingers to the satin ribbon that holds my skirt up. He laces it in his fingers until I have so much pent-up sexual desire, I say, “Don’t make me wait.”

He awards me with another deep chuckle but with rapt attention on my lower half, he finally unties the satin ribbon of my black-chiffon dance skirt. He gathers it in his hand, then adds it to his pile of clothes.

His head dips into the pocket of my shoulder and sucks, then suddenly he’s pushed the leotard straps from my arms, and it puddles around my feet. I’m left standing in my tights, covering my toes to my waist. Reed falls to his knees, rolling the pink tights from my waist and kissing as he goes down.

“I feel like I’ve won the Frozen Four championship game because I can’t imagine a better award than you.”

Panting, with anticipation, I can’t speak.

He rolls them down over my hips, then turns me around and continues kissing my hips and the small of my back. The smooth tights are now pinching my thighs. He runs one hand between my legs and up to my slit. Several moans fall from my lips, when he says, “Always ready and wet for me. You’re giving this to me. This glistening, unexplored flesh is mine.”

“I need to tell you something.”

“All I care about is making you come and come.”

Yeah, good idea.

He spreads my legs, licking through my folds and pressing his finger against my puckered hole. A sensation I’ve never had rolls through me like a freight train going full speed.

“Ree... Reed.”

“Enjoy yourself. That’s what I want.”

My legs shake, and I collapse on to the arm of the couch. But he’s not done with me, as he rolls the tights the rest of the way down and tugs them off my

toes. Does he stop there? He licks up my legs and sucks behind each knee.

But what he does next, I am completely unprepared for. He stands behind me and slides his erection through my folds, not attempting to enter either hole. It feels so intimate and sexy. I can't believe I'm with a man who knows how to please a woman.

When he stops and stands me up, I protest until he spins me around and focuses on my face. "I'm going to fuck you all kinds of ways tonight. If you want something different, just ask, like in your books."

My entire body is at a boiling point. Every time he touches me, whether its tender or aggressive, a burning desire I've never felt before trails over my skin.

"There's so much you don't know about me, Reed. So much I need to tell you."

"Same, but it can wait. Let's forget any boundaries that exist between us and indulge ourselves in pure pleasure." His voice is hoarse. "We both deserve one night to forget our troubles. I don't know yours, and you don't know mine, so let's give our bodies what they need."

He licks his lips, leaving a glimmer of wetness behind.

"What about my dad?"

"He's not here and will never know."

"I'm afraid you'll break me."

"That's the plan, and that's what you want, right? To experience pure, raw sex."

My core tightens, and a gush of arousal runs down my inner thighs at the primal meaning of his words. I reach between us, stroking his erection. It's hard but silky soft and wide. Holy shit, probably too wide to fit.

"I don't mean physically."

"Cookie, never, ever let anyone break you. No matter what, not even me. Got it?" His sincere and haunting tone swallows me whole. "And this isn't just

physical for me; your face plagues me when I close my eyes. I think about you all the damn time.”

“You do?”

“Yes,” he rasps like he can no longer speak clearly.

“I’m guilty of thinking about you too, so much that I forgot to turn in a paper this week. I was worried about you.”

“I’m a fighter. Don’t be concerned.”

I kiss his chest and pull on his nipple with my teeth while still playing with his dick.

My name falls from his mouth—words I want to hear forever. I’m making the bad boy of hockey growl my name. Since I found out Reed plays hockey, I’ve done a little research, and there’s an aura of mystery surrounding him.

His calloused fingers tilt my chin up so I’m looking him in the eye.

He kisses me tenderly like he doesn’t want to be the one to hurt me. But then as he spins me around, he demands, “Bend over. I can’t wait another second for my cock to feel what my fingers and tongue already have.”

He glides through my folds before he nudges the mushroom head at my entrance. After teasing me with his head, he pushes into me in one sweeping motion. Sounds build in my throat that I can’t get out. It hurts, and it’s painful, but then Reed spits out, “I’ve never been inside of anyone that felt this good. My cock feels at home surrounded by your velvety muscles.”

I cry out as he pumps and pulls on my hardened nipples “You like it a little rough?”

“I don’t know.”

He eases himself up, pulling my back into his chest and says, “Be honest.”

“I’ve never done this.”

“Had sex? Or had a giant cock take you from behind.” He laughs like a sex god.

I swallow hard, still peering into his eyes from over my shoulder. He's a man. A man who knows how to make a woman come with only his words and knows how to shatter me into a million pieces.

"Giant... umm... what you said."

"Cookie, don't be afraid. I'm getting to know every sweet inch of you." His voice lifts when he emphasizes sweet. "And you'll beg me to stop but when I do, you'll change your mind."

There's nothing I can say at this moment because I want to experience what he's offering, even if it's only one time. Something dark brews inside him, and I'm not sure I can handle him on a daily basis. Plus, Caleb.

Reed starts off slow, pulling all of the way out, and it hurts when he pushes back in. I grab the back of his thick thigh, trying to hold him in place, and a grunt reverberates from his throat.

"I'm in charge, but you can do whatever you need."

He pounds me harder and does a swirling motion until I yell, "Yes. Yes."

Pulling me tight, he gently presses his lips to my shoulder blade, in complete opposition to how he's sending me into the abyss. "Good spot?"

Fucking hell. No man, or vibrator has ever found that spot. I mutter, "Such a good spot. I love that spot. Love that spot."

Reed's heavy breaths waft over my skin as he praises me. "Such a good girl." His fingers dig into my hip, while the other wraps around my neck, and he comes through on his promise. It feels as if I've crossed over into another life or time—dazed and confused.

My body tightens. My legs attempt to straighten below him, but he wraps that masculine forearm around my waist, holding my weight, gently coaxing every last drop from my center.

Chapter Nineteen

REED

“Take your time. Ride it out,” I encourage her, releasing my hold on her waist and gently placing my other hand on her shoulder to guide her.

And when she does, her lids are weighted, and a possessive pang strikes me in the gut. What does she need to tell me?

The way the light from the window shines makes her bluish-green orbs look cool and dangerous. If anyone is dangerous, it’s me.

“Do you know I’ve never seen you with your hair down?”

She bites her bottom lip as her eyes roam my lips before looking at me under her thick lashes.

My hands glide deftly along the slender curve of her neck, planting tender kisses upon her jawline and delicate cheek. The tips of my fingers trace upwards, gliding upon her tightly wound bun, which is secured by discreet bobby pins. With a gentle, measured gesture, I extract one of the pins, expecting her hair to tumble freely, but it remains steadfastly in place, enticing me to continue unraveling it and possibly unravel her.

Taking a step behind her, I delicately remove the last two pins, freeing several stray tendrils that were once tethered by the ponytail. I’m nearly out of patience when I ease the elastic band from her wavy tresses, causing them to cascade gracefully over her shoulder blades. In a tender display of

affection, I glide my lips across each exposed shoulder blade, savoring their softness, before gently turning her torso, drawing her chest against mine in a passionate spin.

“It’s gorgeous. I see the hint of strawberry.” My hands run through it over and over.

The room smells like sex and makes me crave more of her slender frame. I pick her up honeymoon style, and she lets out a hiccup of a laugh, tucking her head into my neck.

It’s a small guest house with a bedroom which has French doors leading to the in-ground pool. Even though it’s winter, and a tarp covers the pool, there are lights strung over the patio and Caribbean blue lights dotting the landscaped area.

Laying her on the bed, naked and only half-explored, I take a few strides to open the sheer curtains, letting the light filter inside the bedroom. “Don’t move.”

I take her in. She’s every man’s wet dream. Average height for a woman with slender but toned legs. She’s tight everywhere inside and out. One knee sinks into the mattress, and I caress her legs as I crawl on top of her.

“I have all the answers now,” I mutter, as I nibble her thighs, snaking my way around her mound. She lifts her hips, but I keep moving up. Stopping on her rosy nipples, still peaked, I twist them between my fingers.

Brooke arches her back. “Yes.”

“So perfect.” I take her whole breast into my mouth, relishing every wiggle as she arches her back stuffing her tits inside my lips. She releases a deep moan, and I know Cookie likes to be praised.

With her hair splayed across the white sheets, and her eyes at half mast, I graze her jaw, then settle on her lips. She’s vulnerable and open, and I push inside, and her lids fly open, panic written in her eyes.

Breathily, she asks, “Do you have a condom?” She looks away from me, resting her cheek on the pillow. “I know we already... but you didn’t and ...”

“In my wallet.” I rise off the bed, snagging my wallet from my pants located in the other room. “Here.” I hand her the condom, and she focuses on it like she may be changing her mind. “Sorry about earlier. When my mind is on you, there’s nothing or no one who can stop me.”

My knees straddle her hips and when she doesn’t make a move to tear the foil package, I bend over, peppering her with kisses.

“Has my good little ballet teacher never put a condom on a man?”

Her face is already pink from the sex, but it reddens as I grab her jaw with my thumb and finger and steady her gaze on mine. She shakes her head no as her face becomes a deeper shade of red.

My chest swells at her admission. I mean most guys do it themselves but with Brooke, I want to be her first in as many areas as possible. When her cheeks blush, and her chest gets red, it makes me want to stake my claim. Brooke Dulce. Mine.

Except we both know she can’t be. She’s my coach’s daughter, and I can tell she’s a daddy’s girl—wearing her dad’s jersey nearly gave me a heart attack.

I take the package from her hand but when I remove it from the foil, I explain what to do. My fingers cover hers until the condom reaches my base. And I grow harder, knowing I’m giving her new experiences.

Nudging at her entrance, I don’t play around long because her eyes are closed, and her hands are gripping my ass. Her neck arches off the bed, and her hair is strewn over the comforter.

I drive into her slow and easy, rocking our bodies to an inaudible beat. Her center squeezes when I’m all the way in. When I pull out, she closes her eyes. I’ve never had agonizingly slow sex before. As tormenting as it is, we’re connecting on another level. I roll my hips into her, and she pulls back, meeting me in the center. It’s not as deep, which is why I never, well, almost never have sex in the missionary position.

Our eyes collide, and then I watch her lashes flutter closed as her short nails dig into my flesh.

We do this for what seems like an hour, with her having mini-gasms. Then

she pants my name repeatedly and squeezes me from the inside out. It feels so fucking good as I swirl my hips and pick up her legs, wrapping them around my waist.

“Come for me. I’m holding on by a thread,” I grunt out into her ear, and droplets of sweat fall onto her skin.

Weighing her down with my body, I tuck my arms around her back and push in farther with her heels digging in my back.

She writhes beneath me as she yells affirmations, and I fall off the edge with her. If I didn’t have a condom on, her channel would be flooded.

I lie on top of her, fully aware that my weight may make it difficult for her to breathe. Yet, as I shift into a push-up position, she pulls me closer, embracing me tightly. In that moment, a sensation envelops me, like a protective cloak I’ve never experienced before. It weighs upon me, not as a burden, but as a comforting presence, a sense of belonging and an intangible feeling of being home.

What? Did that thought seriously cross my mind? Yes, it did.

Tracing the shell of her ear with my tongue, I give her a wet willy to break the tension.

She giggles, pleading with me to stop. Images of her on a bed, giggling with a child beside her, as I bring up pancakes, flash through my mind.

I must be in a delirium until she snaps me out of it with her soft, hesitant voice. “Where were you today? Yesterday?”

It throws me off my game. This isn’t a conversation during sex. It’s just intermission. When I remain silent, she says, “My dad was worried. I was worried. I had to find a reason to come over and check on you.”

“And what reason did Harper fall for?”

“The fundraiser. The basketball team is doing a skit.”

Acknowledging her gesture, I gaze deeply into her expressive eyes. "So, you paid a special visit to my place just to check up on me?"

She responds with a subtle but noticeable tilt of her head.

"I assure you, I'm fine, and I don't require someone to watch over me like a babysitter."

"My father disagrees," she murmurs.

Confusion settles in as I question her choice of talking with her father about me. "Why are you discussing me with your dad, Cookie?"

"I casually mentioned meeting Logan and Harper at the bonfire, which prompted him to call and ask if I had seen you. He wanted to know where you were," she explains. The tone of her voice is caring and empathetic. "Where were you?"

Our legs become entangled, and though I'm hesitant to engage in this conversation, especially with someone unfamiliar, I find myself unable to conceal the truth.

"Everywhere and nowhere," I confess, my words spilling out without further explanation.

A heavy gulp escapes her, and her eyes wander from my face to my chest. Her voice adopts a soft and tender tone. "Did you skip practice because of me? Were you angry with me?"

"Yes." Her eyes widen as she quickly lifts them. "Wait. What I meant to say is I needed some space to think. I was angry but not at you. I thought Coach being your dad meant we couldn't pursue whatever this is between us." I pause, rolling us onto our sides, keeping us connected at our core. I trace her face, and she draws circles on my arm.

"Am I off track? Do you not feel what I'm feeling?" I sigh as I place her hair over her shoulder. "Of course, you don't."

"I do, but I've been trying to tell you that I..."

"Hold that thought. I need to get this off." Disconnecting our bodies, I roll over, swinging my legs over the edge of the bed and pace into the bathroom to clean myself. Under the sink, I find a washcloth and wait for the water to warm up. It takes forever but if I'm correct, she's going to be sore. I want to

show her how much I appreciate her body, and my number one concern is to take care of her.

She's gotten under the sheets and comforter and has rolled on her other side, facing the window. For a moment, I drink in the scene—a beautiful woman with shimmering, untouched skin and dark strawberry-blond hair lying in a bed with twinkle lights ghosting over her body.

Her eyes are shut, so I scoot into the bed and tuck my arm around her, bringing her back into my chest. She lets out an appreciative moan and sighs.

“Are you asleep?” I ask, kissing her upper arm that's folded over the tan comforter. A few minutes go by before I mumble, “Missionary with you felt so intimate. Better than any sex I've ever had. I hope it was for you too.”

“The best I'll ever have,” she says, yawning. “My old boyfriend only lasted fifteen minutes.”

“Do you want me to be your boyfriend?”

“I wish you could. I think we make each other happy, but I have something to tell you.”

I gently stroke her arm, wanting to convey my intense craving to be her boyfriend and my desire to eradicate all the hidden truths and barriers that exist between us. “Me too,” I say, but she's already purring and hopefully dreaming about how good we are together.

Her body is the perfect complement to mine. I twist her hair gently in my hand before letting it tumble freely. I can't count how many times I kiss her shoulder, her ear, her hair. It feels good to be at peace and completely sated as I drift to sleep with Brooke's skin pressed against mine.

Before long, I wake up to the natural alarm in my head. I have practice in a little over an hour.

She's still sleeping, but when I slip out, she rolls to her stomach. Her arm slides under the pillow, and her legs spread, taking up the whole bed.

The guest house has a full kitchen, so I pop in a Keurig pod and make two cups of coffee. I'm not a huge coffee fan, but the highs and lows of the last

few nights have taken its toll, and caffeine is a must. I wanted to have sex a few more times. I laugh to myself—I may have to help build up Brooke's endurance.

I decide to take a quick shower, wanting to be clean so the guys don't smell Brooke's scent on me. Those horny assholes better not even think about her. And I know Dawes and Flynn would smell the sex scent a mile away.

With the plush, turquoise-colored towel draped around my waist, I stroll into the bedroom, only to find Brooke absent, presumably in the kitchen. Amidst the quiet, an unfamiliar phone rings, a tune that doesn't match my designated ringtone. Curiosity wars with me, prompting me to venture into the living room, the very place where our evening began.

And there it lays, right on the coffee table, catching my attention. As I pick it up, the ringing ceases, and I'm greeted by the lock screen displaying a personal photo of Brooke and a little boy with his arms wrapped around her neck.

Chapter Twenty

BROOKE

No, no, no, no.

I squeeze my eyes shut, mumbling the lost and found prayer one of my Catholic friends taught me in high school.

“Dear Saint Anthony, please come around. Something is lost that needs to be found.”

Who am I kidding? I know exactly where my phone is—it’s with Reed. Scared of what he thinks of me and what I’m feeling, I flee the scene of the best sex of my life. It may be the experience of a lifetime. Who could compare to the tattooed hockey god? He’s an expert at finding hidden spots and creating orgasms that make the earth flip upside down.

He’s showering, and I shoot him a text.

Me: *I had a great time. No, that’s not the right words. I’m not sure there are words, but I have to get to work, so I arranged for an Uber last night. If you want to see me again, there’s something you need to know.*

The Uber pulls up to the gate, but I don’t know the code, so I run down the driveway. I realize that I left my phone on the coffee table when I was retrieving my purse and my intimates. With only ripped tights and a leotard covering my body, I had zipped up my jacket.

The driver lets me out in front of my apartment. I inhale the heavy cool air and prepare to be bombarded by a million questions. Oranges and purples streak the horizon, so I'm expecting them to be asleep.

I push the door closed and pad into the open floor plan. It's not a bad place to live. The school had given it a makeover the year before I moved in. They took out the half wall between the den and kitchen, making it flow and appear larger.

I take out a bowl and the cereal and end up eating two bowls. Having marathon sex makes me hungry. I can't control the ear-splitting grin that eats up my face. Lost in a mixture of euphoria and dread, Lettie startles me.

"Girl, details. And I need all of them." Lettie grabs a Diet Coke from the fridge.

"I didn't see you walk in."

"That's because you were thinking about getting sexed up."

I pick an Apple Jack from my bowl and throw it at her. Where do I begin? Lettie sits next to me. "Was Caleb okay last night?"

Her eyes narrow as she studies my face. "He was fine. We lined up cars and played board games for two hours. I gave him a bath, read him more books than I've read in college, and he finally went to sleep." She's not a morning person. "Now, tell me everything."

She grabs my hands.

"God, it was... he was more than the guys in my books. Demanding in ways and romantic in others." I expel a breath. "He taught me a few things."

Lettie squeals. "Like what?"

"Let's just say he found spots that my vibrator has never found." My eyes briefly close at the new memory etched in my brain. "Sex with Caleb's father lasted fifteen minutes, and I never felt like it was about me or even us. He wanted to get off, and that was the sole purpose. But with Reed, he focused on me, and we had..." I stop and whisper, "sex for hours."

Lettie leaps off the chair and into my chest, and we both take a tumble onto

the faux tile floor. We lie there, laughing. I hit the jackpot when I met Lettie in calculus class. She's a firecracker but when it comes to numbers, she's a genius. But I prefer this side of her. It's also nice to watch her sitting high on her horse, all buttoned up because it's her alter ego.

“Did ya’ll make plans to get together again?”

I shake my head and explain how I left and what I left.

Lettie sits up. “Let me get this straight. You called an Uber the night before so he wouldn’t have to take you home... here... to your house.”

Following suit, I peel myself from the floor and sit with my legs crisscrossed. I take a deep breath. “What? He doesn’t know about Caleb, and I tried to tell him several times, but he was stroking me, caressing me, and making me feel like a woman. I didn’t want it to end.”

“Oh girl, he’s tasty. Those forearms. Yum.”

“I can’t keep Caleb a secret, but I can’t imagine how he’s going to react. When he found out my dad was the coach, it was like a bomb went off.”

“Maybe he won’t care.”

I huff, rolling eyes. “Right. Because every twenty-two-year-old hockey player wants to be tied down. Even if I didn’t have a toddler, why would he want to be with me?”

She stands and pulls me up, placing her hands on my shoulders. “Because you’re an incredible person. You have two jobs, go to class, the grocery, your drama practices, and you still find time to play with Caleb every night... except last night. But fair is fair. Caleb gets a sleepover. You get a sleepover.”

Caleb’s feet slap hurriedly against the floor and straight into my arms, giving me a monster hug. “I missed you, Mommy.”

“You, too. Did you have fun with Lettie?”

He gives a hand pump with a closed fist. “I beat her five times. She’s not good at growing her cherry trees.”

“I think it’s because you’re fantastic at counting. Now, go change into your school clothes and brush your teeth. I’ll be in there to check in five minutes. Mommy can’t be late for work.”

“Okay, Mommy.”

My IKEA dresser has an attached mirror, and photos of Caleb are tucked in the edges. Even though I have thousands of pictures on my phone, I like to see his sweet face everywhere I turn.

Lettie raps at my door and says, “You should wear your hair down more often.”

“How am I going to get my phone back?”

“I’ll call him and ask him when you can get it. Do you know his number?”

“Does anyone memorize phone numbers anymore? No.”

“Then you’ll have to go see him.” She wiggles her brows. “I have class. Let me know what happens.”

“I will. Thanks for staying with Caleb last night.”

The absence of my phone becomes an ever-increasing nuisance, hindering my ability to stay connected. Deep down, there’s a small part of me that hopes Reed will stroll into the café, fresh from his intense hockey practice. Yet, with every person who entered through the door, I instinctively dart my eyes towards it, only to be met with disappointment. I realize that his schedule must be just as demanding as mine, if not more so.

One would assume that having my father as Reed's coach would grant me some insight into his schedule, but surprisingly, that isn't the case. I have deliberately distanced myself from anything related to hockey until this very moment, which means I'm blissfully unaware of Reed's day-to-day activities.

My father's daily routine is filled to the brim with various commitments, ranging from training sessions to practices. The players could be engrossed in

a rigorous training session, studying film footage, engaging in weightlifting exercises, or participating in a multitude of other activities that contribute to their athletic prowess. The fact that I no longer possess a phone heightens my frustration, as I cannot simply reach out to my dad and inquire about the hockey schedule. Plus, if he found out that Reed and I had sex, he would kill him.

I borrow the landline in the café manager's office to call my dad, needing to let him know that my phone is missing.

"Hey, Dad."

"You're finally calling me back. Wait, whose phone are you calling me from?"

"The café. Listen, I just wanted to let you know that I left my phone in class, and I'm trying to track it down. Hopefully, I'll have it back tonight."

"Okay, good. I don't like you being without the ability to call. What if something happens to Caleb?" He pauses, and I know he's right. I have to get my phone back even if it means being embarrassed or telling Reed about Caleb. "I called earlier because the traveling dinosaur exhibit will be in Cincinnati tonight. I don't get much time with Caleb during the season, so I want to take him. We'll spend the night at Great Moose Lodge and play in the indoor waterpark. I'll have him back by noon."

Chewing on the inside of my cheek, I say, "He'll love it. What time will you pick him up?"

"We have a film session at two, so I'll swing by afterward. I have a surprise for you too—a night of pampering yourself with a glass of wine."

"Mad Dog 20/20 isn't wine." I laugh because that's all I can afford.

"I'll bring you a beautiful bottle of red."

"Thanks, Dad."

A night all to myself? I'd rather have another night with Reed.

Little does he know I shared an incredible night with his left winger just last night. My body warms recalling how Reed touched me. How his gaze seared

his name on my skin.

I'm able to relax knowing that Reed has a film session at two, so I won't run into him, so I clock out, go to my playwriting class, and then swing by the daycare early to pick up Caleb.

We go home and snuggle on the couch until he falls asleep, then I place him in his green dinosaur bean bag chair. I pack an overnight bag, including swim trunks and a beach towel, and wait for Dad.

It's nearly four in the afternoon when Dad waltzes in and sweeps Caleb up in his arms. "Are you ready, little man?"

"Will we see a T-wex?" His chubby little fingers grab my dad's cheek to make sure he heard him.

"Of course."

Caleb claps and pumps his fist. "*Tywanasaors Wexes* are my favorite."

God, I love how he mispronounces words. But each day, I notice that words he couldn't say a month ago are coming out clear and correct. Why does my baby have to grow up so fast?

"Are you coming, Mommy?"

"No, sweetie. I have a big play this semester, and I have to write, and you'll have special time with Grandad."

"Let's go. If we're late, the dinosaurs might eat us for dinner."

Caleb's mouth makes a big oval as his eyes widen.

"Grandad is teasing. Love you."

As I'm pecking Caleb's cheeks, Dad reaches into his Stallions parka and pulls out a phone. "Here. It's a prepaid. I had the clerk at the store set it up for me. I have the number programmed into my phone. Hopefully, you'll get your phone back soon, but you need to have one."

"Thanks, Dad. What would I do without you?"

"You never have to worry about that. I'm Team Brooklyn every day of the

week.” He stops and hands me an envelope. “Your surprise. It’s thirty minutes away.”

With a gentle peck on my cheek, my dad ushers Caleb out the door, his overnight bag in tow. In that moment, I’m reminded of just how fortunate I am to have such an incredible father. While my relationship with my mother leaves much to be desired, my father's love and unwavering support have been a constant source of strength for me.

Despite his initial anger at my disregard for his warning to stay away from his players, I’ve never questioned my father’s love. Once Caleb was born, Dad and I became even closer, despite his attempts to manipulate me to accept his money and other little things to make it easier on Caleb and me.

I wish he had more time to spend with Caleb, but what time he does have is quality. And Caleb adores him.

Now that I have the house to myself, how am I going to get in touch with Reed?

Chapter Twenty-One

REED

I t's a sucker punch to the mid-section. I didn't want to believe my gut feeling when I picked up Brooke's phone—she has a son. Nausea flitters through my stomach and travels up my throat.

Coach messages her, asking to take Caleb, I'm assuming that's her son's name, to a dinosaur show. Of course, she can't respond since I have her phone. There's only one thing to do—take it to her after practice.

Somehow, I manage to get to the facility, leaving her phone in my car. While I walk inside the arena, I read her text to me once more.

***Brooke:** I had a great time. No, that's not the right words. I'm not sure there are words, but I have to get to work so I arranged for an Uber last night. If you want to see me again, there's something you need to know.*

My thumbs typed, deleted, retyped, and deleted several times, wanting to respond, but like she said, there are no words to describe the warring emotions, and she wouldn't get the message anyway.

She did try to tell me.

The conflicting thoughts continue to swirl within me, creating a slice of uncertainty. Whenever I'm with Brooke, the darkness and hate in me diminishes, as if she has the power to heal me in ways I never thought

possible. However, engaging in a romantic relationship with someone who is my coach's daughter is one thing; combined with her having a child is an entirely different level of commitment.

Just last night, I convinced myself that we could navigate the complexities of our situation, despite the fact her father isn't only my coach, but he also holds the power over my future.

Will I ever be in control of my life?

If I don't have hockey, I have nothing. I was willing to take a gamble, to keep our relationship a secret for a while, and see where it would lead us. If our connection turned out to be fleeting, her father would remain unaware. But if it turned into something deeper, we would confront her father's wrath together, hand in hand.

However, in the light of day, doubts creep in, casting shadows over my resolve.

Dressed and warming up, Flynn asks why I didn't come to the party last night. My teammates know I'm off kilter. I have partied from the time I set foot on campus until about a month ago. Seeing my roommates happy and in love, always laughing and snuggled up together, has made me want for more than the thrill of hockey or the next puck bunny. Hockey can't fill what I'm missing.

“Better things to do.”

He scoffs, “Better than half-naked women begging for you to suck tequila from their belly button? Doubtful.”

Oh, it was better.

After an hour of drills, we scrimmage for two hours. I'm hitting the hell out of the puck. Slashing and cutting through the ice like my life depends on it, and maybe it does. Coach holds my life in his hands, my future too. The puck is a symbol of my heart being knocked around, not that I'm not used to it. I've basically been on my own my whole life.

“What the hell was that, Bauer?” Coach's voice is clipped, and his eyes narrow with his hands on his hips.

“Sorry, Coach. I wasn’t thinking.”

“You’ve been playing hockey since you were four years old. You shouldn’t have to think to know when you’re offsides. Now get that stick out of your ass and play like the player you’re supposed to be.”

“Yes, sir.”

Coach wouldn't want to know what I'm really thinking about. His daughter's glimmering strands of red running through her dark-blond hair. Her creamy skin. Her seductive smell and sweet taste. The way she took every bit of my length and purred for more. How her eyes doubled in size when I spun her around and took down her hair, letting it fall in waves over her delicate, beautiful body. The way we made love, no wait, the way we had sex, slow and sensual.

Damn, I have no idea what I'm going to do. I wander around campus, even go to the café to return her phone, but she isn't there. Hagan calls, asking me to meet for a quick lunch at the commons. I'm not ready to fill him in on last night's activities because more than ever, I need to know what it meant to her and if I'm worthy of meeting her son. Then I go to a film session.

After watching game film with the team, I wait and follow Coach, knowing he's picking up her son for the dinosaur exhibit. Hanging back, I pull up outside the same apartment complex where I followed her last night. I had looked it up on the campus housing website, and I was right—it's family housing. Now, I'm bracing myself, hoping she's not married or attached to a guy living in the same house. When Brooke and I are together, everything in the background vanishes, and we're each other's sole focus. I should have asked her about her living arrangements last night.

Light snow flurries blow in the wind, landing on my windshield, then melt on the heated glass. I lean my head on the headrest, while Eric Church plays on my radio. I have no idea what I'm going to say or do.

Sitting in my car, I wait until Coach and the cutest little boy come out. Coach has him on his hip and a blue and yellow overnight bag slung over his shoulder. Caleb is wearing a Batman knit cap and a royal-blue coat as he kisses Coach's cheek.

My mom and I were close when I was his age, at least I think we were. I only have a few memories before the age of seven or eight.

I don't know how long I've been thinking but when I open my eyes, Brooke is locking her door. She's carrying a large tote bag, larger than the purse-tote she had at the bonfire. Two strides later, she jumps into her car, backs out, and leaves.

I pull out, unsure if I'm going to follow her. But she needs her phone, right? Where's she going? I realize I don't know much about Brooke except her body fits mine perfectly. She's good at English literature, teaching ballet, and works at the café. Her dad is my coach, and she has a little boy.

Thirty minutes later, she arrives at her destination, The Lodge at Deer Creek. I feel like an undercover investigator as I keep my distance but keep her in my sight. Brooke checks in at the registration desk, and the overly flirtatious man hands her a key card.

Is she meeting someone? After what we did last night? Fuck. Now, what am I going to do?

The lodge is only two floors, and she walks up the steps. The balcony of the second floor overlooks most of the lobby, so I watch until she opens the hotel door, five doors from the staircase.

Once she's inside, I stand outside her door with her phone in hand and knock. A sick feeling travels through my stomach. How many times have I had to face disappointment?

She opens the door with it cracked just enough that she's resting her head against the edge. Her brows furrow. Shit, this looks bad. I'm a fucking stalker.

Brooke swallows. "Reed. Why are you here?"

"I'm not sure." I hold out her phone. "Thought you might need this."

When she takes it, my large hand wraps completely around hers, and a video of our night together flashes in my mind. Without a doubt, Brooke and I have a rare connection. So rare that I've never had this feeling, even though I can't count the number of girls I've been with.

“Thanks. How did you know where I was?” Her voice is tender, and her words hesitant.

“Reed Bauer, Private Investigator.” She cracks a smile, finally. “May I come in, or are you... meeting someone?”

“Just me.”

Relief floods my lungs, and breathing gets easier. She gestures for me to come inside. It’s a small suite with a couch, sitting area, a mini bar, and a jacuzzi in the bedroom. It seems like she would be meeting someone or else what a waste.

“Would you like a glass of wine? My dad brought me the good stuff as long as I promised not to drive after I opened it. Did you follow him after film session?”

There’s a mirror above the wet bar, and we have a stare off as I nod.

“So, you’re majoring in counterintelligence?” A smirk plays on her lips as she looks away bashfully.

I love it when she smiles. My worries and concerns seem to slip away. Outside the sliding glass door is a balcony, so I walk over to drink in the view. The sun may be hidden by heavy, gray clouds, but the light snow flurries stick to the forest behind us.

“He’s cute,” I say as I stare at the frosty, glittered landscape.

“Who?”

“Your son. The photo on your phone screen is cute.” I turn to see her face, and her expression is soft, but her pupils enlarge, and I wonder if she’s as scared as I am.

“Thank you. He’s my whole world.” Brooke reaches for my hand but doesn’t grasp it or hold it. Instead, she twiddles with my fingers. “I tried to tell you many times. I didn’t intend on hiding the truth.”

I close my eyes for a hot second, but then I peer into her soulful eyes. “It was different when you didn’t know I was a hockey player, and your dad was my coach. Neither of us knew. But when I came to the dance studio, you knew

this wasn't a one-time hookup. If it had stopped at the bonfire, then yeah, you wouldn't owe me any explanations. But we studied. We texted. And then I came to you at the ballet studio or daycare center. You had the opportunity to tell me everything."

She finds an interesting spot on the floor, swiping one foot back and forth. "Maybe I would have if you didn't stop."

"Have men always treated you like shit? Is that why you expect me to do the same?"

A spot under her eye twitches, and she closes her body off, folding one arm over her waist and chewing on her finger. "One man. Caleb's biological dad."

For reasons I haven't uncovered, she's still holding something back, so I say, "I was trying to slow down to twenty-five instead of ninety miles per hour. I didn't want you to be a hookup."

"Didn't?" She looks up at me under her eyelashes.

I walk to the couch and sit on the edge, bringing her with me, but she sits on the coffee table, facing me. Her head drops into her chest. She's wearing a chunky cable-knit sweater, the color of burnt sienna, and the wide neck exposes the curve of her shoulders. She pairs it with leggings and suede boots. Brooke Dulce is the epitome of the casual beauty. I don't know what to say. "I didn't then, and I don't now, but I've had one, extremely lopsided relationship, and it ended with me transferring here. Your father gave me a third chance. He probably wants the best for the two of you, and I promise, I am not the one he wants to see dating his daughter."

"Reed, he's my dad and wants me to be happy. We're close, but he doesn't control me. I refused to take any monetary support from him, and he doesn't have a say in who I date. Will I listen to his opinion and concerns? Yes, but I'm making my own way. I just didn't know how you would react."

"Honestly, I've had time to calm down. When I heard your phone buzz and realized you were gone, I was disappointed you didn't give me the opportunity to drive you home, kiss you goodbye, and promise to call you after practice. But then I saw the preview message pop up from your dad and fuck, I was in shock."

Water covers her eyes, and her head tilts in understanding. Apprehensive to be the one to declare it's over, we stare at each other, the floor, out to the balcony. Do either of us want to move forward?

“At the bonfire, I was trying to be a normal college student and just get a tiny glimpse of what it would have been like. But when you walked into the café, I knew I wanted more with you. But you're so out of my league. And you left our study session early and then at the ballet studio, well, I just couldn't believe you actually liked me.”

I scoff, “I'll take that glass of wine now.” She saunters over to the wet bar, pouring a glass for me and refilling hers. I move behind her so when she turns, there's no more than a few inches between us. I take the glass, sipping and letting the full-bodied red, soak in my mouth before swallowing. “Nice. Coach has good taste. Maybe I'll get him a bottle before he buries me.”

“Do you hate me?” she asks before her lips press against the glass, and I watch the wine flow down her throat. She takes another drink, hiding behind the wine, waiting for me to answer.

I place the glass on the stone countertop. The atmosphere is heavy with tension, as we both grapple with the vast unknowns that lay between us. We find ourselves standing at the precipice, uncertain of how to forge trust without delving into the depths of our darkest secrets. While it's possible that Brooke may not harbor any hidden shadows, I'm acutely aware of the murky corners within myself.

I slide my arms under her sweater, lacing my hands on the small of her back. “No. I'm so into you. I thought we could move forward.”

Her eyes strain as a watery film washes over them and if it's possible, her eyes are even more beautiful. “But you don't want to date a girl with a child.” Her voice falls to the hush of a funeral home. A long exhalation comes from her before she drops her head into her chest.

“Don't put words into my mouth. Your dad took a chance on me and if I blow it... let's just say, I don't know what I would do or where I would go.”

Her soft, warm hands cup my face. “So, what you're saying is, you don't know if I'm worth it.”

“Brooke, I come with more baggage than Delta Airlines. You deserve better than a guy like me. And the little guy... is his father in the picture?”

She shakes her head.

“Did he want to be involved?” I ask, wanting to know if this guy is as big of an asshole as my bio father.

Dropping her hands from my face, she spins away but still, my hands are on her waist. I pull her back into my chest. “You’ll get no judgement from me.”

“He doesn’t know. My dad took the job here, and I transferred with him.”

“And you changed your name to Dulce so it would be harder for this guy to find you.”

Her mouth twitches. “Just on my student I.D.”

“I’m going to need more wine.” I walk to the door, hand on the knob.

“Are you leaving?” Disappointment laces through her voice.

“To get more wine.” If there was ever a time to drink, it’s now. It’s cliché, but she’s everything I never knew I wanted. “A little liquid courage couldn’t hurt.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

BROOKE

Restless energy bubbles under the surface as I anxiously await Reed's return. The mere thought of him acknowledging Caleb's presence and not running away in fear provides me with a glimmer of hope. Yet I find myself grappling with the uncertainty of what his presence and acceptance signifies. Does it imply a willingness to take a leap of faith and embark on a romantic relationship with me? Or am I simply misinterpreting his open-mindedness?

As I pace back and forth, my footsteps create an imaginary path into the carpet, questions swirl within my mind. What will I say to Reed when he comes back? How can I express my feelings without twisting his understanding of the situation?

I'm confused and awestruck that he's here with me, but there's a delicate balance to be struck, as I need clarity of his feelings, while being mindful not to force any assumptions or expectations upon him. The words I choose upon his return hold the potential to shape the course of our relationship, and I must choose them wisely.

Being a theatre major, I over-analyze everything. How should I stand or where to look? What facial expression to use. Nervous energy runs through me the same as before I step on stage.

But this is life—it's not pretend.

Startled, I turn to see Reed standing in front of the door with a shopping bag and two bottles of wine in the other hand.

He's staying.

"I thought you changed your mind," I say, unable to look him in the eyes.

Reed sets the bottles on the counter and takes out a knit cap, striding towards me. The look on his face reminds me of the night of the bonfire. Confident and sexy like he has me all figured out.

"We're going for a walk." His hands stretch the cozy knit cap. "It has a hole for your ponytail." Then he pulls my hair through the opening and adjusts it along my forehead.

"Thank you."

His hands run down my arms before he reaches into the bag and gets out two pairs of gloves. Removing the tags, he shoves them into the kangaroo pocket of his blue and white Stallion's hoodie. "My team jacket is in the car. We'll get it since you forgot your coat."

The air feels like a weighted blanket as we weave through the lodge's walking trails. I fold the jacket over my arms, so I don't reach for his hand. The ball is in his court. He knows about Caleb and my dad.

We come upon a wrought-iron bench looking out to a meadow. Reed puts one glove on and clears the light snowfall away. He takes his jacket from me and spreads the outside of the coat down on the seat.

He pops the cork out as we sit and reaches into The Lodge gift bag, coming out with two plastic cups.

"The saleswoman thought I was crazy. She said there's a winter storm warning, so we better get this party started."

He hands me my cup, then throws his arm behind my back and angles into me. Both of us bring the wine to our mouths, and its warmth travels through my body but at the end, I shiver. I know it's time to talk about us.

Briefly, I look into his eyes that match the sky, barely a hint of blue, mostly gray. I love how his eyes change colors, but I don't know whether it's because of his clothing, the weather, or his moods.

Swirling the wine over his knee, he seems to be lost in thought. "So, why didn't you tell Caleb's father you were pregnant? Didn't he deserve to know?"

Knocked off my axis, I didn't expect that question and wiggle on the bench. He studies my reaction, but his face is void of judgement.

"It took me weeks to muster up the courage to tell him." I wipe my hands over my thighs. "I needed time to come to terms with having a baby. I wasn't showing. Hadn't gained any weight. But I knew without a doubt that I would have the baby. It was always just Dad and me. I never had a big family."

"And?" Reed's arm snakes around my shoulders as he rubs circles on my back. Encouraging me to continue.

My insides shake at the memory and before I know it. I'm spilling my secrets that only Dad knows. "When I arrived at his place, his roommate opened the door nonchalantly, so I went back to his room. I turned the knob, and he was banging my sorority sister."

"He had you and wanted someone else? He must be fucking crazy."

"She jumped up, and he begged her to come back right in front of me. Her tits bounced as she retrieved her clothes and fled. But I shouted numerous curses at him and cried. My hormones were... operating at a high level I couldn't control. I pushed him and called him every name in the book. When I called him a son of a bitch, he grabbed two fists of my sweater and threw me against the bed. Then he..."

"Did he rape you?" he whispers like someone would overhear on the vast resort property.

I shake my head. "I fought and kneed him in his privates. He doubled over but got up swinging, hitting me several times."

A mixture of fear and disgust floats over Reed's face before disappearing.

“His roommate came in and restrained him. I knew then, he would never be a dad to Caleb.”

“That’s awful. I’m sorry you went through that. No man should put his hands on a woman in violence.”

Something in the tone of his voice makes me sad, like he’s thinking of his own trauma. After a long stretch of silence, both of us let it seep into our souls. The feelings. The consequences of revealing my secret. But I trust that he won’t tell anyone.

Finally, he sighs, and the heat of his breath falls on my cheek. “Have you had a boyfriend or dated since you had Caleb?”

“No.”

“I guess you’ve been a little busy.” Reed sounds out a short laugh. “You don’t have to answer any questions that you don’t want to.” I fold my lips over my teeth. “Have you hooked up with anyone since you became a mother?”

“No.”

One of his eyebrows shoots up like he thinks I’m lying. He leans back against the bench, moving his head in disagreement. “You hooked up with me.”

Now’s my chance to tell him how I feel. Time to swallow my pride, my shyness, and the lump in my throat. Downing the last of the wine in my plastic glass, I bend over and nestle it into the ground covered with more frost than snow.

I reposition myself on his coat, angling my leg and facing him openly.

He’s a vision of strength and determination, his impeccable physique accentuated even through the layers of winter clothing. The heavyweight sweatshirt wrinkles across his biceps, highlighting his muscular frame. The way his body exudes an air of athleticism and confidence leaves me in awe. However, it’s not just his physicality that captivates me; it’s the way he carries himself, with a sense of purpose and unwavering focus. It’s the way he’s staring at me right now.

Reed finishes his merlot and sets his cup on the ground. I take the opportunity to cover his hand with mine.

“I don’t consider you a hookup. Casually having sex with someone doesn’t come with emotions, right?” Underneath my palm, his thumb sweeps across my skin. Back and forth. Coaxing me. When he doesn’t say anything, I repeat, “Right? Because I don’t know. Put me out of my misery and just tell me.”

The corners of his lips trend upwards enough for me to understand he likes it when I get worked up.

“Hookups are emotionless for me. It doesn’t necessarily mean that I don’t like the person; it just signifies I only want to be with them once.” I feel his fingers running through my ponytail. “Cookie, I had so many feelings flowing through me last night that I’m drained.”

“I wasn’t a hookup to you?” My chest heaves as I emphasize each word.

He moves his hand from mine and caresses my face. His fingers move over my skin as if he’s trying to memorize the location of every freckle.

My lids flutter closed as his lips near mine, and my heart skips a beat. He whispers into my mouth. “I wouldn’t be here if I felt that we were *only* a hookup.”

His lips brush over mine like time has stopped. Left to right, he sweeps his flesh over mine, and I chase his lips until we lock onto each other. Our mouths melt into each other. There’s no tongue. No desire to rip his clothes off. It feels more like the need to be loved.

As we share the frost-covered bench, huddled close to the man beside me, I can’t help but feel my heart swell with a mix of relief and wonder. The snowflakes gently cascade around us, creating an enchanting moment.

Our foreheads press against each other as the kiss ends. My pointer finger traces my lips as a smirk plays on them at the same time.

“Brooke, as much as I want this, it’s complicated in ways that could hurt more than you and me.”

“I know. Are you willing... no, not willing. Do you want to have a relationship with me? A woman with a child? The daughter of your coach?”

My mouth is drier than the Vegas desert waiting for his response. Reed squeezes my hand.

“I’m sorry. No.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

REED

Her lip trembles. Her bright eyes shimmer, filling with tears, which wasn't my intention.

"Let me finish." I kiss her tenderly as she sucks in. "I want a relationship with Brooke Sweet. One that isn't hiding who she is."

"You want me?"

"Caleb's your first priority, and he should be. I'll understand if this is a case of right person, wrong time."

She wraps her arms around my neck with tears waterfaling from her lids. Several minutes pass as I continue holding her delicate body tight. When I break the embrace, I stand, grab our cups, push the cork back in the bottle, and place them in the bag.

"Let's go back to the room. I bought some bubble bath. You can soak and think about what you want. Not in this moment but for longer. I'll go down to the fitness center and work out my feelings." I cup her hand inside mine, and they feel like ice. "Do you want the gloves, or will my hand suffice?"

She clasps her hand in mine and lays her head on my arm. When we're halfway back to the lodge, Brooke's hand flies over her mouth. "What time is it?"

I check my Tag Heuer watch. “Almost nine.”

“We have to hurry. My dad booked a massage for me at nine.”

I lift a brow. She starts jogging and when we reach the lodge, she bends over, out of breath. I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder, and she chirps out a giggle, another arrow to the heart—I’ve been struck by fucking Cupid, and it’s not even Valentine’s Day.

I run up the stairs, holding her legs, and take the keycard out of her back pocket. An older couple smiles at us as they pass. They probably think we’re getting ready to have sex, and I’m not entirely opposed to the idea; last night was phenomenal.

“Four minutes to spare.” I plop her on the bed.

“Maybe you could relax me,” she teases me, biting her bottom lip. “And I won’t need a massage.”

Before I can respond, there’s a rap on the door. “In-room spa services.”

“I’ll get out of your way. This will make you feel good.”

“Stay.”

She doesn’t have to ask me twice. “Okay.” I let the massage therapist inside, and it’s a fucking man. I’m not sure how this will go over.

“Ms. Dulce? I’ll set up here.”

She nods.

He slides his table out of the bag to set it up, locking it in place. He takes a face cushion out and covers the table with a white sheet. “I’ll go into the bathroom while you undress. Lie on your back, then pull the top sheet over you.”

Turning her back to me, she pulls the fluffy sweater over her head. Her ponytail swings as I walk up behind her and say over the shell of her ear, “This is going to be interesting.”

“He could give you a massage too.”

Cackle isn't the right word for the laugh that erupts from me.

"What? You're an athlete. You have men's hands on you all the time."

"Not in a bedroom." I slip my finger under the strap of her tank top. "Why do you always wear a tank top under your sweaters?" I kiss her shoulder, then pull the tank from her body and lay it on the couch.

"I would love to say to make men work for it, but it's because it lifts my boobs."

I pinch the clasp of her bra, and the straps sag onto her arms before she slinks out of it. "From what I remember, they're spectacular."

"Ms. Dulce, are you ready?"

"One more minute."

She snickers as she finishes undressing and slips under the sheet without me seeing anything but her backside. Even though she's average height, Brooke's body looks long and lean.

The massage therapist retrieves a heated blanket from his case and places it over her body, and she hums. I pour the rest of the wine into my glass and sit on the couch.

He lights candles, turns off the overhead light in the small foyer, and plays rainfall music. It's dark, and it appears he has done an excellent job at setting the mood.

"Ms. Dulce, to get the full benefits of the massage, we're not going to talk. If something I do is painful, then please let me know. My goal is to relieve any stress you may have and work out the muscle tension in your body. In a few minutes, I'll have you turn over onto your stomach. Okay?"

She nods, and he unscrews a bottle, pouring oil into his hand before rubbing them together. He spreads it over her face and massages her temples. Okay, this isn't so bad. I can handle this.

A few minutes later, his hands trail down to her neck and shoulders, making long motions, stretching those muscles. I get this massage all the time. Then his hands dip under the sheet to her chest. I can see the outline of her boobs;

he's not touching them but working all around them. Fuck, I should have massaged her myself.

He takes one arm out and wraps his hand around her bicep and presses his thumb into her arms with the other hand. He repeats the action, then switches sides. The purr that escapes Brooke's mouth takes me back to when I was fingering her at the bonfire. Damn, I don't want other men making her feel good.

He taps her and says, "Turn over. My back is to you."

Brooke responds slowly and adjusts the blanket as she turns over. He stands above her head, working on her upper back. It's not long until she's making tiny snoring noises.

He folds the sheet down to her lower back and oils his hands up once more, and his movements glide over her back in long, slow strokes before he changes to small, circular motions. "Ummm," Brooke says in her sleep, and my dick perks up. I already had a semi-erection but now, her voice sounds like it's calling for me.

Not wanting her to make any sexy noises due to another man's hands stroking her body, I stand, retrieve my wallet from my pocket, and take out two hundred dollars. I tap his shoulder and hand over the money. He looks at me like he's appalled, but I pull him towards the door and whisper, "I'll have your equipment returned tomorrow morning."

"But..."

"Do you need more?"

He rolls his eyes as I open the door and practically push him out. "This is fine, but I have an appointment at eleven."

"Perfect. I'll call the spa at ten to return everything."

I gently shut the door and glance at Brooke. She's beautiful. Now, it's time to put some oil on my hands. Mimicking the massage guys strokes, I run one hand down her back and then the other, making sure to cover all the spots. This time, I get a louder purr.

“That’s right. It’s me, Cookie.”

I kiss each shoulder blade. Then take the heated blanket and cover her back while I massage her thighs and calves and move down to her feet and toes. They’re so delicate, only one callous adorns the side of her little toe. I smile, probably from the ballet shoes. It’s the first flaw I’ve found.

I apply pressure up the inside of her thighs, and my name falls from her mouth. “Reed.”

“Yeah.” My finger grazes the apex of her thighs, but then I ease back down, working her hamstrings before I travel back up, slipping through her slick folds.

“What are you doing?”

“I couldn’t stand seeing another man’s hands on you.” I continue fondling her center until my finger finds her bundle of nerves just under the hood.

“Umm... ummm.”

It’s slow and easy. My fingers coated with her arousal work in and out until she’s begging for me to make her come. Roaming my hands over her body, I spread her legs so they’re hanging off the sides. With candlelight flickering, I gaze on her glistening flesh.

“Oh, yes. Yes,” she pants until my tongue has coaxed her first orgasm.

Furiously, I rid myself of my clothing and climb on top of her. Her stomach is on the table, and I have nowhere to brace myself. I’m going to make love to her in a way I’ve never done before. I reach underneath the table, feeling for something to hold onto, so Brooke doesn’t have to bear all my weight.

I slide into her wet center. Fuck, she feels like happiness. An emotion I’ve rarely felt. I push on the metal hook, and the table collapses. Our bodies fall to the ground, and I bounce on top of her as the table tries to fold up.

“I’m so sorry,” I say with my dick still inside her. “Are you hurt?”

“No, but don’t leave me hanging.”

Chapter Twenty-Four

BROOKE

As he rolls off me, I lose the warm feeling of him being inside me. We move to the bed to continue having sex in the most romantic way. Lying on my stomach, he slides both arms underneath me, one hand on my breast, and the other presses on the sensitive spot above my folds. He circles and presses as his erection glides in. Every stroke prolongs to intensify the pleasure. When he's all the way in, he mumbles constant praise, "My good girl, always sucking me in."

We share this moment with the cold embrace of winter outside the glass doors, and I find myself irresistibly enticed by the passion that radiates from within him. There's an unspoken connection, a captivating aura that makes me long to uncover the depths of his soul. It's as if his presence alone ignites a fire within me, a desire to experience life's adventures by his side.

He moves his hand to my waist, tugging me upward, driving so deep, I can't catch my breath. Our bodies rock, rhythmic and slow, creating a sheen of sweat on his stomach and my back.

Even though I can't see his eyes, this seems more intimate than anything I've experienced.

Maybe it's the words he whispers over my ear on his upstroke. "Perfect... Never want to let you go... So wet." Or maybe it's how he pinches my center

on the downstroke. Regardless, I'm one hundred percent positive I could look forever and never find a man who could please me as sexually as Reed.

I push my butt back so that he's balls deep inside me and swirl my hips. My breasts press into the comforter. My legs shake, and my core clenches.

"Hold on, baby. I promised you the galaxy." I squeeze my eyes as my toes curl. "You're fucking everything."

I shimmy my hand underneath my body and hold his wrist while his fingers work me, and his length seems to grow inside me. "I need... need to..."

The aroma of the essential oils combines with our sweat, creating the most intoxicating scent. A deep, primal growl reverberates from recesses of his soul. I push my head back against his shoulder as he bites my neck, and we rocket into another world filled with spattering clusters of intense colors, clear brilliant stars in the distance until we fall in the black abyss. "Ummm."

Reed's body blankets me, and I couldn't move if I wanted to. And if I died right now, this would be the best way to go—in the arms of a man who makes me feel special and safe.

We lie in bed, catching our breath. He draws on my stomach.

"I made a mess."

"A beautiful mess."

Smiles tug at our lips.

"Rinse off in the shower, and I'll fill the jacuzzi. Sound good?"

When I come out of the shower, I point a toe into the water, quickly taking it out. "It's hot."

He submerges himself first and then gently splashes the water over my foot until I sink into the soothing embrace of the bubbling water. Positioned on opposite sides, a comfortable distance separates us. Yet, to my delight, he takes it upon himself to lavish attention on my tired feet, skillfully massaging them with his gentle touch.

Only the sloshing of water lapping against the sides and whirring of the

jacuzzi fill the silence. It's not uncomfortable; it's just quiet. I suspect he doesn't know where to go from here. He said it was up to me.

This is the first time I've had a chance to admire his inked arms and the small one closer to his oblique muscles. I've been around plenty of hockey guys, and all of them are cut, but Reed's arms are bulky and well defined without flexing. The ink adds an edge to him. Some may think he's the dangerous broody guy, but to me, he's attentive, thoughtful, and yes, possessive.

I wiggle my foot away from him and drag it down on his arm. "When did you get your first tattoo?"

"Sixteen."

"Really? Your parents let you?"

"I wouldn't say they let me. I wouldn't say I had parents at that time in my life." He stares blankly over my shoulder like he's lost in a memory. "This tattoo serves as my voice, a form of self-expression when my mom showed little to no concern. She abandoned me, leaving me to navigate life on my own. But having art etched into my skin gave me a glimmer of control. It's a tangible reminder that despite their absence, I hold the power to shape my identity and carve out my own path."

The pain in his voice sounds like sandpaper scraping against rough wood. His eyes are focused just over my shoulder until he looks down at the water and rolls the waves of the jacuzzi with his hands. I decide to leave it there. If he wants to tell me more, he will.

"Which one was the first one?" I ask, changing the subject slightly.

He looks down at his left arm and points to the lion on his bicep.

"It's beautiful and intricate." The swirls make the mane look like filigree. It's all one color, a deep blue ink with a tremendous amount of detail. The lion is standing upright with his paws up in a boxing motion and with claws extended. "Why a lion?"

"A reminder to always be brave no matter the cost." He plays with my toes. "When I didn't have a stepdad, I was the little man of the house and whether my mom knew it or not, I always wanted to keep her safe. At night, I checked

the doors to make sure they were locked. When my stepdad came into the picture, and they sent me to boarding school, it was a shock. I had never been without my mom. It wasn't like Hagan and Harper, whose family came to see them all the time. I had to find the courage to stay. To be on my own at twelve.

“It took courage for me to follow your dad to your house. When I saw my reflection in the mirror after practice. The lion reminded me that whatever obstacles there may be, I owe it to myself to face them head on. We're obviously sexually compatible, and I enjoy moments like this, talking whether by text or in person, but where do *you* want this to go?” He points between us.

I shrug. “I swore of hockey players after Caleb's dad got what he wanted from me. We dated for a month, but it was mostly going to parties and looking back, it was superficial. But my dad told the players that I was off limits and vice versa.”

“So, you started something with the hockey player out of spite?”

“Not exactly; it was subconscious. He was nice looking and even though he was a freshman, he was *the* guy. The school newspaper couldn't get enough of him. One party led to a hookup. We didn't tell my dad and well, you know the rest.”

He caresses my shin, lapping the bubbles over and over. “How did you handle the pregnancy?”

I shake my head. “The only way I knew how. I grew up without a mom. We have that in common. Dad used to push his feelings down, so I did the same. Quit my sorority and freaked out by myself. Withdrew from school. Then we moved here as soon as Dad got out of his contract.”

“Did you ever have second thoughts about informing Caleb's dad about him?”

“Of course. And I still do. But if he didn't like me enough to be faithful, and not to be violent, what kind of father would he be? I want a man like my father. One who will stay and be there for his child no matter what.”

“That's a good goal to have for your little boy. How did you tell your dad?”

His hands slide up and down my shins and around to my calves, soothing me.

I chuckle. “It wasn’t a conversation any girl wants to have with their dad. But we were sitting at the kitchen table. I waited until I was four months pregnant before I told him. Reed, I was so scared. The last thing I ever wanted to do was disappoint my dad, but I did.”

“He seems to love both of you based on the text I saw.”

“He does. But his face was riddled with disappointment, especially when I refused to tell him who the father was. Eventually, he heard the guys talking about me being at hockey parties, and he figured it out. I was always careful not to be in any pictures. And the players were scared shitless that Dad would bench them. Dad quit his job the next day. Had to pay back two million dollars to the university and took the job here.”

Reed’s wheels are spinning. I can literally see him thinking. “Coach took the job at Kentucky because it was low profile, where the fans don’t care anything about hockey. To protect you, right?”

I nod.

“The team doesn’t even know Coach has a daughter. At least no one has ever mentioned it. Technically, he’s never told us that you’re off limits.” His lip curls up as a smile stretches, making me tighten my core. God, he’s hot.

“He thinks I’ve learned my lesson, and he still wants me to stay away from hockey guys.”

“I can’t say I blame him.” He reaches for my hands and pulls me into his lap. “Back to the question. What do you want?”

I move my leg and straddle him and rock over his length that isn’t at full strength but with a few strokes, it hardens.

“Cookie, I love the confidence you’re gaining, and as good as it feels, and as much as I want a round two, I’d rather have this conversation. I’ve lived through many disappointments in my life, some of my own making, but my lion gives me courage. The bravery to tell you how much I want you in my life despite the obvious drawbacks of your dad being my coach.”

“You don’t consider me having a son... a drawback?”

“Not at all.” There’s not an ounce of hesitation in his voice. “Any little person who is part of you, has to be incredible.”

I kiss his lips and then lean my nose against his. “What if we hang out for a few weeks and make sure this is something we both still want to pursue. If it is, then we’ll tell my dad, and I’ll introduce you to Caleb.”

“Can I meet Caleb during the hangout weeks? I know how important is for... us to meet. If he hates me, then it doesn’t matter how much you and I like each other. I know you’ll do what’s best for him.”

His eyes meet mine, and those stormy gray-blue eyes seem clearer, and his gaze doesn’t budge. “Okay. It’s a maybe.”

He runs his fingers through my wet hair, separating the strands and twirling them around his finger. “I need to make a rule.”

“A rule?” I ask.

“Yeah, no sex for our first three hangouts. I don’t want you using me for sex.”

I splash water in his face, and it starts an all-out splash war. His laugh is like the pretty bow on top of the most beautifully wrapped present—heartwarming.

Chapter Twenty-Five

REED

We lie in bed, reading a billionaire romance where we alternate reading the male and female points of view.

“The scene where her first love builds the house she always dreamed of, even though they aren’t together... swoon,” Brooke says as she wiggles her head right under my neck.

It’s as though we’ve been lying in bed together for years.

“What do you dream of, Cookie?”

She tilts her head, flashing me those playful round eyes. “To have a big family and produce musicals, plays, and eventually movies. What about you?”

I trace her lips with my finger. “The NHL and to find someone who loves me as much as I love them. I’ve never had that... ever.”

Not a sound disturbs the stillness, creating a void that invites introspection.

Have I found her? Can I have the NHL and her at the same time?

I put the book on the bedside table and cradle her body against mine as we drift off to sleep.

When we wake, her leg is thrown over my thighs. I kiss her forehead. Brooke and I kiss and talk non-stop about Caleb, and I can't wait to meet him. But also, about how I enjoy scary movies, and she hates them. Why she walked away from figure skating, wanting to spend more time with her dad. And her favorite game is Risk.

Her dad is supposed to return with Caleb at noon, so we pack up and leave the snow-covered resort in separate cars, but I do follow her home. The roads are icy and as her boyfriend, it's my job to make sure she arrives home safely.

I can't believe I'm secretly dating my coach's daughter who is also a single mom, but the instant connection Brooke and I possess is the first in my lifetime and based on what she said about Caleb's sperm donor, she feels the same way.

I'm sitting in my car, waiting for her dad to return with Caleb. Out of nowhere, my mind drifts to Coach saying, *"I coached their center for a year and believe me when I say he's an ass. He doesn't score. Got it? I want to shut them out."*

Could that guy be Caleb's father? No, surely she wouldn't date a douchebag like him. But then I think about when I was eighteen years old. I didn't make the best decisions.

I hear a little boy's voice, and Brooke's door swings open. He leaps into her arms, talking a mile a minute, and the warm, loving smile on her face is as priceless as it is wide. Caleb is her whole world.

Will Caleb welcome a third person into his family? And will I be a better man in his life than my stepfather was in mine? Inwardly, I laugh because it wouldn't take much to be better than him.

I pull out of the parking lot and head home to change clothes before going to make an appearance at the Children's Hospital. Logan and Harper asked me to visit a pre-teen boy who loves hockey. His favorite professional team is the New York Rangers and college is UMich. I'm just glad we don't have a midnight game.

As soon as I step inside the house, Harper hurls a hundred questions at me.

“Did you find her? Was she receptive? What did you talk about? Are you a couple? We can double date. No, wait, triple date.”

All of her questions give me an idea. My roommates would never tell anyone about Brooke and me if I asked them not to. We can hang out here with them, and that will increase our chances of keeping our clothes on and my dick in my pants.

Books are strewn all over the couch. Papers cover the coffee table. I tease, “You don’t have time to hear all about it.”

Harper throws a pillow at me. She asks Logan, “Can you put my notes in the kitchen?”

Logan leans down, kissing her cheek. “Sure, princess. Do you need something to drink while I’m in there?”

She shakes her head and when he’s gone, she pats the couch, and I jump over the back, sitting where Logan normally does beside her. He comes back in, shaking his head. “I’m really going to have to get you a girlfriend.”

I put my arm around Harper. “No, I’ve got one.” The cheesiest grin takes up my whole face.

“A girl who isn’t pregnant with your roommate’s baby.” He walks around and removes my arm.

I can’t hold it in. I’m like a kid in a candy store, and I’ve not felt like this since I was young... happy and free. “Brooke and I are hanging out.”

“You couldn’t close the deal?” Logan asks in a slightly higher octave.

“It’s complicated. Not only is she my coach’s daughter, she...” I swallow the lump refusing to move in my throat. “She has a little boy, and the dad isn’t in the picture.”

Harper’s mouth drops, and Logan’s eyebrows shoot up his forehead.

“So... this stays between us for a few weeks. We’re going to hang out here or at her house and see if we have more in common than...”

Harper’s stomach is getting big, so instead of standing and hugging me, she

waves her hands for me to come in for a hug. She says in my ear, “Does she know about...?”

I shake my head. “This is why we need to get to know each other before telling Coach or spending time with her son.”

“Our lips are sealed. Aren’t they, Logan?”

“Of course. Anything to keep Reed from hitting on my girl.” He’s joking but loves to rib me about it. The thing is I never had a romantic interest in Harper. Well, maybe when we were in boarding school.

I kiss Harper on the cheek and punch Logan in the arm. “Thanks. I have to change and get to the hospital. Do you want to go?”

Logan responds before Harper is able. He’s protective of her and his baby girl. “Harper would spend every waking hour there if she could, but she has a test on Monday and has to study.”

“Look at the whiteboard, but I’m almost positive none of us have anything going on tomorrow afternoon. Invite Brooke over for game night.” Harper grins.

“I’ll think about it.”

Of course, the mere mention of game night has all my roommates in pajamas. So, I run out to a little boutique on Ashland Avenue that Harper and Adalee are always raving about.

“May I help you?”

“I’m looking for pajamas for game night. His and hers.”

The sales associate is a student, and I believe she’s in the Tri-Delt sorority. Her hair is pulled back in a sleek ponytail, and she’s wearing pearl stud earrings. “Do they need to match? Or do you want them custom made?”

“Custom? No, I need them now.”

She laughs. “We have a heat press so we can put whatever you want on them.”

“Oh, okay. Maybe.”

Guiding me through the corridors of the converted old house, she leads me into a cozy, tucked-away room nestled at the back of the building. The house has been transformed into a charming retail space, filled with neatly arranged shelves and racks adorned with an array of clothing items. Her voice resonates with warmth and excitement as she presents me with the sight of perfectly coordinated matching sets.

“You’ll definitely need extra-large. What size for your friend? Male or female?” She perks a brow.

“Female. She’s a ballet dancer, so maybe a small or medium. She’s about this tall.” I hold my hand to my chest.

She flicks through the rack and pulls out a pale-pink shirt with seafoam-green sleeves and polka-dot flannel joggers. “Would these colors look good on her?”

“Yeah, her hair is that strawberry-blond color. You’re good at this.”

“Thanks. I’m a fashion merchandising major. I hope to design one day. Now, let’s find a pair for you, and then I’ll design something for the front.”

Not once does she flirt with me. Maybe she just knows I’m taken, not that most girls on campus care.

A half hour later, I’m back at home. I climb the stairs and change into my pajamas, brush my hair and teeth, and laugh at how ridiculous I look. I throw a t-shirt over the pajama top so we can unveil our pajamas together.

My roommates are downstairs, making appetizers. Hagan just got home from an away game road trip, so it’s the first time we’ve all been home at the same time in a week or more. One of us is always gone.

I sneak downstairs and notice how Hagan has Adalee pulled into his side, while they’re making a charcuterie board. He pops an olive into her mouth, then they kiss. Logan and Harper are making snicker doodles and red velvet

balls.

Will Brooke and I get to this point?

The doorbell rings, and they all turn to see me over their shoulders. “She’s here.”

The truth dawns on me, revealing that this is a new experience for me—having a girl over for something more than just a physical encounter. It’s a realization that brings both excitement and a sense of vulnerability that I’m not accustomed to.

Inhaling deeply, I open the door to find Brooke in the knit cap I bought her at the lodge. Her ponytail has a pale-pink scarf-like ribbon tied in a knot with the tails hanging, which matches the pajamas I bought.

“Hey.”

I shut the door behind me. “Hey. You look amazing.”

“If you think the Michelin man is amazing. It’s freezing.”

I lean down and take her cheeks in my hands and kiss her shimmering lips. They’re a bit sticky and smell like cinnamon rolls. “You switched from peppermint.”

“I need to keep you guessing. A man like you might get bored with boring old me.”

“You underestimate yourself.” I pepper her neck with quick kisses. “Are you ready? Because I would be happy kissing you on the porch for two hours.”

“I’m ready to play something other than Hi-Ho Cherry O.”

I slip her hand in mine and push the door open, and she steps into my house, to play games as my girlfriend. This isn’t what I expected yesterday morning when I found out she had a son.

We walk into the kitchen, and the firing squad is lined up against the counter, no doubt wanting me to sweat.

Hagan is the first to say, “Nice to see you again, Brooke.”

Her eyes graze over each person and then to me, looking down at my plaid flannels. She clears her throat. “Thanks for inviting me. Did I miss the dress code part of the invitation?”

“Come to my room, and I’ll explain.”

“No rush, we have five more minutes on the cookies,” Harper says.

When we get to my room, I point to the boutique shopping bag on my bed. “This is for you. But let’s take off the stocking cap. It’s not snowing inside.” I wrap my arms around her waist and feel her body vibrating. “It’s pajamas,” I whisper into her ear. “They know all about us, and they promised they wouldn’t tell a soul. I didn’t want you and me to be the only ones without pajamas.”

She pinches the gold and cream shimmering tissue paper from the bag, reaches in, and pulls out her gift. The pants are on top, and she holds them next to mine. Then she pulls out the top. “Cookie,” she says with a smile. They have chocolate chip cookies printed with the nickname I gave her underneath.

“Why do you call me Cookie? I’ve never asked.”

“Because your freckles look like chocolate chips. They’re not red.”

She lifts them to her heart and says, “This may be the most thoughtful gift I’ve ever received. Thank you.”

“I like you, and I really want to make it past the first-round cuts.”

She looks up to me under her full lashes. “Me too, but it’s not just about how we feel about each other. It’s how you feel and deal with me having a three-year-old. He’s always going to be my priority.”

“Exactly how it should be.” She presses on her toes and gives me a long, closed-lipped kiss. “The bathroom is across the hall, or I can step out while you change.”

“You could help me.” Her words, tinged with a seductive undertone, have a hint of playfulness and desire. As if she were purring, her voice carries a sensuous quality, accompanied by a soft exhale that escapes her lips. It

becomes evident that Brooke is challenging the boundaries of our relationship, subtly testing my commitment to keep it within the realm of getting to know each other better.

I peel her out of her jeans and kiss her belly button as I do. Then I pull her sweater over her head, revealing a green tank top. “Do you have these in every color?”

“Almost,” she says as she turns her back, removing the tank. Snatching the top from my hands, she slips it over her bra.

“You’re adorable,” I say as I scan her from head to toe. Her socks are covered in penguins. “I’m giving you fair warning. My roommates take competitiveness on a whole other level.”

We lace our hands together, descending the stairs prepared for battle.

“Oh my God, they’re so cute,” Adalee says, as she looks at Hagan.

“Adorable.”

“Fuck off. We couldn’t be the only ones not in pajamas. I think this is the first pair I’ve had since I was eight years old, unlike you fuckers.”

Harper raises her eyebrows. “Are you going to show us your pajama top? We all want to see if they match.”

As I pull my t-shirt off, my pajama shirt rides up, and Brooke inhales a deep breath. “Don’t worry, what’s mine is yours, whenever we’re out of the get to know you phase.” Her face turns the shade of a cherry.

I adjust my raglan-sleeved pajama shirt, and everyone is silent. If I thought Brooke’s face was red before, now, it’s the color of fire.

A collective aww comes from my roommates’ mouths.

Brooke says, “Cookie’s boyfriend?”

“Just because we’re only telling these assholes doesn’t make it less true.”

Harper leans over with her baby belly between us and hugs me. “I love grown-up, Reed.”

“Me too. Name the game, and I’ll win.” I shrug out of the embrace.

Logan asks, “Charades or Pictionary?”

We play Pictionary first—girls versus guys. I learn quickly that guys wait until you’re completely finished drawing before giving answers, while the girls team draws a line, and the others immediately shout answers. “Knife. Snake. Rake. Chicken leg.”

I look at Brooke. “Chicken leg?”

“Don’t judge. We’re winning seven to three.”

After intermission, we play charades, but we draw numbers for teams. Brooke, Logan, and Adalee on one team. Hagan, Harper, and yours truly are on the other team. Hagan and Harper, being twins, have this innate ability to know what each other is thinking. Plus, when you look up *game night* on Wikipedia, I’m pretty sure it was invented by their family. They’ve played together dozens of times.

Brooke is acting out her phrase. She holds up four fingers, and Adalee yells, “Four.” Brooke touches her nose, indicating she’s correct.

Then she holds an imaginary bouquet and walks slowly. Logan says, “Bride. Wedding.”

Brooke touches her nose after he says wedding.

I love watching Brooke in her pajamas, having fun with my friends. I realize I should be going to church and thanking God every day for putting these people in my life.

Brooke lies on the floor, folds her hands over her chest, and closes her eyes.

Logan and Adalee both shout, “Four Weddings and a Funeral.”

She bounces off the floor and hugs Adalee. “Yes.” Logan slaps her a high-five.

But they can’t compete with Hagan and Harper, who literally act out one word, and the other one gets it. We agreed the first team to seven correct answers wins since we only had a couple of hours before Brooke had to

leave. Our team has six correct answers, so we only need one more.

This time, I'm acting out the movie. I hold up one finger. Hagan says, "One word." I touch my nose.

Then I put my arms out horizontally and tip my head back just a bit, and the twins shout in unison, "Titanic." Then they do some twin dance bump thing.

Brooke has an ear-splitting smile on her face as she watches us celebrate.

Logan goes into the kitchen and retrieves a tiara. He places it on Harper's head. "Here you go, Princess. She's the only one that won twice."

The girls go into the kitchen, and Hagan just stares at me. "Man, I never thought I would see this side of you. I knew it was there. I hope you don't fuck it up."

"Me too. Me too."

Logan smacks my back.

The girls return. "Thanks for having me. I need to get my clothes."

"I'll run up and get them for you. Or do you want to change?"

Her eyes dart around. "I should change. My neighbor might wonder who I was studying with in pajamas."

"Nicole? Does she have a little boy named Martin?"

Her eyes widen as she stammers, "How do you know Nicole?"

"He babysat for her in the summer," Harper chimes in.

"Correction, I helped her build a raised garden and some other handyman-type things."

Brooke's eyes narrow. "She had an emergency and needed me to stay with Martin for a few hours."

"Oh, small world."

Something changes in Brooke's demeanor. I'm not quite sure what it is so I follow her upstairs. "What's wrong?"

“Nothing. I really need to go.” She pulls off her pajamas and changes back into her jeans and sweater.

I grab her knit cap and put it on her like I did the other night. “Our first hangout isn’t ending on a lie. Tell me.”

She shifts her weight, spies a spot on the floor, and says, “Nicole gets around. I know it’s none of my business.”

“Stop. I never had sex or anything else with Nicole. I hadn’t received any NIL deals when I first got here. I put up a sign in the student center saying I would do odd jobs. That’s it. I promise.”

Her shoulders relax, and she looks at me with her expressive eyes. “Really?”

“Really.” We chip away at the distance between us, and she lets me taste her lips and explore her mouth. “You taste like cream cheese icing now.”

She shoves the pajamas in her purse luggage as I call it. When we get to the kitchen, Adalee hands her a plastic baggie full of cookies. “These are for Caleb.”

I swear Brooke’s eyes tear up. My roommates never mentioned her being a single mom during our game night. But Adalee has had her share of needing a family and is a genuinely nice person. She hugs Brooke, and then it’s Harper’s turn.

“Thank you. I had a great time. He’s a sweet connoisseur, so he’ll love them.”

I mumble, “Sweet, funny.” I grab her hand. “I’ll walk you out.”

When I return, the firing squad, otherwise known as my roommates, have shit-eating grins on their faces.

“What?”

“Cookie’s boyfriend? Even Logan isn’t that cheesy.” Hagan laughs. “I’m not sure I want to know why you call her Cookie.” He wiggles his eyebrows. “I think I’m still in shock that you’re in a relationship, much less with your coach’s daughter. You must have a death wish.”

“It’s not ideal, but I’ve dealt with worse, and she’s worth it. Thanks for tonight. It was exactly what we needed... to have fun together... take the sexual part out and see if we had fun together. Which we did. It means a lot to me that we can hang out here without anyone knowing until we’re sure we want to move forward.”

Harper says, “Roomie hug.”

“That’s not a thing,” Hagan replies.

“It is now. And she couldn’t stop staring at Reed all night. We’re going to triple date all the time.” Harper extends her arms, and we appease her. She’s pregnant, cute, and glowing, which makes her pretty hard to resist. “And did you see how Roscoe lay beside her? I think he smelled her little boy on her clothes.”

All I can do is smile. It’s been the best day of my life except yesterday and the day before. And the other days Brooke Sweet was in my presence.

Chapter Twenty-Six

BROOKE

Why did I agree to no sex until we knew each other better? I know all I need to know. Reed Bauer is smoking hot and caring. I haven't seen him in a few days, but we've texted during the day, and he's called me after Caleb's in bed. We did have dinner at his house one night with Harper and Logan. They wanted to have dinner early, so I squeezed in a few hours before picking Caleb up from daycare. Logan and Reed cooked shrimp scampi, and it was mouthwatering.

He requested to see photos of Caleb. As a result, I'm regularly sending him two or three pictures a day, along with details about where we were and what we were doing. He seems genuinely interested, consistently asking numerous questions. Now, I know his favorite food is fettuccini Alfredo, and his favorite vacation spot is Banff, Canada. He said it was one of the only places that he had seen that felt undisturbed. And he was quite the prankster as a kid. I've mainly seen the teasing sexual beast or the serious side of Reed until game night. Having that time together has been instrumental in our getting to know each other.

The hockey team plays two games this week. They have an away game tonight against Ohio State and a home game this Saturday. I want to go, but I know I can't unless I steer clear of Reed until we tell my dad.

I sit through class today, looking up YouTube videos of Reed playing

hockey. I still can't believe my tattooed, misunderstood boyfriend went to boarding school with Harper and Hagan. In these videos from Banning Prep, he wears the same smile he has with me. But in the ones from Broadhurst U, his face is like stone, expressionless most of the time.

After watching Reed's games this year, I've observed that he plays hockey with a raw and intense attitude. Dad mentioned that Reed has faced numerous challenges in his life, although my father was unaware of my connection to his player at that time. Without disclosing any personal or confidential details, my dad's concern for Reed was evident by the tone of his voice. But why? What is Reed carrying on his broad, muscular shoulders?

I meticulously make a record of the dates and notice two years missing in Reed's hockey career. To clarify, I haven't come across any videos from his junior or senior year of high school. After his sophomore year at Banning Prep, this remarkable talent, whose appearance defies conventional standards of attractiveness, fell off the face of the earth.

He just has an aura. Even Logan and Hagan seem to stare at him. Reed's stormy gray eyes make it hard to look away. He's not dark complected but has a golden skin tone and add the tats and the eight pack. I can't believe little me has caught his eye.

"Mommy, Mommy. Is that Gwandad's team?"

I slam the computer closed like I was watching porn. "Yeah, baby. It was an old game from earlier this year, but they play in an hour. How about we get your bath done and when we finish, we'll make some popcorn and watch the first period before bedtime."

He jumps up and down. "Yay."

After I wash his hair and his body, I give him his dinosaurs and let him play. I sit on the side of the tub, watching my precious little guy. I wonder if I should have given his father the opportunity to meet him and be in his life. *Was I or am I being selfish?*

My mind wanders to Reed's response to the picture I sent of Caleb and me at Halloween this year. Even though Caleb loves dinosaurs, he wanted to be Lightning McQueen, and I was Sally. We made our costumes out of boxes.

He wore a red sweatsuit underneath, and I wore blue.

Reed: *You do know Lightning and Sally were romantically involved?*

Me: *Stop it.*

Reed: *But you can be my Sally. I'll even buy a Corvette.*

Me: *I think he was a Mustang.*

Reed: *Nope. I grew up on Cars. Definitely a Corvette.*

Enamored with the gentle aspect of Reed's personality, he's not what he appears to most people.

At first glance, he seems intimidating with his brooding and reserved personality. His tattoos further contribute to the perception of him as a "bad boy," and observing him playing games gives the impression he possesses the finesse of a figure skater, while also harboring an emotional intensity that would make one wary of crossing paths with him on the ice.

"Okay, it's time for the game. Let's get you dry." I rub the towel over his head, and his waves spring tighter. I watch him towel himself off and look at the puddle on the ground as he steps off the bathmat.

We're wearing our pajamas—Caleb in dinosaurs and me in my Cookie pjs. It just feels right since I'm going to watch Reed play. The popcorn is popped. The milk is poured, and my laptop is on the site streaming the hockey game.

"There's Gwandad. He's on TV." Caleb leans his stomach on the kitchen table with his pudgy little fists under his chin, completely mesmerized by the game. I understand. Hockey is in his blood. Mine too.

I realize that Reed has been moved to the first line, and my heart leaps with excitement. They start the first period, and Reed skates with precision and determination. He's talked about Flynn and Dawes, his linemates and friends.

He hasn't told them about dating me. He knows they wouldn't slip up intentionally, but he, no we, can't afford anyone to know yet.

Reed's line advances, and he passes the puck to Dawes. Dawes flicks it with a wrist shot to Flynn, and he launches it back out to Reed, and he makes a

move on the defender and scores.

Caleb yells, “Goal.”

There’s only three minutes left in the period, so I let him finish watching. He’s jabbering, “*hockey this* and *hockey that*” before we settle in his bed to snuggle. I read him three books as his lids get heavy. “I love you. You’re the bestest.”

“You’re the bestest, Mommy.”

We say the same thing every night. He turns on his side and puts one arm around my neck. I peck his little lips and then his forehead and sneak out of his room.

I take the laptop to my room and watch Reed play the game he was born to play. It’s effortless. Don’t get me wrong. I know he works hard and probably has since he was Caleb’s age, but when he’s on the ice, he glides and strikes with the precision of a snake bite. When the defenders least expect it, he strikes.

The Stallions win the game, and Reed’s being interviewed by the conference reporter. “Wow, your line was moved up today, and you made Coach Sweet look good.”

“Wynward has a little injury, so I’m glad I could step in and help the team get the win. I’m proud of Dawes and Flynn; they rose to the occasion. We’ve worked hard outside of mandatory practices to be in perfect harmony, and tonight, we played that way. Thanks to Coach for believing in us.”

The female reporter stares at him with her perfectly glowing face, manicured eyebrows, and bright-red lips, but he doesn’t even seem to see her. His hair is damp from sweat. He has taken his jersey off, and his full chest is on display with the exception of a t-shirt strewn over one shoulder. A twinge of jealousy courses through me, not over the reporter, but wishing I was there beside him. “You were perfection tonight. And it’s the first game all season that you didn’t have to go to the box.”

He runs his fingers through his hair, making little paths and chuckles. “Well, I have incentive to stay on Coach’s good side.” Then he winks into the camera. She and whoever is watching will believe he’s talking about staying

on the first line. But after that wink, I know he's referring to me.

A few minutes later, he messages me.

"Go to sleep. I can't be texting you on the bus. I'll call when I get home."

Four hours later, I hear his voice talking to me and only me.

"Hey. Nice win."

"Thanks. I've always been the best one on the team, but your dad made me work my way up. It felt good."

"It's good to be challenged, like you challenged me to give us a chance." I breathe heavily. "I'm glad you didn't let me having a child stop you from giving us a chance. Aren't you freaked out?"

"No. Not yet anyway. Maybe I will be when I meet him," he says, honestly. "How did you feel the first time you brought him home and your parents weren't there with you to help? Did you freak out?"

The sound of his voice feels like he's caressing my skin even though we're not together. A throaty laugh escapes my lips. "I remember holding him in my arms and looking around the room, and it began to spin. I put him in his bassinet beside my bed, then I wiggled under the covers and cried."

"Why?"

"Because I was scared. Frightened that I would be a terrible mom like my own. Upset that I didn't make a baby with someone I loved. Happy that I had this tiny baby. Half the time, I wonder how we get through the day. It seems like something is always going wrong... until you came along."

"Is that right?" If I could see him, I know he's smiling. It's a phrase he says often.

"You have a calming effect on me."

He scoffs, "Most of the time we've been together, you've been screaming my name."

"Stop."

“You’re blushing, aren’t you?”

I shake my head without answering him. We both know I am. “Will I see you today? Come by the café? Or meet me in the library? I have two hours between class and work.”

“I’ll let you know. I have mandatory study hall today and a paper to write. In fact, I’m interviewing the woman getting her PhD in kinesiology.”

“Kandy? What’s the premise of your paper?”

“Yeah, her card says Kandace. How static and dynamic stretching can improve performance.”

Images of him contorting his body to achieve a different angle or lengthening himself over me makes my mouth water. “You’ll have to show me how you stretch sometime.”

We talk for hours until it’s time for me to get up and start my day. Reed doesn’t have practice this morning since they got in late, but I know Dad is already in the office when I get a text letting me know he’ll be flying to Toronto to watch a high school senior and will be gone for a couple of days.

The pitter patter of feet slam against the floor as Caleb crawls onto the bed. “Mommy, I want Apple Jacks.”

After two bowls of Apple Jacks and a banana, I fill my tote bag and sling it over my shoulder. Inwardly, I laugh about Reed calling it luggage. But it has everything I need for Caleb and me.

It’s forty degrees, and there is a cluster of parents with kids outside the daycare building. We weave our way through. The chatter around me doesn’t register until I see the note taped on the door.

We apologize for the inconvenience, but the daycare will be closed effective immediately. We will be closed for five to seven days due to the flu outbreak and staff shortages. You’ll be contacted via email regarding the reopening date.

No. No. No.

The reason everyone is gathered here now becomes clear. None of us are sure

what to do in this situation. We bring our children to daycare because we have no other choice. We don't have a grandparent or parent around to babysit. I join a group of acquaintances, and yet we struggle to come up with a solution. One suggestion is to take turns watching the kids in small groups at the student center. However, all of us have class at nine, which is why we drop off our children around eight.

Before going to class, I usually grab a coffee and a pastry.

Since my dad is leaving town, I call my neighbor. Unfortunately, her little boy has strep throat. Next, I contact Lettie. When she answers, she sounds like horse shit. I don't know what it means, but Lettie says it all the time. I guess it's a Southern thing. She either has the granddaddy of all hangovers, or she's sick too.

"Sorry, this flu has kicked my ass," she says as she coughs and sneezes at the same time.

This is when I wish I had more friends. I regret isolating myself from potential friendships just because I have a child and was concerned about what others might think.

"Why don't you call your bad boy? Maybe he can take Caleb to breakfast at the student center while you're in class."

"Yeah, right. I'll run some chicken soup over to you later."

"No, I don't want you getting sick. Then Caleb won't have anyone to take care of him."

"Feel better. Let me know if you change your mind."

I'd rather have one Lettie than twenty people who don't truly know me. She stated what I've been feeling lately—what would happen to Caleb if I got sick or injured? Who would be able to pick up the reins and take care of him? Dad? He'd love to, but there would be no way with his schedule.

I may need to work more hours or hire a part-time nanny. Based on my pay rate, a babysitter will have to do.

Kissing Caleb's cheek, I say, "I guess we'll go back home."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

REED

The Sugar Shack. I never imagined shopping for a girl in the upscale businesses along this street, but my need for Brooke to know I'm more than a hockey player, more than a broody asshole, is taking control.

The moment I step inside, a world of Southern delicacies unfolds before me. From the irresistible allure of bourbon maple bacon to the succulent indulgence of chocolate-covered grapes, every corner of the Sugar Shack is filled with delightful surprises. S'mores, lovingly dipped in velvety white chocolate, stand in tempting rows, while towering gummy bears adorn the shelves, demanding attention. Of course, traditional pies, cakes, and cookies line the glass cases, but it's the bakery's commitment to the unconventional that truly sets it apart.

I've bought Harper a peanut butter cinnamon roll. The rest of my roommates have sworn off sweets for the next month.

After I pick out the cake pop flavors for Brooke, the salesperson arranges sprigs of holly, making it look like a real flower arrangement.

Knowing Brooke would be in class, I drive straight to her apartment. With everything in place, I carefully position the vase of delectable cake pops right in front of her apartment door and wish I could see Brooke's face when she sees them. I've never sent a girl flowers or bought a corsage. The last dance I

attended was my sophomore year at Bannington Prep where I flew solo.

All of those teenage firsts were taken from me.

As I turn, Brooke is fumbling with her keys while holding her little boy's hand. Fuck, she didn't want me to meet him yet. What is she doing home? I dart my eyes around, thinking about hiding.

She walks two more steps until there's nowhere for me to go. Brooke's eyes rake up my body until they land on mine with horror in her eyes. She doesn't even say hi. I pick up the vase.

"Delivery for Brooke Dulce," I say, attempting to play it off like I haven't fucked her ten times in all sorts of ways.

Her lids fall, and her shoulders are up in her ears. "Thank you." She nudges me out of the way and unlocks her door. "Caleb, go on inside. Mommy will be there in a minute. I need to pay the delivery man."

Did she just push a shiv through my heart? It's insulting, being reduced to a delivery man. Not that it isn't a good gig. I hear the guys in the brown trucks make bank.

I take my eyes off her for a moment to look at her son. He has her big, round eyes, and his big smile slams into my heart. His rosy, red lips showcase his mouthful of tiny white chiclets.

When he disappears, she asks, "Missing me already?"

Do I kiss her or keep my distance? What is the protocol for someone with a child? We were going to wait weeks until I met him, but now, I've thrown a wrench into our plans. Our goal was to make sure we were compatible, and the newness didn't wear off quickly. She assumes that it will for me, knowing there have been a plethora of women before her. But none have been her.

I haven't been attracted to a single girl in a chunky sweater who carries luggage before and definitely not one with a child.

"God, I've missed you since you left after game night. Phone calls aren't enough, Brooke. This no-sex deal is killing me. I need to be inside you. Eating you. Touching you. Kissing you," I whisper over the shell of her ear,

and she turns a shade of coral that matches her jacket. “I brought these, thinking you were in class.”

“That was the plan, but the daycare is closed due to the flu. Dad is traveling. Lettie and Nicole are sick. So, I’m missing class. Do you think Harper knows anyone who babysits?”

A thought crosses my mind that I’m positive she’ll nix before I’ve finished my sentence. Removing my cap, I tousle my hair, wondering if I should suggest it. “She does.”

“Who?”

“Me.” I grab her hand while she shakes her head back and forth. “It’s just a few hours. Your friend Nicole trusted me with her son.”

“No, there has to be someone else. I can’t let him get to know you and want you around all the time until I know if you want to be around.”

I snort. “I want to be around, Cookie. I bought you a flower arrangement of cake pops.” I gather her in my arms. “In ancient days, if the man brought food and berries to a woman, she knew he was hers to protect and feed.”

“Neanderthal,” she says as she furrows her brows. “But we decided to wait a few weeks.” She pushes to her toes and pecks my lips quickly, then scans the surrounding area to make sure we weren’t seen. Brooke definitely wants to keep our relationship on the down-low.

“It’s already been over a week. Life happens. Shit happens, and we make the best of the situation. It just so happens that I’m free today. I’ll call in sick to study hall. Your dad is gone, and the assistant coach that oversees study hall works with my line. Currently, I’m in good standing with the coaching staff.”

She breaks the hold I have on her. “You played fantastic.”

“I did.”

“So sure of yourself.”

“I’m good at what I do, Brooke. I won’t apologize for that. A chef doesn’t apologize for being able to cook. A certain ballet teacher, soon-to-be Broadway producer, has given me a new lease on life.”

“Okay, okay. I just don’t want my dad to find out.”

“If it will make you feel better, I’ll call the assistant coach and ask him if I can do study hall this evening, after you’re back home. I’ll say I have a contract to sign for a commercial.” Glancing at my watch, I add, “You have thirty-two minutes to get to class, so let’s do this.”

She pushes her tongue against her cheek and sighs as she opens the door. “Follow me.”

I’m in over my head, but I won’t let on. What am I going to do with a three-year-old?

“Caleb, my friend Reed is going to stay with you while I go to class.” He hides behind her leg, sneaking peeks at me. “He wants to play dinosaurs with you.”

“Hey. When I was little, my favorite book was about dinosaurs.” I crouch down to meet him eye to eye. “It was about a Pteranodon showing off his yawn.”

A confused scowl passes over his face.

“I have my laptop in the car. I’ll go get it and find the book on video and read it to you while you look at the pictures.” This earns me a smile of relief from Brooke. “I’ll be right back. It will be fine.”

When I come back in with my backpack in tow, she laughs. “Okay, promise you’ll call or text if you need anything.”

She walks to the couch and kisses Caleb where he’s watching *Paw Patrol*.

“I promise. Now get out of here.”

“Okay, I’ll see you at four thirty. I have to work after class, but if you...”

“Go.”

When the door closes behind her, I repeat to myself, “You can do this. He’s a kid.”

“Is this your favorite show?” I sink down onto the couch beside him.

“What’s that mean?”

“Well, it means if you could watch any television show you wanted, would it be *Paw Patrol*?”

He thinks about it hard, scrunching his nose and scratching his head. Then he seems to have forgotten the question as there’s a *Paw Patrol* emergency. Caleb jumps off the couch and stands four feet in front of the television, completely mesmerized by the rescue dogs sliding down to their vehicles.

“That looks fun,” I say, getting his attention.

Climbing back on the couch, he responds to my original question, “I like dinosaur shows mostest, but my friends love *Paw Patrol*.” He raises his fist up like he’s a winner.

We watch two more episodes of the *Paw Patrol* marathon, but then we play Hi Ho Cherry O a few times and then Hungry Hippo. At the end, I make him count how many balls in each hippo’s mouth.

We’re lying on our stomachs in front of the couch. “Which hippo has more, the blue one or the green one?”

“Green one.”

The blue hippo has eight, and the green one has nine. He’s a smart little dude. My watch shows it’s five minutes before noon. Only four hours to go.

“Good job. You should get a reward.”

“Can I have marshmallows?”

“Sure. Do you know where they are?”

“Yep, in the big cabinet,” he says, pointing to a pantry door.

I open all the cabinets, searching for bowls and cups. When I find them, I take one of each out for Caleb, open the bag of marshmallows, and I pour a generous portion into the bowl. Caleb takes the bowl with him to the den, settling on the floor as he immerses himself in playing with his Hot Wheels. With precision, he arranges them in a neat line, meticulously organizing them by color.

Suddenly, his focus is interrupted as he notices a rogue red car mixed in with the black ones. In response, he overturns the bowl in frustration as he goes to fix it. Upon returning to me, he accidentally steps on a marshmallow, causing it to squish between his toes. This insignificant event triggers a cascade of emotions.

It begins with crying, escalating into screaming, and eventually culminating into a full-blown tantrum. Despite my reassurances that everything is all right and my attempts to clean him up, he cannot seem to regain his composure. The cycle of agitation continues, leaving both of us caught in a whirlwind of emotions.

My attention is drawn to my phone as it rings with Cookie across the screen. Inhaling a deep breath, I answer, "Hey. Everything is fine."

"Really?"

"Yeah." I tell her what we've done so far, hoping she doesn't hear Caleb crying in the background.

"Did he nap?"

"Nap, uh... no."

"He can sleep on the couch or in his room. That way, you can get some studying done yourself. That is if you still want to stay on the good side of Coach Sweet."

My eyes soften, and all the tension melts away at her innuendo. "Any ideas on how I get him to sleep?"

"He has a routine, but the daycare being closed has probably thrown him off schedule. Just play soft music and read him a book or two." She pauses. "Reed, thank you. I know this isn't what you had in mind when you came over today... I have to clock in for work."

It's not what I expected my day to look like, but if I'm going to have chance with her, it's imperative that I experience what Brooke does every single day.

After our conversation, my stomach growls, reminding me that I need to eat. Could Caleb's agitation be attributed to hunger? Marshmallows certainly

wouldn't be filling for him. Eager to remedy the situation, I explore her kitchen cabinets in search of sustenance. Eventually, my search yields two cans of SpaghettiOs and a trusty can opener.

I walk back to check on him, and he's calmed down some, just whimpering. When lunch is ready, I call him into the kitchen. He doesn't come right away, so I go into the den to tell him again.

"I want to watch TV. Mommy lets me."

For the next two hours, I persistently attempt to convince him to eat the SpaghettiOs until he finally gives in and takes a few bites. Unfortunately, he hasn't had a nap, and I can't help but worry that this challenging experience will be fuel for Brooke to reject the idea of us being together as a couple.

I can hear her now, because Caleb comes first in her life, as he should. "*We can't. Caleb doesn't like you. I like you, Reed. I really do, but he's my guy.*"

Chapter Twenty-Eight

BROOKE

I find myself in the midst of a battleground, where toys lie scattered like fragments of a detonated land mine, filling the narrow entrance, which makes me think of the film *Harper*, Adalee, and I recently watched about Princess Diana's visit to land mines. Reed was taking a shower, and the others weren't home. On my left is the kitchen, where pots and pans are strewn about, tainted with food splatters that have sprayed across the countertops and table.

Why did I leave Caleb with Reed? This wasn't fair to either of them; they're complete strangers. I hoped to have them meet where we did a planned activity, and I could ease both of them into a relationship. Put out feelers and such.

Apprehensive about what I might find next, I turn the corner into the den, but the only thing I see in addition to the mess is a white spot smeared on the carpet. When I lean down to examine it, it's white and sticky, which can only mean marshmallows. My shoulders drop in frustration as I sigh. A mother's work is never done.

There are only two places left to look—the bedrooms. I find Caleb lying on his side in his bed, while holding Reed's hand. His fingers are loosely curled around Reed's pointer and middle fingers. My breath catches as a warm feeling courses through me. Hope and anxiety fight for my attention.

Reed's butt is on the floor, with his long legs stretched out before him. A dozen books are scattered around his body, but his head rests on the mattress beside Caleb. I slip my phone from my pocket, wanting to capture this memory, and lean against the oak dresser, picking up one of his dinosaur stuffed animals, and it conjures up images of a family.

The word family scares me since my family has always been small. I know next to nothing about Reed. He always steers the conversation to me, school, or hockey. But staring at the two of them fast asleep on a weekday afternoon makes every hair on my body stand up and believe—maybe I can have it all.

Caleb squirms around, letting loose of Reed's hand, but then it flops down, hitting his shoulder. Reed shakes his head and runs his hand through his hair. That's when I remember he had a Stallions cap on earlier. No telling where it is based on the current situation of the house.

When Reed realizes I'm in the room, a smile breaks across his face. For a moment, we just take each other in. I extend my hand, and he rises to meet me. I hold my finger to my lips, and we tiptoe out of this room, closing the door behind us.

Reed stammers, "I... I know what you're thinking but after a few meltdowns, we had a good time."

I snicker, "Now I know you're not a mind reader." His facial features all meet in the middle, appearing tired and grumpy. "I was thinking about how hard you must have tried."

I guide him to the kitchen to get us out of earshot and prying eyes in case Caleb wakes up. I missed Reed so much more than I've let on. We've said we hated being apart, but I want to show him.

"I appreciate you even more," he says, sliding his hand behind my neck and drawing me close. "He's a lovable kid when he's not crying. But I think that's when you have to love them the most."

My heart pinches in a way that's completely unique. We get lost in each other's eyes until he finally makes his move. His large fingers squeeze the back of my neck as he takes my mouth into his, exploring the angles like he needs to remind me that I'm wanted. The kiss is greedy, taking my tongue,

showing me he's a man—my man if he sticks around, and I'm beginning to believe he might.

He sits me on the counter, wedging his hips between my legs. Curling his hand around the meaty part of my thigh, his thumb circles my clit through my leggings. Fuck, this feels good. I drop my head into his chest, with his name falling from my lips.

“Why do you have to be so good at this?” The question leaks from my lips accidentally in a raspy tone.

His finger slows, and his knuckle tips my face to his. My eyes linger behind until they collide with his.

“I've tried dozens of times to get it right. It was never right before you, Brooke.” He tenderly strokes my cheeks. “It was never fucking right.”

Can he feel my chest beating so hard it may crack my ribs? The lock that guards my heart falls off, and I'm digging at his pants. “Slow down, Cookie,” he says into my mouth. “Now, wiggle your hips so I can get inside you.”

He finger fucks me until my folds are swollen, and I'm on the cusp of being saved. My fingers pinch his shoulder and back as I buck off the countertop, trying to get more friction. “I'm almost... please, please.”

Lifting me, he slides his other hand and rubs the other hole. Before I can tell him to stop, and that hole has a no-entry sign, my legs quake, bursting into a million pieces. Coming for what seems like several minutes because this man wants me, and he thinks me and my mom clothes are sexy.

“God, I love it when you're dripping wet for me. Catch your breath.” He puts my feet to the floor and spins me around so I can hold my jelly legs up and brace myself on the counter. He licks his fingers. “I wish I could bottle your release. It makes every bad thing that has ever happened to me a distant memory.”

All I can think of is that I want to erase every bad memory he has had and replace them with pleasurable and satisfying ones. Somehow, I need to get Reed to open up to me about his past. His missing years of hockey. His parents being non-existent.

I quickly forget because Reed enters me while kissing my neck. The waistband of our pants cling to our lower thighs, restricting our movements but damn, it feels good. Every way with Reed is a lesson in enjoyment.

“Brooke, I... I...”

A thud breaks the moment startling us. For a few seconds, we don't move. He jerks himself out of me. “Caleb.” Pulling his pants up and helping me get mine up. I run towards Caleb's bedroom, but the bathroom door is open, and he's on the floor.

“Baby, are you okay?” I gently caress his head and carefully examine his body for any signs of injury. “What happened?”

“I was dreaming I had a daddy.”

He raises his head, and I swiftly gather him in my arms. “Oh, my sweet baby.” I cradle him, yearning for him to have a father figure in his life. Perhaps it's time to confess to Caleb's father. Maybe he'll embrace having a son now that he's older. I didn't give him the opportunity to be his father. His dad was such an asshole, using me that I didn't want Caleb to be around a guy like that. It was also the reason I tried valiantly to stay away from hockey players until I unknowingly met one in a hammock at a football bonfire.

Even if Reed and I date, he's not Caleb's father and shouldn't have to be.

“How did you fall?”

“I'm sorry, Mommy. I tried to peepee in the big boy potty. I thought I heard my daddy hurting in the bathroom.” His adorable round eyes gaze at me innocently. Then I realize I'm sitting in a puddle of his urine.

A deep voice comes from behind me. For two minutes, I forgot that Reed was here and just a three minutes ago, he was inside me, filling me to where I was choking on my last breath and grunting as he did.

“Hey, little dude. Come with me so your mommy can get cleaned up.” Then he chuckles.

“Don't laugh. It's on him too.”

Reed's eyes open, and his eyebrows shoot up. Caleb climbs off my lap and

grabs Reed's hand. Reed extends his other hand, helping me off the floor.

"Welcome to my world," I say, sarcasm lacing my tone.

After they're gone, I turn the shower to hot, shed my dirty clothes, and step in. I have more than pee to wash off. My inner thighs are coated with my sticky orgasm. It's also on my stomach where he reached under my shirt and splayed his cum-covered hand across my skin and held me while giving himself to me.

So many thoughts run through my head as I lather my sponge with a peppermint-sugar hair and body wash that Lettie gave me for a Christmas present. It invigorates my hair follicles, making my head feel cool and my body too.

What is Reed keeping in the deepest part of his soul?

What will it take for him to share with me?

What would happen if I told Caleb's dad that he has a son?

What if my dad finds out about Reed before we've had a chance to see if this is really going somewhere? And it seems to be headed in the right direction.

I mean it seems like he likes Caleb, and he just worked me over in the kitchen, so there's that.

Wrapping a towel around me, I take two steps into my bedroom, dress, and put my hair in a wet bun, since I teach ballet tonight anyway.

As I stride into the den, it's straightened. Yes, toys are in the wrong spots, but they're no longer strewn all over the floor. My eyes are drawn to two socked feet. One tiny pair on the thick thighs of Reed Bauer, while his are stretched out over the ottoman.

This isn't good for me—seeing Reed so comfortable with my little boy that he only met this morning. The laptop is open to hockey. Hockey? What?

"No," I say a little too loudly.

Their heads swivel in my direction. "Why?" they ask at the same time, except Caleb adds 'Mommy' to the end.

“Reed, you need to go. Caleb has to go with me to teach ballet.”

“I want to stay with Weed.”

Shaking my head, I say, “He was just helping me out.” I cross my arms over my waist and roll my eyes.

One day, and he’s already choosing someone else.

Reed must detect my frustration. “It’s okay, little dude. Go with your mom tonight, but I’ll be back tomorrow morning.”

Caleb throws his arms in the air. “Yay. Can we make a fort tomorrow?”

“Sure.” Reed messes his hair and slips Caleb from his lap. “Brooke, can you walk me out?”

I nod. There has to be another way. I forget to grab my coat when we walk outside. He wraps his arms around me.

“You can’t come here, making my son fall in love with you, when we don’t even know what we want.”

“I know what I want. You. Today was challenging, but I never wished I wasn’t here. I enjoyed playing with him. He only acted up after I fed him a bowl of marshmallows,” he teases and leans down to kiss me.

“I’m serious. This was one day, but you’ll get tired of it after a week or two.”

“We’ll see about that, Cookie. See ya tomorrow.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

REED

My body feels like it's been driven over hundreds of times. I didn't want to let on that I was tired as fuck. It doesn't matter that I skate nearly five miles a day, run three miles on most days, and lift weights every day. This is a different kind of exhaustion—it's mental.

Wanting Caleb to have fun with me had me doing everything he asked. And when he threw a fit, finding a way to calm him was nerve wracking. Top that off with trying to get his nap in like Brooke asked was no small feat for a guy who had babysat one time in his life for three hours.

It takes a monumental effort to drag my ass out of bed for our early morning practice. I grab a pod and feed the Keurig. Peering out the kitchen window, it's pitch black, and the sun won't rise for a few hours.

In Michigan, where I played before transferring, our arena was dedicated to college hockey. Yes, they had some leagues during the off-season and junior training camps but while it was college hockey season, we were the only ones who used the arena.

However, at Kentucky, we lease out our facilities with the monies going towards our travel budget. Our schedule necessitates conducting early morning practices due to various activities such as figure skating lessons, exhibitions, and junior hockey practice. Even though we could practice later

in the day, Coach wants to adhere to a routine by having it at the same time every morning. This way, normal morning hours are clear for classes, and afternoons for weightlifting and study hall. On the days when the facility isn't being utilized, Dawes, Flynn, and I take advantage of the opportunity to engage in additional practice sessions. We want to stay on the first line.

With thirty pounds of gear slung over my back, guys from the hockey plex file in at the same time. There's not much talk when we first get to practice. A few of the guys probably drank half a bottle of bourbon or tequila last night.

It's five forty-five a.m. and the only sounds are metal lockers slapping against its frame, the occasional grunt or sigh, and the sound of our gear being tugged up our legs or over our heads.

During warmups, Flynn asks, "Where were you yesterday? You didn't come to study hall or to the plex. We were supposed to play poker."

"Jesus, Flynn. You're not my babysitter."

He scoffs, and it turns into a short cackle. "Funny you should use the word babysitter."

My head whips in his direction. He can't know about Caleb and Brooke. Well, he doesn't know Brooke is the coach's daughter.

"What the fuck are you talking about?" I ask through gritted teeth, keeping my voice low.

He skates off, raises his hands, and shrugs his shoulders with a knowing smile. But how?

Our assistant coach blows his whistle, and we line up on the goal line. The first line, three forwards and two defenders skate as fast as we can to the opposite goal line and back. We rotate through until we've done it ten times. I try to talk to Flynn, but he's avoiding me on purpose, talking to guys on the other lines.

Two straight hours of sweating even though it's cold as fuck. The assistant coach skates over before I come off the ice and asks me to see him in the office. Then he looks at Flynn and Dawes and says, "You too."

I strip my clothes off and take the quickest shower ever. I need to go straight to Brooke's so she can leave for class. What will she think if I bail on her on my second day of watching Caleb?

"Come on, dammit," I shout at my two friends.

"What's your hurry?" Flynn pulls his hoodie over his head and slips his feet into the ugliest slides I've ever seen.

"Where did you get those shark slides? You act like you're fifteen."

Dawes slaps my back as we walk through the doors to Coach's office. "Because fifteen was fucking fun."

Yeah, I was free at fifteen.

"Fellas, have a seat." We look, and there are only two chairs.

"We'll stand. I have an appointment at eight thirty."

He grabs a clipboard from the desk and mulls over it. "Okay, I'll make this quick. Wynward is out for a few more weeks, and all of you are being promoted to the first line permanently unless you do something to fuck it up."

Dawes immediately says, "Thank you, sir."

"Thanks, Coach."

"Okay you can go. Don't miss study hall today, Bauer."

"I'll be there."

"Coach Forsberg, who is that in the photograph?" Flynn points to a photo that wasn't showcased the last time I was in there. When I focus on the frame, holy fuck—it's Brooke and Caleb. My heart races out of control.

"That's Coach Sweet's daughter and grandson," he says without a second glance.

Flynn's gaze fixates on me. "Oh, I've been here two years, and he's never mentioned having a family."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

Hoping no one other than Flynn notices the change in my skin color or temperature, I walk out. I pick up my gear and rush to my Jeep, not speaking to anyone on the way.

As I arrive at Brooke's, she's waiting at the door. She's not used to being late or depending on someone.

"Sorry, I'm late."

"It's okay. He's watching *Cars*." She pecks me on the cheek, and the little pompom on her knit cap bounces along with her hair as she runs to her car.

She'll freak out if she finds out that Flynn knows or at least suspects that something is going on between us. It's better she doesn't find out until I have a man to man with Flynn.

For two more days, I watch little dude from eight-thirty to twelve. Lettie came over and relieved me today but the other days, Brooke took him to work at the café with her, so I could make study hall, weightlifting, and talk to my professors and Lettie could ride horses.

Flynn hasn't said anything to me about it all, but he knows I've missed class two days because we have the same class. At weightlifting, he didn't ask. He just says, "I'm coming to your house after I run an errand." He doesn't give me time to come up with an excuse. The truth is I need to make sure he doesn't let anything slip.

It's late afternoon and of course, it's the one day that all of my roommates, plus Adalee, are home.

"Awesome, will you be here for dinner?" Adalee asks as she pulls out pasta from the cabinet.

When the doorbell rings, Hagan yells, "Come in."

"Oh, hey, Flynn."

"Are you guys partying tonight?" Flynn knows Hagan and Adalee don't

drink, and Logan and Harper are currently abstaining.

I bark out, “No, asshole. Do you ever think about anything else?”

Harper and Logan come downstairs, and she’s holding her stomach. But when she sees me, she lights up. “I’m so glad you’re home. I’ve missed you.” She wraps her arms around me. “Where have you been?”

Flynn coughs in his hand. Look up asshole in the dictionary, and you’ll find a picture of Flynn.

I shake my head and pinch the bridge of my nose. “He knows.”

“Knows what?”

“That I’m dating the coach’s daughter.”

Flynn’s eyes look like saucers. “So, I was right? Dude, she has a kid. And you are one hundred percent fucked. When Coach finds out, he’s going to rip your eyes out or maybe cut off your hands. You won’t be on the first line without eyes or hands.” He chuckles like the situation is funny.

I slouch down into the kitchen chair. *He’s exaggerating, right?*

My roommates stay silent for a beat before Harper says, “But where have you been?”

I explain, “The daycare Caleb attends is closed due to sickness. Brooke needed to go to her classes and her jobs. I wanted to help her.”

Harper and Logan sit in the chairs beside me. Logan chimes in, “You’re a stand-up dude. How’s it going?”

“Yeah, does he love you? Do you love him?” I’ve known Harper long enough and had many heart-to-hearts, so I can see that she’s feeling anxious—for me.

“He’s a cool little kid. Loves dinosaurs, cars, and building stuff. I’ve been teaching him to shoot the puck. I bought a little kid plastic set off the internet and gave it to him today. You should have seen his eyes light up. I can’t believe his grandfather coaches college hockey and hasn’t bought him anything hockey related.”

Adalee twists her mouth up and sighs. She has something to say, but she is by far the most cautious of my roommates regarding her words. “Maybe she doesn’t want him to feel forced into hockey.”

Everyone considers her words. “Yeah, but why?”

Harper’s eyes narrow as she walks over to Flynn, who is leaning against the cabinets. “You do not say a word to anyone until Reed and Brooke are ready to tell her dad. Got it?”

“Easy, princess.” Logan slides his hand down her arm. “If Flynn wants to be welcome in this house, he’ll keep his mouth shut.”

Logan’s the biggest of all of us and can be intimidating when he uses a certain tone, and this is one of those times.

Flynn holds up his hands like he’s flustered. “My lips are sealed, but it might help if they don’t kiss outside her apartment.”

“Are you following me?” I ask.

“No, I hooked up with a girl across the street. She has a daughter. Maybe we can have ready-made families together?”

“Fuck off.”

“Why are you upset? Since when can you *not* take a joke?”

As I reflect on the situation, I find myself compelled to admit, with a slight brush of my lips and closed eyes, that my feelings for her have grown stronger. “Initially, our plan was to date for a few weeks and make sure we’re compatible before involving her son and spending time together as a trio. However, I could hear the panic in her voice when she would have to call in sick to work and miss her classes, so I volunteered to hang out with him.”

Hagan offers a reassuring squeeze on my shoulder. “It’s a lot to handle, and if you feel the need to take things slower, she’ll understand.”

“It’s not that. I realize how much time she doesn’t have. I thought I was busy, but it doesn’t come close to what she does in a day.”

Adalee boils the water. “Flynn, are you staying for dinner?”

“Can’t. Promised the boys we would go to McShane’s. And I hope the basketball team is there after North Carolina trampled them. I hate those fuckers, thinking they can pluck any girl they want.”

Logan studies him for a moment. “The basketball players come and go, so I don’t know most of them, but Dane and Jazarius are good guys. They visit the children’s hospital anytime we ask. And they’re doing a routine for the Evy Brown Cheer-Off.”

I feel the need to take up for Flynn, not wanting my roommates to think he’s an asshole. “Flynn caught his girlfriend with one of the basketball players, so he’s taking his frustrations out on the whole team.”

“That sucks,” Hagan says. “I’ve been cheated on, and it makes you feel worthless but believe me when I tell you there’s someone perfect for you waiting for you to call her. Or in my case making me beg.” Hagan and Adalee smile at each other before he pecks her cheek.

That lightens up the mood, and Adalee continues to cook.

“Hey man, I’ll walk you out.” Flynn follows me. “I appreciate you keeping this between us. I wanted to tell you that I had found someone who makes me feel like I’m worth something more than a fuck. But when she found out I played hockey, and I found out her dad is our coach, I freaked out. Still freaked out.”

My phone buzzes with a text. I pull it out, and it’s Brooke. He sees my screen says Cookie.

“So, this has been going on for weeks? Cookie was the name of the girl you were texting on the bus.”

“Yeah.”

“Be careful. Is blowing up your shot at an NHL career worth it?”

“I think it is. I need to talk with her.”

He walks backward to his SUV. “See ya in the morning.”

Brooke: *Why does Caleb have a stick and puck?*

Me: *I thought it would be fun for us to play together.*

Brooke: *You should have asked me.*

Me: *Sorry, but just to let you know, he's a natural. In one day, he can already slapshot into the net.*

Brooke: *Maybe I don't want him to play hockey.*

Me: *You love hockey players.*

Dots bounce and bounce until ten minutes pass, and they quit dancing on my screen.

Me: *Should I still come tomorrow? Or are you upset over me buying your son a twenty-dollar toy hockey stick?*

Nothing.

Chapter Thirty

BROOKE

He pins me against the door with a wicked grin. “You can’t get rid of me that easily.”

“What are you doing here so early? Don’t you have practice?”

“Midnight game, so we just had a run through. I was hoping we could talk, but can I come in first?”

A rush of cold air sweeps in behind Reed when I push the door back so he can enter. I feel my nipples draw up as I shiver, and Reed soaks in the sight of my pert nipples pointing out my pajama top.

“Happy to see me?” he asks with a wink and a syrupy sexy smile. His finger traces the outline of my nipple under the thin lavender shirt I’m wearing. A chill runs down my spine, and he draws me into his arms. “I’m sorry about buying a present for Caleb without asking.”

This man rarely dons a coat and pushes his sweatshirt up to the middle of his forearms, which is distracting and so freaking sexy. When his strapping muscles cage me in his grip, it makes him even more irresistible.

I nod with my head buried in his chest. His large, heated body feels so good against mine. “I overreacted. I want him to be a kid and not totally consumed with any sport at the ripe old age of three and a half.”

“Is he awake?”

“Not yet.”

“Good, I need...”

I cut him off. “We can’t have sex when he’s here. I lost control the other day, and I can’t do that. I’m a mom.”

“You’re sexy as fuck, and moms have sex all the time. But if you would let me finish, I was going to say, *talk*. We need to talk.”

My foot presses against the other nervously, a reflexive action when I feel uneasy. “Do you want to discontinue whatever this arrangement is?”

“What?”

“You didn’t sign on for taking care of a three-year-old.”

“I signed up to be your boyfriend, even if it’s in secret. I’ve never really been a boyfriend with a real girlfriend, but I see what Hagan and Logan do for Adalee and Harper. They do whatever their girlfriends need. You needed a babysitter, and I offered. Don’t feel bad about it.” His fingers skim my hairline as he searches my eyes. “Flynn is hooking up with someone in this complex and saw us one morning kissing and then saw me again yesterday playing with Caleb. Logan threatened him, so I’m sure he’ll keep it to himself.”

“I hope so because I’m not ready to tell my dad.”

Reed is moving at the speed of light, and it feels like he’s a runaway semi-truck, going so fast he’s going to jerk the wheel and flip out, when he realizes this isn’t what he wants.

He’s caring and thoughtful, two things I never thought I would say about a hockey player. Caleb can’t stop talking about him. How he lies on his belly and runs the cars through the obstacle course. How he adds words to books and makes them “more funny,” as Caleb says. And when I see them together, Caleb always has one hundred percent of Reed’s attention.

“I don’t know where to go from here,” I say honestly.

He sits down on the couch and tugs me into his lap. His hand sweeps over my legs until the silence becomes unbearable. Several times, his mouth opens, only to close again. I wish I knew what he was thinking.

His tongue peeks out, dampening his lips. “We’ve jumped one hurdle—Caleb and I enjoy being with each other. So, let’s soak in all the good vibes.”

“You’re staying... with me?”

“Brooke, I’m scared as shit. If this doesn’t work out, my back will be completely covered in tattoos. But I’ll never regret it.”

I draw on his neck with my short nails. “Do you only color your skin when something bad happens? Because your arms are covered.”

He doesn’t speak, but he pushes something down his throat. Reed’s Adam’s apple doesn’t show but judging by his pained expression in his eyes, and the tightening of his jaw, there’s a story behind the pain. One he hasn’t shared with me.

“You can’t conquer your pain if you keep it inside.”

Immediately, I feel his muscles tense underneath me. His lids fall, and he attempts to move me from his lap. I hold onto his neck.

“Reed, whatever it is, I can handle it. Whatever you’ve been through, I can hear it. I can listen.”

He takes an agitated breath and rubs his thumb over my leg. “I can’t.”

“Have you told Harper?” I ask because I have feeling this is why they’re so close.

He gives me a nod.

I don’t want him to feel defensive, so I play with his hair, lightly rubbing the skin of his neck.

“Now isn’t the time. Go get dressed, and I’ll make you and Caleb breakfast.”

He lifts me up, setting my feet on the floor. “Do you have eggs?”

He doesn’t look at me, just walks into the kitchen—classic avoidance.

After I've thrown on leggings and a sweatshirt and packed my bag to go to the café, I find three plates on the small kitchen table. His back is to me, slicing an apple. The white shirt hugs his back like Saran Wrap—taut, showing every delicious muscle as he moves.

I place a hand on his back, and he jerks a bit before I slide my arms around his waist and lay my cheek against his back. "I'm glad you have her. But we can never be more than casual if you can't confide in me."

I push my hands against his abs, wordlessly asking him to look at me. When he does, I say with very little air, "If you don't trust me, then I can't let Caleb get attached to you. It's not fair to him."

It's not fair to me either.

His throat trembles, and his jaw quivers like when you're chilled to the bone. "Find someone to watch Caleb tomorrow. I'll sleep until noon, then come over to my house."

"Okay, I'll try. I'm working with Harper and Logan on the fundraiser tomorrow afternoon. Nicole was going to let Caleb come over to play."

"Ask her if he can spend the night? Or maybe Lettie could keep him again?"

I rub my lips together, mulling over the possibilities. "It's a Saturday night, and Lettie has plans every Saturday night to get into trouble." She's responsible Monday through Thursday but on the weekends, she lets loose.

He tucks a stray hair behind his ear and slides his hand into mine. "What time will you be through at the theatre with Harper?"

"She said about three but if I understood correctly, she and Logan would be longer. I'm sure Nicole will let him stay until dinner."

"That may be all the time you need to... okay, just come over when you're done. I'll give you my life history."

Our eyes cling together as a feeling of dread seeps into my heart. Luckily, the cutest little boy turns the corner, screaming his name, not mine.

"Weed. Weed."

Caleb can't say his Rs yet. It's adorable. He jumps into the powerfully built arms of my secret boyfriend. Reed ruffles his hair and explains, "I made breakfast for you and Mommy. You have to eat your apples if you want to be a hock... an artist someday."

God, I'm falling hard for this man. He heard me, and he's following my wishes to let Caleb love whatever it is that he loves. Right now, it's dinosaurs, *Cars*, and building but tomorrow, it might be Spiderman, art, and soccer.

Caleb squints his eyes and pinches Reed's cheeks. "I play hockey with my t-wex."

"Or you can build hockey arenas. You're good at building. What do you say we build one today instead of a fort?"

"Yes. Yes."

I'm truly not ready for what happens next. Caleb molds himself to Reed's body, squeezing hard, then kisses Reed's cheek. "I go get the blocks."

Unable to speak, I look at Reed. He sets Caleb down and crouches in front of him. "Okay, but we eat before we play."

Caleb runs out of the kitchen, and we're left standing uncomfortably. He plates the food and hands it to me with a cup of coffee.

It's too late. The puck is in the net, and Reed has scored both of our hearts.

Chapter Thirty-One

REED

Tired and worried doesn't begin to cover how I'm feeling. I got up yesterday at five and went to practice before going to hang out with Caleb. All day, I dreaded the conversation I need to have with Brooke about why I was forced to leave boarding school, how I spent my time for those two years, and then the debacle at Broadhurst University.

Class was uneventful. Study hall went by fast, having so much work to catch up on. No matter what, I have to keep my scholarship. If Brooke reacts like she should, to my past, it shouldn't be a problem—she'll discard me into the nearest dumpster.

For our Midnight Madness games, we have a team dinner at seven. Last night, it was at a local Italian restaurant where the breadsticks are like loaves of bread and the bowl of dipping sauce is the size of a soup bowl.

Wynward grabbed the seat beside me. "When I'm off the injury list, I'd love for you to be my winger."

"Nah, man. Janik and Golden are yours. I can't put up with your fancy ass."

We both laughed, but I understood. He's better than Dawes, my current center, at this point and if we make it to the Frozen Four, Wynward and I on the same line would be unstoppable.

As I arrived at the arena, my familiar routine took over, pushing my past thoughts to the outskirts of my mind. However, just as I thought I've left it all behind, I saw Coach and like a mirage, Brooke and Caleb suddenly appeared before me.

I know it would be better for Coach to learn of my relationship with his daughter from me before he finds out on his own. But it may be a moot point after I fill her in on my past.

I'm one hundred percent in love... what? No. I like her. And Caleb is awesome. I love the way he pulls his bottom lip inside his mouth when he's thinking. His little teeth bite the skin of his chin. And how he says my name. Weed. Not to mention when he snuggles under my arm while we watch a movie or read a book.

The game moved at the speed of light. Signs with my name littered the crowd both times I scored. There was no time to lose focus. It was back and forth all night, but we squeaked out a win, 4-3.

I got home at three this morning and was so exhausted that I slept until eight, but now, I'm wide awake and waiting on the proverbial shoe to drop. Questions swirl through my mind.

How do I begin to tell her what happened?

Will she believe me?

Will her face show her disappointment in me?

Will she be able to look me in the eye? Or will I be able to look in hers?

After a couple of hours, I can't think any longer. I should have gone to the hockey complex to celebrate. We're still undefeated in conference play, halfway through the season. And it would have been the distraction I needed from thinking about the conversation Brooke and I will have later today.

I take a load of laundry down to the basement, which has a small den, laundry, and bathroom.

When I come back up through the kitchen, there's a box of donuts on the counter with a postie note on top.

Great game last night.

I yelled so loud in my apartment.

Well, as loud as I could without waking Caleb.

Can't wait to spend time with you.

Brooke

I lift the note and smile at her thoughtfulness. I was a fool to think I would have a chance with a girl like her. Maybe it's better this way. I throw up all my garbage. She walks away, and Coach never has to know.

But that's not what I want to happen. I want her to look in my eyes and tell me she's with me.

After eating a couple of frosted glazed donuts with star sprinkles, I go for a run, sticking to my routine. After a shower, I dress and watch a college basketball game with Roscoe. He lies at the end of the couch, cuddled up into the armrest.

I check the time over and over. When it finally hits three, I know she'll be here any minute. My stomach churns and burns, and I feel nauseous. Logan and Harper are at the theatre. Adalee is with Hagan's family in Baton Rouge, watching Hagan and the baseball team play LSU, so we will have the house all to ourselves.

Gravel crunches in the driveway, and I know I'm minutes away from my new life blowing up in my face. I open the door and chuckle at her luggage as she walks towards me.

"You spending the night?"

"Maybe." She smirks, with her hands pulling my body into hers.

Her hair is in her signature braided ponytail, wearing high-waisted jeans with a cropped sweater. Without lifting up the light-blue sweater, I know she has a tank top underneath. "What color?"

I kiss her tentatively, but she pulls me closer. "Let's go to your room and find out."

This wasn't what I was expecting. Yesterday morning, she was concerned, and then she texted me again last night before the game, saying, "Trust and truth will carry us through."

It seemed like she wanted to have this conversation immediately.

My fingers grab hers, and we walk inside.

"Thanks for the donuts. Loved the star sprinkles."

"Well, you played like a star."

"Did you stay up to see the whole game?"

"I did."

I swing her into my body. "That's a very girlfriend thing to do."

We sway back and forth, kissing before she slips her fingers under the waistband of my gray sweatpants. She runs over the dip in my back, around my hips, and pushes the band down a couple of inches.

"How do you get this V? It's mouthwatering."

My hands cup her jaws. "I've got something that will make your mouth water."

The flicker in her eyes suggests she's game. Feeling her pretty peach lips wrapped around me will leave a lasting image for me to jerk off to when she leaves me.

"Let's go up."

She's like a giddy schoolgirl, pulling me upstairs. As soon as we're in my room, she sits on the bed and drags me to her. Standing in front of her, she pushes my sweatpants down one inch at a time until my wood springs out, practically jumping in her mouth.

"Commando." She wiggles a brow.

"I'm an impatient man when it comes to you."

Brooke peers up at me with those green eyes that look bluer today because of

her sweater. She doesn't have on a speck of makeup other than mascara. She takes my hand from her face and puts in on my hard-as-steel rod.

"Will you help me get started?" she asks as her creamy skin flushes to an energetic shade of pink.

I gently caress myself a few times, and she responds by resting her hand over mine. As our hands interlace, a sizzling connection emerges, and I yearn for one more moment with her. "That's it, baby," I whisper, and then I slowly withdraw my hand from beneath hers.

She strokes me at the same pace and dips her mouth to meet my bulging head. It seems bigger to me tonight. A moan escapes her lips as she swirls her tongue and licks up the precum. Focusing on her eyes, they flit closed when she takes more of my length.

Some girls don't like it, and some guys don't either. It's a vulnerable position to relinquish control. I fucking love it, but this time feels different. She's inexperienced, yet it feels better than the puck bunnies who've given dozens of blow jobs.

Brooke finds a slow, tortuous rhythm, and my fingers roam over her face. My thumb connects each freckle dotting her nose and cheekbones.

She adds suction, and it catches me off guard. "Fuck."

"Sorry. Am I doing it wrong?" She pulls off, and spit hangs from her bottom lip.

"It's perfect, but I'm going to blow. Fuck the three-week rule."

Her tongue peeks out between her lips, then she says, "My thoughts exactly. We've made it two weeks."

"I guess we're not counting the time in your kitchen, huh?"

She smirks and her green eyes gleam. "It doesn't count unless you finish"

I pull the sweater over her head and fling it somewhere. I can't take my eyes off this slightly red-headed beauty. My dick twitches as she takes me back in her mouth, and I brace myself with one hand on her shoulder.

This time, she speeds up the pace, and my hand sneaks onto the back of her neck, sliding under her braid. I push her head gently at first, but I'm seconds away from spilling into her mouth. Can she feel it because she stops?

"Take your shirt off," she demands under her lashes.

My shirt is off before she finishes the sentence. I push my erection back in her mouth and laugh inwardly, thinking about her calling it a peen.

A few more strokes, and I growl, "Fuck, this is good." I feel the suction loosen as she smiles. My hips piston, and I fuck her mouth like I've never done before. It's warm, with the added stimulation of her darting her tongue around every few strokes.

I jerk her off and lie back on the bed. She wiggles out of her pants, leaving me panting at the sight of her in a strip of red lace covering her mound.

"Turn around." She smiles and wiggles her ass.

My palm slaps her cheek before wandering over her slender but perfectly toned globes as she goes back down on me. If this was the last time I could see, this image would be enough to last a lifetime. She's beautiful.

But never having this feeling again is a prison sentence.

A scorching sensation travels from my toes and licks up my spine. My shoulders rise off the bed, and my toes curl as a deep, uncontrollable grunt rips from my chest. My dick jumps and twitches inside her mouth, and she breaks the skin-to-skin contact. But then she turns her body and grabs the base, watching the creamy lava spew from my core onto my skin.

After a minute, I relax into the bed, and she rests her head on my chest. My hand caresses her arm. "That was incredible. I love the way you are with me."

She whispers, "I do too. You've given me a confidence I never had before." She uses her finger to draw in the creamy mess. "Thank you for making me feel sexy, even when my tank top is covered with marinara and Cheeto stains."

I chuckle, thinking about how I took a bag of regular Cheetos out of my

backpack, and Caleb squished his nose in disgust. “He does love those puffed ones, but not the regular ones.” Lost in thought, my fingers automatically trace her arms. “This—right here. Right now. It’s what I want.”

“Me too.” Again, her words are like a slight summer breeze that I can barely hear. “You better get cleaned up before your roommates get home.”

I kiss her forehead. “Okay, I’ll be right back.”

Crossing the hall, I let the shower warm up for a few minutes, using toilet paper to clean off the excess and flush. I use my three-in-one body gel to wash my hair. She finds me irresistible when my hair is wet, and I need her to remember all the good vibes when I tell her about the worst night of my life.

I walk into my room, and her back is to me as I grab my sweatpants from the floor, shuffle into each leg, yet she doesn’t budge. I sneak up behind her and blow a raspberry under her ear. Her spine straightens as a folder of papers falls onto the floor. One piece lands face up—Broadhurst University Non-Disclosure Agreement.

Her eyes are covered in tears, and her hand covers her mouth.

“I can explain.”

Chapter Thirty-Two

BROOKE

Ever seen a deer in headlights? Yeah, Reed's eyes are as wide as I've ever seen. He's standing completely still as he looks straight into my eyes. I was unable to read the entirety of the documents and understanding it was a whole other issue, but one thing is clear—Reed sexually harassed a woman.

Bad boy image or not, I can't imagine Reed doing something that a woman didn't want—I mean what woman wouldn't want him? He was the complete package at Broadhurst University. Every article I found was complimentary of his play and his work ethic. There were a few articles where he was pictured with another woman, but it was at hockey events.

He reaches for my hand, and I let him take it but even the way he grips my hand feels desperate.

Still facing me, I search his eyes for any indication of remorse, and there's not a trace. Damn, am I big fool?

“This was what I was going to tell you tonight... even though it violates this agreement.”

“You've told Harper,” I grumble.

“Yes, and the rest of my roommates know. Harper told them, and then we

had a roommate meeting, and I answered all of their questions. I'll do the same for you because I need you to trust me."

All I do is nod as he closes the distance between us in nothing but his sweatpants. Who can concentrate on words when his naked torso is sprinkled with water drops? "Can you get dressed?" My tone has a bite to it.

Usually, he would smirk, knowing I'm distracted by his glorious hockey body, but there's no trace of confidence at the moment. He opens his second drawer and grabs a royal-blue Stallions t-shirt and slides it over his head and broad shoulders as I stand mesmerized by the various muscles in his back.

With his reflection in the mirror, he drags his hand through his wet, wavy hair. "We were dating," he mumbles.

"Who? The girl in the NDA?"

He moves his head up and down. "Rina French."

I sit on the edge of the bed, having already put my clothes on while he was in the shower. "I don't understand why your girlfriend would accuse you of sexual harassment."

He takes a deep breath. "I considered her my girlfriend, but she worked for the team as a trainer, so we didn't disclose it. It was only a couple of months during the season."

Reed rests his elbows on his knees and drops his head into his hands. "I've never had a good role model other than your dad. I had a shoulder injury, so we were constantly together in the training room. The Broadhurst U coach asked her to work on his star player whenever I needed it. I was used to hooking up and finally, someone seemed to care about me, but still, it's not the same way I feel about you. I needed someone to care about me as me, not me the star hockey player."

He peeks at me out of the corner of his eye, and I want to just say it doesn't matter, but I can't because it does matter. I'm allowing him to spend time with my son.

"Was she coming to your dorm room too?" I ask, hating the images flashing through my mind. I know Reed was a player, but until now, I hadn't let

images of him with other women creep into my brain.

“Yeah. We had a secret relationship.”

“Like us?”

His body sways ever so slightly as he closes his eyes. “Completely different.”

“You told me you hadn’t had a girlfriend.”

“In reality, I didn’t. It was fake on her end. And we basically only had sex. No movies, studying or reading books together.” He picks up a piece of paper off the floor. Scanning it, he points to a clause and reads, “In exchange for signing this non-disclosure agreement, Broadhurst University will not press charges unless you violate the agreement. You will not contact Rina French or any staff at Broadhurst University for a period of ten years.”

“But why did she say you sexually harassed her when you were sleeping together?”

He blows a puff of air, and his body jerks. “Because I walked in on her and the coach. She was bent over the training table... working her way up the depth chart. I guess... I wasn’t enough.”

“Just so I’m clear... she was fucking you both at the same time?”

“Yep. According to her, she was being blackmailed by the coach. He came across a video from the training room that looked as if I was harassing her, and she was saying no to me. They cut the video, so it didn’t show her saying ‘*wait until I work on your shoulder.*’ Rina said she was forced to file the complaint against me, or she would lose her job. To make it worse, she said she would deny anything she told me. The university threatened to get a restraining order against me.”

I thread my fingers through his. I believe him. He’s not a good actor, usually wearing his feelings on his inked sleeve of skin. Every video where he fights on the ice, you can see it coming. His face changes when you zoom in.

“You really liked her, huh?”

Reed lifts his shoulders but then turns his body so he’s facing me “Back then, I did. Having someone care about me felt good, but she doesn’t hold a candle

to you. It's like you said with Caleb's father... you thought it was good until you get far enough away from the situation. You look in the rearview mirror and realize there were so many red flags."

Chewing on the inside of my lip, his words sink in—that's precisely how I felt about Erik, Caleb's biological father. "Your old coach is a piece of shit."

He releases a breath he was holding in. "He's worse than a piece of shit. When I walked in on them having sex, he didn't stop pumping until he finished. She told me all the stuff before the lawyers got involved because I was fucking angry that either one of them would do that to me. She broke off all communication, even as my team trainer. Then I was served with papers and asked to the athletic director's office, who wanted to sweep it all under the rug.

"While we were all in his office, Rina lied and corroborated the tape of me playing with her and making unwanted sexual advances. When really the coach should have been fired for having a sexual relationship with an employee. They told me they would let me transfer outside of the power hockey conferences."

"Does my dad know?"

"Yeah, we had a talk when I got here. They weren't supposed to tell him, but they did."

"You could have sued them."

"With what money? With whose support? I had no one until I transferred here. Your dad must be clairvoyant. Logan didn't know that I knew Hagan and Harper, but without them... well, let's just say it was the first prayer answered for me in a long time."

I huff and fall back onto the mattress. "I hope my dad believed you. Because it's going to make telling him about us that much worse."

He leans back and rolls onto his side and touches my arm through the sweater. "Brooke, it doesn't matter if your dad believes me. What matters—to me—is that you do."

Reed's right. How we feel about each other is what matters. How he treats

Caleb and me. I lift my head as he peers into my eyes. We hesitate before he isolates my lips with his, capturing the bottom one with his teeth. Everything Reed does is intense. He's all-in whether he's playing board games with Caleb, fixing breakfast, or having me for dinner. Whether it's soft and tender, or rough and fast, when Reed takes any part of me, it's all consuming.

He doesn't go any further than the extremely hot make-out session—just kissing and touching over our clothes.

“Does this mean you want to keep this going? Because I want to tell your dad before...”

“I would never do what she did.”

Cuddling me tighter, he says, “I know. But I've been to the school of hard knocks, and things can get twisted. Your dad could ruin me.”

“He won't.”

“If something happens here, another school of any substance won't touch me. I'll be blacklisted.”

I roll to where I'm half-lying on his chest. “He won't. I'll make him understand.”

“I have so much more to tell you.” He strokes my hair and places it over my shoulder.

“Let's take a break. We have time, and I think we both need a breather.”

After a few soft kisses, we fall asleep.

Feeling like I'm in a dream state, I squeeze my lids tighter, not wanting to wake up. Feeling safe in Reed's arms. He's not the only one who needs to feel loved.

I'm somewhere between sleep and awake, so I'm semi-aware of what's going on but so much is playing through my mind. Wanting to make his pain go away like he has mine. Until Reed, I was walking through life and now, I'm living it. Whatever he has to tell me is in the past, and I don't care.

Phones are ringing. What?

“Cookie, your phone has rung a few times.”

I stretch. “Can you grab it?”

He bounces from the bed and gets my phone from my tote. “It’s Lettie.”

I sigh, knowing it’s Saturday night, and she probably wants to show me her outfit. *Do you think Dane will like it? Or will he tell me it’s too tight or too short?*

He places it in my palm, and I hit the green button. “Hey.”

“Come. Come now,” she cries. She’s not on speaker, but Reed can hear her clear as day.

“Lettie, calm down and tell me what’s wrong.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

REED

Without sparing a moment, Brooke and I tear through the house in a frenzy. It's bone-chilling cold outside, and I slipped on my tennis shoes without socks. And as we run to the car, my ankles feel like I've been frostbitten. Damn joggers. When we return, I'm throwing them all away in favor of the open-leg sweats, everything about them is easier. My feet are too damn big for the little holes anyway.

Brooke remains speechless. Her fingers picking at each other, repeatedly. I place my hand on her thigh and squeeze. She glances down at my hand and then out the window.

"Everything will be okay," I say, as I rub her thigh, hoping to soothe her.

We turn the corner as firetruck sirens blast through the winter air. A blaze like I've never seen engulfs my vision. Brooke and I stare for a moment, and I pull over at the first available spot across the street. Brooke slams the door and runs straight ahead, yelling, "Lettie. Lettie."

There are three fires spread throughout Lettie's complex. My first thought turns to Caleb. "Lettie doesn't have Caleb, does she?"

Brooke's eyes soften at the edges. "No."

I didn't think so, and I breathe a sigh of relief, but now, we have to find

Lettie. Grabbing Brooke's palm, I tug her behind me. Part of me just wants to put her on my back, so she's safe but also so she doesn't do anything stupid like run into a burning building for her friend.

A figure runs towards us, and her chest collides with ours. "Dane's inside. He won't wake up. He's too heavy. I couldn't pull him out. Oh God. Oh God," Lettie cries out.

It's a millisecond before it sinks in, but I drop Brooke's hand and head straight to Lettie's apartment. Honestly, it's instinct. The firemen arrive, and one finds my arm, but I jerk out of his hold. I didn't even realize I was inside until the heat hit me with such force, I had to shield my face.

"Dane. Dane." He's not in the living room. The kitchen opens to the same area with a breakfast bar dividing the two rooms. The bedroom. "Dane. Dane, yell. I'm coming."

The smoke is so thick I can't see. Black heavy air billows from the room as I cover my palm with my sweatshirt and push the door open. It's so hot it nearly singes the material. I see two long feet over the edge of the bed. "Dane."

Panic sets in as I realize that the wall adjoining to the next apartment has caught fire. With every passing second, the flames grow more menacing, threatening to engulf the room. Desperation wells up within me as I call out to him, but there's no immediate response.

He's shoeless, rendering him unable to walk through the perilous conditions. Without thinking twice, my instincts kick in, and I muster every ounce of strength to tug his tall, lanky frame over my shoulder. In this harrowing moment, it becomes clear that I must carry him to safety.

As I make my way out of the bedroom, I'm met with a courageous fireman, his protective gear concealing his face. Without hesitation, he throws a fireproof blanket over both Dane and me, shielding us from the scorching heat and guiding us through the chaos. In the face of danger, the selfless fireman leads us to safety, ensuring our escape from the raging fire that has consumed Lettie's apartment.

I don't know if it's been a few minutes or a few hours, but my body feels

weak until I hear Brooke's voice calling me. "Is he okay? Are you okay?"

"Ma'am, step aside. They both need treatment."

"No, I'm coming with my boyfriend."

From there, it's a whirlwind of activity—stretchers, fire hoses, flames, screams, and smoke that blocks the stars that were sprinkling the sky only minutes ago.

The paramedic checks my oxygen level and administers much-needed oxygen. As I inhale, it stings. The woman sits me on the edge of the ambulance. "Stay here. I need to check and see who else needs help."

I nod and see Brooke's arms folder over her waist with tears in her eyes. "I'm okay. Come here."

She shakes her head no. "I don't want to hurt you."

Extending my hand, I beg, "Please."

When she takes it, I draw her closer; just feeling her skin makes me feel better.

"Why did you do that? What if I would have lost you?"

I don't know why, but I peer into her cloudy, green eyes, reflecting sparks of the inferno in front of us. "Maybe I wanted to be known for one good thing in my life. Even if no one but you saw or knew about it. I want to be worthy of you."

Her arms fly around my neck, but being unable to breathe is stopping me from cherishing the embrace she's giving to me. She pulls away, only a few inches from my face. "You big goof. You're one of the kindest men I've ever met," she says, kissing my soot-covered skin.

"Go check on Dane and Lettie. I won't move."

"Okay, only if you're okay."

She'll only believe I'm fine if I act like my usual self. So, with a wink and a sugary smile, I pat her on the ass and press a kiss to her pliant, gorgeous lips.

Blue and red lights flash throughout the complex parking lot. Scanning the area, I see multiple vans from the local news outlets. Camera crews flank out all positions behind the yellow tape, warning, *do not cross*. It feels as if I'm in a vacuum, and it takes me back to my fifteen-year-old self. The tragedy of it all.

The more I'm around Brooke, the deeper in I fall. And as much as that scares the hell out of me, I know she's the woman I want to be with, not just now but forever. Will it be easy for her to hear what happened when I was a teenager? No, but will she believe me? It's a chance I have to take. Will she understand I had to protect myself and my mom? I hope and pray she will.

A stocky cameraman and a reporter rocking a professional-looking mullet stop me as we leave the apartment building. "Bauer, Reed Bauer. Witnesses say you ran into the burning complex, essentially saving star shooter, Dane Greathouse."

"He's a friend." He's not really, but he's Brooke's friend's friend. "I did what anyone would have done."

Brooke stands beside me with her arm laced through mine and her head resting against my bicep. "No, that's not true. Most of us wouldn't have done something so stupid! So heroic. So compassionate."

She looks up under her dark lashes with the affection I've longed for. After memorizing every detail of this moment, I kiss her on the head.

"And you must be proud of your boyfriend," the reporter says to Brooke.

A faint but loving smile pulls at her lips. "I am."

"Sorry, but we have to get to the hospital."

Chapter Thirty-Four

BROOKE

“**Y**our dad messaged and requested a meeting with me after practice,” Reed says with apprehension in his voice.

“It’s probably something about hockey.”

“Cookie, he wanted to make sure I didn’t make any plans. I’ve been hightailing it out of practice to help with Caleb, and I guess he’s noticed. I think he knows about us.”

We didn’t get home from the hospital until nearly midnight. They’ve admitted Dane for forty-eight hours because of the smoke inhalation. They estimated that he was unconscious for five minutes. When we first got there, the emergency room nurse told us they cleaned his airway, whatever that means, and now, he’s on oxygen and IV fluids.

The visitor limit is two at a time, but the staff made exceptions since he was a Stallions basketball player. Basketball always reigned supreme at this university until the football team won the National Championship. But even when the basketball coaching staff and players showed up, Lettie wouldn’t leave his side. Reed and I walked out to give them room, and Lettie was holding his hand.

Chewing on the side of my cheek, I ask, “Why do you think he knows?”

“Because Flynn said they were all out at McShane’s last night, and they showed the clip of us on the news.”

“Practice is over at eight, right?”

“Usually. How are you?”

I’m sure he hasn’t slept because I haven’t. Images of the apartment complex burning and the smoke blanketing the campus. Reed’s exposed skin covered in soot. The screams, cries, and tears from Lettie and her neighbors. And the kids who had nowhere to go while their mother went to the hospital.

“I’m...” I decide not to lie. “I’m terrified that I would have to face it alone if that happened to this complex. What if Caleb...”

“Hey, don’t go there.” His voice is soothing and calm. “I’ll come over after practice and hang out with little dude, in case you want to go to the hospital and check on Lettie.”

“Okay. Call me immediately after you talk to him.”

“I will. Get some rest.”

When we hang up, I know I need to nap, but I’m overwhelmed with so many emotions right now, it would be impossible. And I refuse for Reed to have this conversation with my dad alone. I’m an adult, and I can choose any man I want. It’s not his decision.

After a quick shower, I blow dry my hair and pull on my leggings and a tank top. Looking around my room, I see one of Reed’s sweatshirts thrown over my light-pink fuzzy chair. Caleb had spilled his chocolate milk on him, so I told Reed I would wash it and get the stain out. I tug it over my head, and it swallows me, reminding me of the story where the whale swallows the kid and saves him. That’s how I feel right now, like Reed has saved me.

I pull my hair into a ponytail, run the mascara brush through my lashes, and run my peppermint-flavored balm over my lips. Minutes later, Caleb is awake and dressed, and I take him to get donuts before dropping him off at Annie’s to play with Kimmie for a few hours.

I keep telling myself I’m a grown woman. Hell, I’m a mother. My dad

doesn't get a say in my love life. All the way to the arena, my stomach churns. No child wants their parents to be disappointed in them, and I hate that my dad found out from the media.

Locating Reed's jeep, I park behind it. And when I walk past it, it smells like smoke. For some reason, I look up to the cotton-covered sky. Thick, puffy clouds with no trace of gray smoke. A slice of yellow light shines down on the arena, which must be a good omen.

There's no security at the door, so I use the key card my dad gave me three years ago when we transferred here. Hopefully, it works. I've never used it. The door clicks after I scan the card. Disappearing into the hallway, I'm taken aback that this is only the third time I've been in this building in as many years. The day he moved into his office with zero fanfare. There was an announcement that made the campus paper but other than that, it was never mentioned on local radio or news stations. I came to the midnight game because I had to pick up Caleb. Granted, I stayed, mesmerized by number nine, Reed Bauer.

In five minutes, Dad will walk into his office, and Reed will be close behind. I walk to the back of the tunnel and hear the sounds of the team practicing. I would love to see Reed play, but I want to take my dad by surprise. If he thinks he's going to blindside Reed, he's not. I'm here to support my guy.

I pass the locker rooms and find a door labeled with "Coach Sweet." A slim window runs the length of the door. Beside it, I peek inside, and his office is empty. Tentatively, I twist the knob and walk in. It's blank with no personality, with the exception of one photo of Caleb and me.

The clicking of metal grabs my attention. Practice is over, and the players are in the locker room. I swallow my nerves and take a deep breath.

My dad walks in with the assistant coach talking about how to move the players around and still give themselves a chance at winning these next few games. Standing in the corner, I clear my throat. Their heads whip to the noise.

My dad looks between us. "Forsberg, this is my daughter Brooklyn. This is my assistant coach, Geoff Forsberg."

I give him a close-lipped smile. “Nice to meet you.”

Kandy walks in. “Oh, you’re busy. I’ll come back. Will you be here in an hour?” She’s grinning from ear to ear as she pushes her glasses up to the bridge of her nose. “Hi, Brooklyn. How’s that little boy? If you ever need me to watch him again, let me know.”

For the record, I didn’t ask her to watch Caleb; my dad did. But he did seem to be comfortable around her. “Thanks, I appreciate it.”

My dad pins her gaze. “Kandy
, I’ll let you know when I’m done.”

Standing anxiously in my father's office, a wave of nervousness washes over me as I contemplate whether he really knows about the relationship between Reed and me. But when Reed taps his knuckles on the door, entering the office, he catches sight of me. His surprise is unmistakable as he shakes his head, unable to conceal his reaction. My eyes shift towards my dad, and it's evident that he is aware of our relationship. There's no doubt now, in this tense moment, that our secret has been unveiled.

It's a conflicting situation that tugs at my heart, torn between my loyalty as a daughter and my blossoming affection for this hockey player. As I await the inevitable confrontation, a swell of emotions surges within me, knowing that our futures, filled with intricate complexities, are about to be thoroughly unraveled before us.

His assistant coach exits, closing the door behind him. Through the window, he gestures to my dad to remain calm.

Dad turns his back to both of us, and Reed takes the opportunity to move closer to me. He looks at my sweatshirt, well, his sweatshirt, and flashes me a grin capable of incinerating my panties. When my dad turns around, his smile vanishes completely.

“Brooklyn, you shouldn’t be here.”

Chapter Thirty-Five

REED

Blood throbs in my veins, anticipating the pieces of my past that may come out. “Brooke, this is between your dad and me.”

“This is my life. Both of you quit acting like Neanderthals. Dad, say what you need to say.”

Coach’s disapproval looms heavily in the air. He walks around his desk and sits on the edge, crossing his arms over his waist. His gaze moves to Brooke and when he realizes it’s my sweatshirt, he catches me in his web. “How long has this been going on?”

“Not long,” Brooke says quickly.

“Long enough for you to be wearing his clothes.”

“Sir, it’s not what you think.” It started out precisely how he thinks it did—a hookup. We didn’t have sex, but it was a casual hookup and when I saw her at the café the next day, in the back of mind, I knew I wanted to spend more time with her.

Brooke’s head snaps in my direction, but she stays quiet as her dad scoffs, “Well, tell me what this is.” His hand goes back and forth between Brooks and me. “Because on television, it certainly seemed that my daughter is your girlfriend. My daughter!” he snaps louder.

“Yes, sir, I care about your daughter.”

“Dad, you have no control over my relationship with Reed.”

He breaks out in unhinged laughter. “Maybe not. But Reed and I both know I hold his future in my hands.”

My head drops, and Brooke’s slender body pulls me into her side. “Dad, you wouldn’t,” Brooke says through clenched teeth as she grips my hand harder.

Coach erupts, “You don’t know what he’s capable of.” His voice booms against the concrete walls, taking me by surprise. Now I know that he’s scared of me. Scared of what I’ll do.

Tears form beneath my lids, but I’ll be damned if he gets the best of me, so I force them back. The room is quiet, eerie like he knows he shouldn’t have said those words.

Brooke moves away from me and steps towards her dad. “I’m disappointed in you. Funny how the roles reverse sometimes. Caleb needs a grandfather who stands up for the underdog. He needs a male figure that roots for the right person to come along and change the trajectory of their life. If you punish Reed for dating me, you’ll be punishing the rest of the team and yourself for no reason.”

“I can cut him from the team for not showing up to class and shirking his responsibilities for the last week.”

“Do it, and you won’t see Caleb ever again. I’ve lived without a mother, and I’ll figure out how to live without a father if it means that Caleb will have a positive role model. Reed dropped everything last week to help me with Caleb.”

“Brooke, stop.” I rub her back. “I need to talk to your dad alone.”

“No.”

“Yes. Please. I’ll call you when I leave.”

She presses on her toes, kissing me on the cheek, then glares at her dad. “Okay. I need to check on Lettie and Dane.”

He walks around and sits in his desk chair as I sit across from him, back to the more familiar coach-player interaction. “You’ve met Caleb?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmm.” He removes the Stallions Hockey cap from his head, scratching through his hair. “You’ve been lying to me. You’ve come to practice every day since... since when?”

“A month or so.”

He chuckles. “And you think you’re in love?”

Who said love? Those words ring in my mind, but I refrain from voicing my feelings to her protective father. I’m glad she has her dad in her corner. I would love to have someone in mine. Before professing my love for his daughter, there are steps I need to take. So, silence prevails as I navigate the delicate territory of my coach’s approval.

He asks, "Or does she merely believe *she*'s in love? Which is it?"

Taking a deep breath, I gather my thoughts and respond respectfully, "We haven't explicitly exchanged those three words, sir, but I genuinely care for her. She's more than an inspiration to me. Brooke is extraordinary, juggling two jobs, pursuing an education, and wholeheartedly caring for Caleb."

His nod acknowledges her commendable qualities, yet an underlying hesitance remains. I understand his doubt, the belief that I am undeserving of her. In a surprising moment of agreement, I find myself confessing, "I admit that I may not be good enough for her at this very moment. However, I'm striving to improve myself in an effort to become the man she deserves."

“Reed, I’m not upset that you’re dating my daughter...well, a little bit, but I’m angry that you lied to me. I can’t trust you.” He taps the top of his pen against a pad of paper. “I thought I could trust you. I’ve done so much for you.”

“Sir, we just wanted to make sure it didn’t fizzle out. We wanted to tell you before the world knew.”

“Have you informed her of your childhood?”

A heavy sigh escapes me, causing my shoulders to slump as I feel the weight of disappointment settle upon me. The air I exhale can fill an entire room of balloons at a children's birthday party. "No, sir," I confess, my voice tinged with remorse. "I had planned to tell her last night. We were deep in conversation about what transpired at Broadhurst University when Lettie called."

The coach's stern expression remains unwavering as he delivers the verdict. "You're benched, not suspended, until further notice for breaking team rules," he declares firmly, each word landing with resolute gravity. "Not a single missed class, study hall, weight room session, or team meal. You need to prove your commitment to the team and improve your grades." His figure rises from the chair, his authoritative presence filling the room. "And as for Brooklyn, you need to be honest with her about everything. If she truly loves you, I will support your relationship."

With those final words, he exits the office, allowing the door to slam shut behind him. I'm left alone in the silence, the weight of his expectations and the consequences of my actions sinking into my soul.

The locker room is empty with the exception of Flynn. "You're not dead. I guess it went well."

If this was happening to anyone else but me, Flynn's remark would be funny. I pull my clothes from my locker, changing on the spot, wanting to shower at home and think about what I need to do.

"He benched me."

"He can't do that. What about our line?"

"He can, and he did. Not for dating Brooke behind his back—for violating team rules and responsibilities, or so he says."

Flynn slaps me on the back. "Hope she's worth it. Because this didn't just fuck you, it fucked Dawes and me too."

He waits for me to respond and when all I give him is a simple nod, he leaves me alone with my thoughts.

It doesn't last long when Brooke calls. "Are you finished? What did he say?"

“I won’t be playing for a while.”

She huffs into the phone and sounds like an old landline with static, equating to the constant friction of my life.

“I’ll talk to him.”

“No, hockey is my territory, and no matter what your dad thinks of me, he helped me when no one else did. I owe it to him to follow the rules, and I fucked up.”

“But you were helping me and Caleb. That should carry some weight.”

“It does. And he wants you to have a good man in your life.”

“Oh no. No. No. You don’t get to retreat like a wounded animal,” she says with a defiant tone.

As we’re talking, I walk out to my Jeep and throw my gear inside “Listen, your dad was right about some things. I need to study. I haven’t finished my paper on *The Outsiders*, and I have two tests next week, so I need to focus. I need to be at everything. Study harder. Work harder. Skate faster.”

“Okay, when will I see you?”

“I’ll call you later. I think I just need some sleep, and we’ll figure everything out.”

Even I can hear the sound of defeat in my voice. Maybe this is the sound of right girl, wrong time. If I want to be with her long term, then I have no other option but to tell her about my teenage years. Every last blood-curdling minute. The minutes that shaped my life.

When I get home, Harper’s on the couch curled up on her side. “Hey.”

“I’m going to sleep. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, but Brooke came by and told me what her father said and how he acted. She left a note or something for you in your room.”

I grip the molding of the archway. “Thanks. We’ll talk later. Do you have brunch today with the family?”

“Yeah, Mom and Dad stayed at Kaylee’s house, so we’re going there today. Do you want to come?”

“Nah. I just really need some time completely alone.” She sits up as I glance over my shoulder. “I told Brooke about what happened with Rina at Broadhurst, but Coach says I need to tell her the worst of me... and I need to figure out how.”

Harper is tall, and she envelops me from the back. “You were a scared little boy.”

“I was six feet and one hundred eighty pounds.”

“Well, the Evy Brown Cheer-Off is this weekend, and I expect you to be there, no matter what.”

“I’ll be there.”

On my bed, a black box with a gold ribbon stares at me, with a note on top. I tear the envelope across the top and pull out the notecard. It has a large B in gold foil in the center. Brooke is classic in every way. She lives her life simply. I sit on the bed, lifting the flap, finding impeccable writing inside.

Reed,

Will you be my date to the Evy Brown Cheer-Off? I’ll be backstage working, but I’d love to look out in the audience and see my handsome-as-fuck boyfriend sitting in the crowd, cheering me on. You’re the one I want to escort me in and out. I want the world to know that we’re together. No more hiding.

I carefully unwrap the present, a stylish tie with a pocket square neatly tucked inside. As I hold the thoughtful gift in my hands, a conflicted feeling washes over me., knowing the secret I've been withholding. A part of me desires to be honest and open with her. Yet, as I stare at the handkerchief and tie, I can't shake the fear of how she'll react if she discovers the truth. I clutch the items tightly against my chest, falling backward onto the bed. Feeling honored for her affection, but the undisclosed secret burdens my conscience. I contemplate whether it's time to lay bare my hidden truth and risk the uncertainty that may follow.

Tonight, after a nap, I'll go to her and tell her everything. That way, if she never wants to see me again, at least I have two away games this week.

My lids keep closing as the mental exhaustion settles in, and I eventually succumb to a restless sleep.

Chapter Thirty-Six

BROOKE

Convincing Lettie to leave Dane's side takes more effort than pulling Caleb away from *Paw Patrol*. Dane's parents arrived in the middle of the night from eastern Kentucky. The first thing I saw when I entered his hospital room was Lettie's head lying on his hand. Whether they ever become a couple is still to be determined, but there's no doubt their friendship has stood the test of time. The test of watching the other one flirt and kiss someone else.

The first time I bumped into Reed was last semester at a bar. He practically growled at a guy for touching me. His possessiveness is attractive to me. Others may feel opposite, but there's something about a man who wants you all for himself and who will take up for you even when they don't know you.

At this point, I realize that Reed and I could never be friends like Dane and Lettie. Neither of us could stand by and watch the other get kissed or touched—not when his touch lights the fuse to embracing my sensuality.

Dane's parents insist that Lettie go to my house and take a shower. They top it off with, "Bring us some goodies from Magee's Bakery. You know how much Dane loves their cookies."

After checking in on Caleb, Annie says they're going to see the new kids' movie, and she'll bring him home in a couple of hours.

Lettie always says, “When it rains, it pours.” This weekend is a prime example. While Lettie is in the shower, I have time to reflect on the weekend, starting with the setup of the Evy Brown Cheer-Off. Excitement doesn’t begin to describe how it feels to have one of my dreams come true. Yes, it’s local but being the stage manager for an event that will help hundreds of families in need, as well as give me experiences outside of the academic world, is thrilling.

Harper has given me the order of appearance, and Logan has given me a script he will follow as the master of ceremonies. Now, it’s my job to coordinate the lighting, sound, and the backstage. I made notes on Saturday, but our first run through is Tuesday night, which is where I will give the sound and lighting personnel the specifics, On Thursday, we have a full dress rehearsal, and Saturday, it will be live.

I leave my apartment to meet Reed. Contrast the high of pleasuring Reed until he muttered my name repeatedly, with the gut punch of finding out Reed transferred here because he was accused of sexual harassment, my emotions are all over the place. In the end, I will never believe that Reed would put his hands on a woman who didn’t want it. There’s something so raw about his reaction to the guy in the bar.

But when I heard the panic in Lettie’s voice, I knew something bad had happened. Flashes of smoke and the raging fire are forever seared into my memory. And the way Reed ran in to get Dane has to be the dumbest but most heroic thing he’s ever done. When he came out, and the paramedics took over, there wasn’t a single corner of my heart that wasn’t filled with love for him. It’s early, and there’s so much we need to discuss. It’s not enough that I know his favorite color is purple. I need to know why. Or that he twirls his spaghetti onto a spoon. Who taught him to do that? He’s not Italian.

On instinct, I said he was my boyfriend, and I ruined our timeline of revealing our relationship. My dad is upset that both of us lied. I don’t know if I’m willing to fix things with my dad right now. I was so angry when I left his office. The fact that he was going to talk to Reed before he talked to me and found out how I felt is simply wrong. In fairness, I should have buckled up and told my dad beforehand. Sometimes in life, we do the wrong things for the right reasons.

I had bought Reed a gift for the foundation fundraiser, so I ran home and picked it up, hoping to prove that I'm all in. When I dropped it off at his house, I gave Harper a few details, then placed the gift on his bed. Reed should know I'm not giving up. By the sound of Reed's voice, he feels guilty for betraying my dad's trust—the only person who has helped him in his hockey career.

I sigh when Lettie emerges from the bathroom, clad in a dinosaur-covered towel that is too small for her, and her hair twisted into a bun on top of her head. Tears stream down her face as she crumples onto the floor, overwhelmed with emotions. I wrap my arms around her and sway gently, comforting her. "You'll be all right. The doctors said Dane will make a full recovery, and that's all that really matters."

"Everything is gone. My clothes, laptop, my makeup, contacts, and..." She's listing items so fast, she stumbles over her own words until she starts crying again.

"I want you to know that the material possessions can be replaced," I say, gently redirecting her gaze towards me. "But you... are irreplaceable. You've always been there for me, never judging me for having a child. You chose to be my best friend regardless." Tears well up in my eyes. "I cannot express how much I needed you and how grateful I am that you called me and managed to escape from the apartment."

The doorbell rings, and Reed cracks the door open and calls my name.

"Come in."

Lettie gets up and walks to the couch, staring out the sliding glass door.

"How's she doing?" Reed asks, stuffing his hands deep into his black athletic pants.

"She's in shock. I'm going to make her stay with me. Can you imagine having nothing but the clothes on your back?"

He shakes his head and then goes back out the front door, bringing in a few bags. "My roommates went shopping so Lettie would have a few things. They also called their parents, and they're donating enough money to cover housing for everyone in the complex until the end of the semester."

He sets two shopping bags down full of clothes, makeup, toiletries, and at the bottom, is a new laptop in rose gold. “It’s beautiful. She’ll love it.”

“It won’t replace the photos and documents that were on hers but at least when she’s ready, she can go back to school.”

He pulls me into an embrace that feels different, but I can’t pinpoint why it feels like something is missing. I shake it off because emotions have run high for the past two days.

“The other bag is for you.”

I put my pointer finger in the center of my chest. “Me?”

Reed rewards me with a soft smile as he reaches for my hand.

“Can we talk? I really need to get some things off my chest.”

“I really can’t leave Lettie alone right now.”

“Right, I’m sorry. I’m being selfish. Look inside.”

On top is a Stallions hockey t-shirt for Caleb and two Hot Wheels. A layer of gold tissue lays between Caleb’s things and what’s underneath. I look at Reed with wide eyes when I pull out two tickets to Comedy on Main.

“How did you know she’s my favorite comedian?”

“You mentioned her one night on the phone. As soon as I heard she would be performing here, I bought tickets, hoping for an honest date. But now, I want you to take Lettie. She needs you right now.” He twists his lip and then tucks them in his mouth. “I mean I need you like I’ve never needed you before, but a comedy show isn’t what I have in mind.”

I jump up, and my legs wrap around him like a pretzel. “What did I do to deserve you?”

He scoffs.

“I’m serious. This is so thoughtful.”

“There’s more.”

I dig into the bag and find a bra and panty set. Stunned isn't the right word. It's the fact that he didn't pick something sheer and sexy. Reed picked out a blue and white gingham print matching set. Yes, the bra is low cut, and the underwear are thongs, but it's something I would completely buy for myself. Cute, not sexy.

As a huge grin spreads eagerly across my face, he says, "Everything you wear matches. When and if we get some time alone this week, you better have this on."

"Why?"

He whispers over the shell of my ear, "So I can rip it off, but not until my tongue and fingers have traced the edge of that ruffling lace and until I have buried my head in your cleavage. And before I move slowly down to the panties, I'm going to have them so drenched, you may need to throw them out."

I gasp. This is the Reed I've come to know. To expect. To love. No matter how I try to compartmentalize my feelings for him, they're too big. Every day, he fills my heart a little more. Yes, the presents are nice because it means he's thinking about what Caleb and I like, but it's his actions, wanting to shield me from my dad's wrath.

"I love how red you turn when I say dirty things to you. It's a turn on. Feel this." He presses his erection into my stomach, and a hungry need pushes through me.

"Reed, I... I..."

He covers my mouth with a tender kiss. Our lips overlapping again and again. Maybe he's not ready to hear that I think I'm falling in love with him. "I have to go. Hopefully, I'll see you Tuesday when we get back from Jacksonville."

"Okay. Call me when you get a chance."

Reed and I have texted and talked at least once on the phone every day, but not for any length of time. This week is hectic. After his away game in

Florida, I felt like him being benched was all my fault. His voice had a hint of sadness as he said, “It’s the first time I’ve ever sat and watched a game knowing I wouldn’t be on the ice.”

Walk through for the fundraiser went long, and there was no time for us to get together because I had to teach ballet too. He had a hockey event on Wednesday night and a paper due. Thursday night, we found time for a lengthier texting session.

Reed: *Dating sucks when you don’t get to see your girlfriend.*

Me: *I know, right? I’m sleeping in Caleb’s room, and Lettie is in my room.*

Reed: *I heard Dane came over.*

Me: *Are you spying on me?*

Reed: *I installed cameras one day while babysitting so I could watch you get naked.*

Me: *You did not.*

Reed: *Of course not. But my balls are so blue, I wish I had.*

He puts a winky face and the fire emoji at the end.

Me: *Next week will be better, and I ordered you some undies from the internet. Can’t wait to see you in them.*

Reed: *Cookie, if you grace my dick with those gorgeous lips while wearing that peppermint lip balm, I’ll make you swallow because I won’t want to let you go. That peppermint tingles.*

I cover my mouth, snickering at his comments. Reed Bauer makes me feel alive even when we’re hundreds of miles apart.

Me: *Do you like it?*

Reed: *Fuck, yeah.*

Me: *You're in a good mood. Did you get in the game?*

Reed: *No, but at least I have one more day talking to you.*

Me: *We have a date on Saturday. I can't wait to see you in a suit.*

Reed: *Wear the set I bought.*

Me: *You'll have to wait and see.*

The set has country-girl vibes and since Reed is from South Bend, Indiana, only an hour from Chicago area, I think he wants to roleplay a little. Six weeks ago, I would never think I would be talking about sex with a man, much less looking forward to roleplay.

I love the confidence Reed has given me. It extends to other parts of my life. I would have never suggested that I be responsible for an entire event going off without a hitch. But I didn't hesitate to ask if they needed me. Once we talked, I knew I would be a valuable asset to Harper and Logan. If you're not in the business, it's hard to know what you don't know, and I'm confident that I have everything down, and there will be no surprises at the fundraiser.

Reed arrives to pick me up for the Evy Brown Cheer-Off. He's wearing a black suit and the crispest white shirt with the tie I bought him, and the pocket square tucked neatly over his left side. His dark-brown hair and slate-gray eyes pop against the white collar. I notice his cufflinks when he hands me a bouquet of flowers—they're my dad's. They're gold with a diamond hockey stick and a black onyx puck on each. Before my mom left, whenever they went out, he would wear a shirt that needed cufflinks.

I don't want to talk about my dad, so I let it go, for now. After I kiss Caleb goodbye, and Reed gives him a fist bump, we leave for the theatre.

Lettie and Dane opt out of the cheer off to stay home with Caleb, but they're

bringing him when it's time for the basketball players to perform. They didn't get to practice with the team, but they still want to support the team and the foundation.

Logan, Harper, Hagan, and Adalee are waiting for us, so we can all walk the blue carpet together.

There are more photographers here than I've ever personally seen around campus. I'm sure they're mostly interested in Logan and Harper since it's their event, and he's getting ready to be drafted number one in the NFL.

I'm partially right. They yell, asking for pictures of Logan and Harper by themselves. Harper clenches his arm as they pose. The paparazzi ask her to turn sideways to see her baby bump, and her neck reddens. The rest of us swoop in, and Hagan stands on the other side of Harper with Adalee, and Reed and I stand beside Logan.

What I didn't expect was for the photographers to be yelling at Reed. And I certainly didn't intend to embarrass him.

Why did Coach Sweet bench you? You're the star of the team.

How does it feel being famous for pulling Dane out of a burning building?

Are you dating the coach's daughter, so you could get playing time?

You're the campus hero.

Reed ignores them, smiling for the cameras, but it doesn't quite reach his eyes. He looks delicious in his suit, and I can't wait until we have a few moments alone after the event.

Hagan leans in and says, "I remember the days when you would have crushed his face in for asking a dumbass question."

Harper smiles at me. "Aww. He's growing up."

"Fuck off."

Chapter Thirty-Seven

REED

We take a seat in the auditorium, while Brooke and Logan go off backstage. They kick off the night with the Stallion cheerleaders. Friends of Logan's perform flawlessly, and two of the girls who were close to Evy Brown make a few statements about how much she loved Logan and Harper and how happy she would be right now. Sniffles sounded from the crowd and after a momentary pause, Logan says, "She taught me so much. I remember her drawing pictures of Harper and me, desperately wanting us to be together. It's amazing how a little person that you haven't known that long can mean so much."

True. That's how I feel about Caleb.

An hour in, my phone buzzes. Lettie and Dane are here with Caleb. I walk out to the red velvet lobby adorned with gold chandeliers and ornate mirrors along the walls. Caleb has on a suit, and his hair is gelled. He raises his hands, and I pick him up in my arms. He hugs my neck tight, and Lettie snaps a picture.

It's hard to imagine this little dude not being in my life after only a short amount of time.

Dane and Lettie follow me as I scoot in the aisle, with Caleb sitting on my lap. Harper pats my knee and gives me a shit-eating grin. *Yes, I love this little*

boy. I don't care that he's not mine. If something ever happened to him, I would go crazy.

The basketball team performs with the Delta Gamma sorority and of course, they have a basketball goal as part of their routine. They toss the girls up to their shoulders, then the Stallions mascot throws them the basketball, and the girl dunks it, bringing the crowd to their feet.

The Stallion fans do love their basketball.

They build a pyramid and, as our school song plays, they unfurl a big flag of the Stallions logo. Dane and Lettie smile ear to ear as his arm lays across her shoulders.

As the performances end, I see Brooke in the wing with a black headset on, holding a clipboard. Her royal-blue dress hits mid-thigh with black high heels completing her outfit. She is the whole package. Beautiful, smart, goal-oriented, caring, and perfect for me.

Logan beckons Harper onto the stage, and with Hagan's support, she climbs the steps until she reaches Logan's side, where she grasps his hand. Inhaling deeply, she expresses gratitude to everyone involved in raising funds to help pay for accommodations, meals, and time off work, allowing families to spend precious moments with their children battling cancer.

After the winner is announced, the music plays, and the Tri-delts and the Beta Theta Pis accept their trophy, but then I see Brooke look at Logan, and she points her pen to someone. The curtains open to reveal a bookstore. I stretch my neck to Hagan and shrug. He whispers, "*Notting Hill* is my sister's favorite movie."

"I know, but what is he doing?"

And that's when I know something big is happening. Logan has a little twitch in his jaw. It's unusual to see Logan Warren nervous, but his voice cracks when he begins.

"Harper, we're here today to celebrate Evy's life and the difference she made in our life."

He blows out a breath, and his shoulders fall into their normal place. "You

stole my breath the first time I saw you. You stole my mind the day of the Stallion Awards, because there wasn't a minute I didn't think about you. You stole my heart at the Garlic Hotel."

He takes a breath and drops to one knee. Roscoe runs out with a little blue box in his mouth, and Logan asks the woman he loves to marry him. In *Notting Hill*, the female character declares her love in a bookstore, and the male character shields himself from love in case she will eventually break up with him. Harper always wanted to rewrite the scene. She cries and yells at the television every time she watches it. Logan is recreating the scene, giving her the happy ending she wanted.

Admittedly, I have water in my eyes. Seeing Harper handle the attention with confidence that she couldn't have done six months ago fills me with pride. They are two people who make each other better, which is how I feel about Brooke and me.

Of course, Harper says, "Yes."

In the wings, Brooke applauds with pure joy. My gaze fixates on her, captivated by her unwavering happiness. Her gift lies in bringing comfort and sheer delight to those around her.

When it's over, Dane, Lettie, Caleb, and I go on stage and congratulate the happy couple. Brooke joins us. I have Caleb on my shoulders.

"You've grown so much since this morning," she says, smiling and touching his toes, then rewards me with the happiest smile that warms my heart.

"You silly, Mommy."

I push him over my head and swing him around like he's an airplane until he lands in her arms.

"Give me a smooch."

I lean down, and she giggles. "I meant Caleb, but I'll take one from you too."

Caleb and I kiss each side of her cheeks, and I say in her ear, "You're getting more than a kiss very shortly."

The flush on her face fills every dark counter of my heart.

“Lettie, do you and Dane mind taking Caleb home? Reed and I will be home in an hour after we help clean up.”

“Sure,” Lettie says with a wink. I’m just not sure if she’s winking at us, knowing my plans, or if she wants to spend more time with Dane.

I hand them some money. “Hey, I promised the little dude ice cream if he was quiet during the show. He loves the Superman flavor.”

When they’re out of sight, and we seem to be the only ones left, I take her in my arms. “Did you know about the proposal?”

Brooke raises her brows in a teasing manner. “I knew he was going to do something because none of the ending was on Harper’s list of events. Logan came to me afterward, giving me directions on cueing the *Notting Hill* prop and then sending in Roscoe.”

“It was a grand gesture.”

“It was, just like in my books.”

“I’d like to give you a grand gesture.” I walk her backwards, off stage until her back is against a concrete wall. She’s breathing hard in anticipation. I ghost kiss her neck, not ever touching my lips to her skin. But I feel the little hairs stand up as I whisper how perfect she is. “You better show me a room if you don’t want to get caught.”

She guides me to a dressing room the guys used to change into their costumes. My fingers follow her jaw line down her neck, before turning her back to me. I pull the zipper slowly, admiring her spine. So delicate.

I move her sleek ponytail out of the way, loving the way her body shivers when I touch her. Our chemistry is more than physical. It’s the way we tease each other and make the other one wait. My hands are all over her back until I finally rake her dress from her shoulders. Then my hands caress her arms before I turn her around, revealing the matching lingerie set.

“You wore it.”

“I love it.”

“Daisy Duke or Mary Ann from Gilligan’s Island?”

“I don’t even know who those people are.” She laughs. “I know what Daisy Dukes are, but I’ve never seen the show.”

I growl, “We’re going to roleplay. You’re a country girl and you’re going to mount the rugged man who has been imagining being inside you all week.” I smack her on the ass as she lets out a squeal.

She says, “Have a seat, cowboy.” She presses two fingers against my chest until I fall back on the couch, and we play ride the cowboy until both of us are spent and empty.

When I get home late in the evening, there’s an envelope on the kitchen table addressed to Reed C. Bauer.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

REED

Brooke has been busier than ever with Lettie living with her, but this week, Lettie went back to school. My routine is back to normal. Practice, class, lunch, study hall, weightlifting, running, extra practice with my line and sneaking in time to talk to Brooke. We did a video call one night so I could talk with Caleb too. What happened at Broadhurst hasn't affected her rapport with me, and she hasn't wanted to talk about anything further. Her mind has been in overload between that and the fire that destroyed her best friend's apartment.

I'm still benched, but it's given me extra time to think about how badly I need to trust Brooke with the worst of me, so she can see the best in me. Today is the day. I can do this. I can tell her my awful truth.

Nobody's home after my weightlifting. Harper and Hagan are in class, according to the whiteboard, and Logan is in Pittsburgh for a meeting. I run upstairs and shower. Splash on a little of that cologne that she loves and opt to tame my hair instead of wearing a baseball cap.

Ready to give her my pain and my heart, I pull into Brooke's complex. The only spots open are two sections from her apartment. I see her talking to a guy. Maybe it's a neighbor, but she doesn't notice my Jeep. I back into the spot and watch for a minute before I walk up the back way.

As I get closer, I stop as I hear my name coming from this guy's mouth. Brooke says, "I deserve a man who can hardly breathe unless he's with me. And we both know that's not you."

The door opens, and it's Caleb, "Mommy, is Weed here?" He peeks out. "That's not Weed."

"Go back inside. I'll be there in a minute." Caleb is a rule follower, just like his mom. He goes back inside and shuts the door.

The guy looks from Caleb to Brooke several times before he raises his voice. "He's a criminal. He fucking tried to kill his dad."

"He doesn't even know who his dad is."

"You're so fucking gullible. His stepdad, okay?" He grabs her arms.

"Erik, stop," she grunts out. It takes it a split second to register, and then I'm charging towards them.

"Do you have a death wish? If you put your hands on my girlfriend again, you won't have any." Then I whisper, "If you don't believe me, ask my stepdad." I push him away, and I know I've seen him somewhere before. My mind is flipping through pictures of Bennington, Broadhurst... not juvie... he's too clean cut. It hits me. He plays for Coach's old team. The guy I slammed into the wall and fought with not long ago.

Bratt. Erik Bratt. What's he doing here?

"Girlfriend? She wouldn't know where to begin."

"I assure you she does."

"Does she know what you did? How you went to jail for attempted murder?"

Shock, hate, and fury overload my senses. "How do you know what happened to me?"

"I wanted something to rattle the Stallions best player. Money talks and my family has it."

All the calm and peace I felt is nowhere to be seen. I'm about to kill this guy. I grab his shirt and rear my fist back when he taunts me. "We both know if

you do, you'll go back to jail."

I let him go when I hear little dude's voice. "Weed's back." I straighten my sleeves and walk into the house, picking up Caleb as I go.

I can't hear Brooke and the douchebag hockey player, but in a few minutes, Brooke walks in.

"Caleb, go to your room."

"But..."

"You heard me." Her tone is as authoritative as I've heard from her. She urges him on, giving him his remote control car, and closes his bedroom door.

With her head hanging low and one hand clasping her mouth, she paces around the room until she ends up in the kitchen. She braces herself against the counter. She asks in a low, shaky tone,

"You went to jail? You tried to kill your dad? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Should I have led off with that at the bonfire?" I want to say something about Erik Bratt being at her apartment but whatever it was, it's not as bad as what I did.

"Don't be an asshole." She's crying and mumbling, "I'm dating someone capable of killing another person. No, no, no. Why am I drawn to guys who..." Her voice trails off.

Her dad appears out of nowhere and envelops Brooke in his arms. "Shh... I'm taking Caleb." He scratches her back, reassuring her. "Hear Reed out. Call me when you're ready for me to bring Caleb home."

Brooke snuffles, wiping the tears from her cheeks, and says, "He's in the bedroom."

Coach has Caleb facing the other direction. "Bye, Mommy. Bye, Weed. I'm Superman, and Gwandad is taking me to get ice cream."

"Bye, sweetie." She pulls her cardigan tighter.

"Little dude, I bet you'll be super strong when you get home," I strain, trying

to act like everything is okay, as the door shuts behind them.

Silence. The calm before the storm is eerie when you're just waiting for your life to implode. The sun can be shining, but then the tornado moves across your life, decimating the foundation you've built in a split second. That's how I feel in this moment. Just waiting.

Brooke walks into the den. "How did Dad know to come?"

"I planned on telling you today, so I asked him to come. I would never want Caleb to overhear anything that may be traumatic. Look at me, please." Desperately wanting her to turn around so I can look into her eyes, I fold my hand over her shoulder, and she flinches. That hurts. Brooke has always melted into me, wanting my body against hers. "Why was Erik Bratt here?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yeah, it does. We both need to come clean. Is he Caleb's father?"

She whispers, "Yes." I notice her rapid breathing before she straightens, pulling on her courage like it's clothing. "Now, if you want a sliver of hope to stay in my life, tell me why you tried to kill your dad."

"I don't know where to begin, so I'll start with how much I care about you. How much I love —"

With heartbreak dripping from her voice, she cuts me off, "Don't you dare."

My chin drops into my chest, knowing this is always going to be my undoing. When I find someone I click with, who I want to spend every day making happy, she'll leave when she finds out what I've done.

"Brooke, my mom was being abused. Looking back, I saw my stepdad hit her on occasion, but since I was at boarding school, I didn't understand the extent of it."

She slowly turns her body towards me, but her stare is centered on the floor.

"I came home from boarding school, happy like most sixteen-year-old boys. It was summer break, time for summer hockey camps, girls in bikinis at the country club, and hanging out with friends from the neighborhood. But that's not what I got."

I grab an action figure from the floor and twirl the legs in my hands, stuttering, “I... I parked my car in the driveway, left the luggage in the car, so excited to see my mom that I burst through the front door and almost tripped. My stepdad’s voice boomed through the halls. And I heard a thud against the wall. It was confusing. It was like when you’re watching a movie that’s filmed in virtual darkness. Then I heard a scream.”

My body feels like it’s that dark kitchen. I don’t realize I’m shaking until the toy falls from my hands, landing on the carpet. Brooke’s eyes collide with mine.

“Mom yelled words like *embezzlement*, and it *wasn’t your money*. More noises sounding like items falling onto the floor. When I figure out where they are, I run into the kitchen. He’s hitting my mom in the face. He’s out of control, so I charge him like a bull. Instinct took over.” I pause, my lungs constrict, unable to speak. The memories are squeezing the life out of me as I catch my breath. “Sorry, it feels like it’s that day.”

“Take your time because I need to know everything, Reed. Everything.” Her tone is soft but unequivocal.

Brooke sits beside me on the couch and for the first time, she looks at my face. Out of the corner of my eye, I see water welling up in her eyes. “My stepfather gripped my shirt, bunching around my neck when he screamed, ‘You little fucker. If you come at me again, you’ll regret it.’

“Anger rushed through my veins. I felt a chunk of spit in my throat and spat in his face. I told him not to touch my mom again, or I’d kill him.

“He threw me into the kitchen table, breaking the chair. My feet slipped against the tile as I scrambled to get up. My mom was shouting, but I couldn’t hear her. I realize blood is spilling from my nose and possibly my ear.”

With Brooke having a child, I know she needs to know every detail, so I dig deep to find the courage.

“He shouted that she was a puck bunny, and my father didn’t want her either. He had his hands around her throat, up against the wall. It was my only chance to save her and...”

“And then what happened?” she asks.

I squeeze her hand and bring it to my lips, kissing her knuckles as my tears splash against her ivory skin.

“The room was spinning. I was looking for anything to... I grabbed a knife from the butcher block and fuck... he was hurting my mom. I wasn’t trying to...” I don’t want to say the words kill him, and I sob. My back curves, and my head rests on my hands. “His back was turned, and I ran towards him. As I slung my arm, he turned, and the knife went into his chest.”

My lids close, not wanting to see her expression, which based on her flinching again, is full of fear and disappointment.

When I look at her, she’s a complete blur due to my watery eyes. “Brooke, you have to believe me. I was sixteen. My whole life in front of me. I wasn’t angry before this happened. I wasn’t the bad boy of hockey—the guy everyone feared on the ice. I was a sixteen-year-old boy who couldn’t wait to come home and see my mom.”

Her body is frozen and rigid, so I stand. “I’ll go. You deserve a man way better than me. Caleb needs a father figure and obviously, I can’t be that for him. But whether you want to hear it or not—I love you.”

She closes her eyes, and I feel the pain in her chest because it’s in mine too. Just as you believe you’ve discovered the individual who heals your heart and accepts you and your flaws, you come to realize that there are indeed certain limitations in place.

“Reed.” My name coming from her lips makes me wonder if this is the last time I ever hear it. “Just rip the band-aid off. I’ll understand. Finish the story.”

My voice raises and collapses at the same time. “Story. It’s not a story; it’s my fucking life. My horrible fucking life. I didn’t kill him, but I wish I did. How does it feel to hear that? It’s the first time I’ve said it out loud. And I don’t know what to do with that. My mom hasn’t spoken to me in years. I have no one. As little as you think your world is—mine is smaller. I’m not asking you to feel sorry for me. I’m asking you to ask yourself what you would do in that situation.”

Her hand touches mine, almost tentatively before she intertwines our fingers. “I’m sorry that happened to you and to your mom. I’m sorry for what you felt like you had to do. What I don’t understand is why you went to jail. Didn’t your mom defend you?”

Scoffing, I say, “No. She said she had fallen due to her vertigo. And while my stepdad and I were fighting, she caught an errant punch, and she wasn’t one hundred percent sure which one of us did it.” Our eyes collide, and I take a breath. “The last time I talked to her, she said, ‘You owe me. I talked your stepdad into getting the police to charge you as a minor.’ She wanted some of my NIL money at Broadhurst.”

“So, you spent the missing two years in the juvenile system?”

With my lips rolled inside my mouth, I nod in affirmation.

“But how did you get a hockey scholarship? And at Broadhurst? They’re one of the best hockey teams in the country.”

I explain to her that her dad was friends with my biological father, and he told me who my real dad is. “I believe my biological father pulled some strings to get the juvenile detention center to allow me to play in a hockey league while in juvie. It was all done anonymously in sealed records but since your dad informed me of who my bio father is, I assume he worked it out. Your dad brought me here as a favor to him more than likely.”

Her mind is racing, trying to put all of the pieces together. Been there.

“I’ve been trying to put the pieces of my heart together for a long time. And it never happened until you.”

Her lips tremble as she says, “Thank you for trusting me, but I need time to let all of this sink in. I don’t want Caleb around violence.” She hesitates as she slides her hands up my chest.

I grab her wrists and say, “Don’t. Don’t cry over what I’ve done. Don’t touch me unless you believe that I was defending my mom. I won’t apologize or regret defending her even if she’s a piece of shit. I will always, always defend the people I love.”

Behind a film of blurry eyes, I bend over and kiss the corner of her mouth. “I

know this is hard to hear. Hell, it's the most difficult words I've ever muttered. Your dad knows but when I told him the bare bones, it wasn't the same. It was for hockey. I love hockey, but I'm not in love with hockey. Telling someone you love is almost unbearable."

Walking backwards, her hands fall from my chest as the gap between us widens. The pain returns to my heart with a vengeance.

"Reed, I believe you..."

"But."

Her eyes fall. "But I need some space."

Chapter Thirty-Nine

BROOKE

Reed left my apartment three days ago and hasn't attempted to get in touch with me. To be fair, I said I needed space, and I respect him for giving it to me. But I miss him. Caleb keeps asking when he's going to see Weed again, and I answer the truth... I don't know.

With Caleb tucked into my chest, I dream of more days like the night of the Cheer-Off. Reed loves me and loves this little boy. Caleb lights up when he's around.

Every waking second for the past few days has been filled with images of what Reed went through. How he defended his mom. How he defended me twice. It all makes sense now. Five or six months ago, when I met him at a bar, and he threw one of my classmates on the ground for touching me, and then again when Erik was here.

All of my thoughts have been centered on his defense of his mom and me. Do I want a man who will keep me safe at all costs?

The first thing I do when I wake up is message my dad. He's coaching practice right now, but hopefully, his schedule is clear after he finishes. We haven't talked since the day he confronted Reed and me about our relationship, other than when he picked up and dropped off Caleb a few days ago.

I'm ready to talk. I get off at two today.

By the time I've dropped Caleb off at daycare, he still hasn't answered.

Hours pass, and a text comes in from Reed.

Reed: *Coach granted permission for me to go out of town. I have some things to take care of.*

Me: *But you will be back?*

The bouncing dots quit bouncing, and I slump against the table I'm wiping off. I don't deserve answers from him until I've given him my answer or thoughts.

If you asked me a week ago, I would have said Reed and I are tighter than we've ever been. There's something about roleplaying that's freeing, acting like you're someone else, but there's a little bit of you in every action. Who you wish you were. But being with Reed, I no longer feel like someone else. I'm becoming the person I want to be. More confident. More social. Prouder of being a kickass single mom.

A vibration in my pocket has me pulling out my phone with hopes it's Reed, but it's my dad.

Dad: *Dinner? I'll rent the new dinosaur movie so you can give me a tongue lashing.*

Dad always knows how to make me smile. Yeah, I'm giving him a piece of my mind.

Me: *We'll be there.*

I assume Dad knows where Reed is going, but I'll wait to ask until dinner.

In the short time I've known Reed, we've been through more than most couples go through in a year. So many obstacles have been placed in our way. But what I'm recognizing is they weren't obstacles at all. Caleb isn't an obstacle. My dad isn't an obstacle. They're part of me. And my dad, to some degree, is a part of Reed.

Do I care how they feel? Yes. Will I listen to Dad's advice? Yes. But do

either of them get to decide who I date? No. If Reed wasn't good with Caleb, that would be different, but Reed plays with him when I'm not around. Caleb never stops talking about him. *Weed put the covers over the boxes. Weed lets me wear his hat. Weed asked me if you like SpaghettiOs.*

I admit, I'm worried. Not just about our relationship but Reed himself. Once he said, "I have more baggage than Delta Airlines." He's gone somewhere without any support, and he probably assumes I think he's a terrible person for what he did. I don't.

Bonnie snaps her fingers. "Brooke, table 5."

Straightening, I see it's a group of Reed's teammates and walk to them.

"I'll be your waitress. What can I get started for you?"

"I'm Flynn. This is Dawes, Janik, and Wynward. We're —"

"I know who you are." This is my chance to dig for some information about Reed. "How was practice?"

"Good. Except Coach and your boyfriend had a private conversation in his office, and Reed left without even lacing up."

I don't know what to say. I'm his girlfriend... or was. I guess we're in limbo. He trusted me with his heart and his pain, and I made it about me and Caleb.

I feel tears welling up in my eyes. Dawes grabs my hand. "You've changed him. You know that. He's gone soft."

"That's not true."

Wynward says, "It would mean a lot to him if you were at our next home game. The rest of us have someone in the stands. A girlfriend, a parent, a sibling, or a friend —"

Flynn interrupts him, "A puck bunny."

They all smack Flynn, and these gorgeous, fit men cackle like a gaggle of geese.

"Seriously, Reed has no one who can come. His roommates came to a scrimmage before the season started but not since. I don't mean to pry, but

it's pretty unusual for the coach's daughter not to like hockey.”

My throat feels like I have cotton mouth. So dry. I nod as I fold the order pad open, click my pen, and ask, “Are you ready to order?”

For a hot minute, I think they've lost the ability to speak, but then Flynn rattles off a laundry list of side items. When I return with their food, Dawes slides me a piece of paper and says, “Can you let me know if you hear from him? He's private and would tell me to fuck off if he knew I was keeping tabs.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

They leave cash on the table when they exit. Flynn veers off in my direction. “I've known about you two for a while, and I never said a word, until it came out on television. If Reed doesn't know how to act when he's in love, it's because he's never been struck by the arrow. He doesn't know you'll be worrying about where he is or what he's doing.” He surrounds me with his arms in an awkward embrace.

With a close-lipped half-smile, I nod and push a loose strand of hair behind my ear. My head barely moves when my voice strains to say, “Thanks. But I'm not sure if we're still together.”

Each one of them gives me a sympathetic smile.

The house smells of garlic, basil, and oregano when I open the side door that leads into the kitchen. And sourdough bread baking is like the cherry on top. My dad is buttering me up. Hoping to calm the hurricane that he thinks I'm about to unleash.

When Caleb sees him, he runs into his arms, yelling, “Gwandad.”

“How's my favorite dinosaur?” My dad swings him around, kissing him on the cheek.

“I don't want to be a T-wex anymore. I'm going to be a hockey player like Weed.” Happiness dances in Caleb's eyes. “He bought me a stick and a

puck.”

I look at Dad. “It’s a play set. Not real.”

Dad crinkles one whole side of his face, but he doesn’t say the words I know he wishes he could. *You wouldn’t let me get him anything hockey related.* Ignoring his expression, I say, “Trying to bribe me with my favorite meal?”

“Yep, and I’m man enough to admit it. Caleb, can you put the napkins on the table?”

My son toddles around, opening the drawer where Dad keeps the napkins. Caleb counts out three and then puts them beside each plate. When my dad is with us, he’s the greatest father and grandfather. It’s all the time he’s not that I’m lonesome.

When we’re finished, Dad rents the movie that Caleb wants to see and sits him on the couch, just out of hearing distance—if we keep our voices low. We handwash the dishes and drying when I ask, “Where did Reed go?”

“I can’t tell you, but it’s something he needs to do.”

“Dad, please. Some of the team came into the café. They’re worried about him. Apparently, he’s back to his moody, broody self. The side of him I’ve rarely seen, but I have felt it a few times. He puts on a good face, but it seems like he’s standing on the edge of a diving platform, and he’s having second thoughts on jumping in the water. It doesn’t help that you’re taking away the one thing he has—hockey.”

Dad scoots closer to me and flips the hand towel over his shoulder. “Baby girl, he violated team rules for a week. If I let him get away with it, I’ll lose control of the asylum.”

He bumps my shoulder. I never thought of how it would affect my dad. I just thought about how he would react and how it would affect Reed or me.

“I think I’m in love with him,” I confess quietly, stealing a glance over my shoulder at my dad. A mixture of apprehension and excitement, over my newly realized feelings, clouds my expression “Actually, I know I am. He’s so good with Caleb.”

Dad's voice is kind but firm as he offers his advice. "You can't base your decision to love someone solely on their love for your son. Their love for you should be the foundation. Without it, their affection for Caleb will never be genuine. And I can assure you, Reed would agree."

Regret casts a shadow over my apology. "I'm sorry Caleb and I didn't visit you after you found out. Or I didn't return your attempts to reach out. My emotions got the best of me, as I was frustrated that you seemed to prioritize Reed's feelings over mine. However, I now comprehend that you were simply trying to instill fear in him if he hurts me."

"You and I needed time apart. If I didn't have that time, I probably would have violated the coach's code of conduct by telling you everything I know about Reed." His voice is tinged with a bit of sadness. "Don't get me wrong. Reed is a good person who has hailed from a terrible situation."

"He came clean. Never in a million years did I think it could be as bad as it was. He went to boarding school for heaven's sake. It costs more than tuition at this college."

Dad tilts his head and surrounds me with his strong arms. "Money can't buy happiness."

"Is he coming back?"

"I hope so."

"If you hear from him, will you let me know?"

He shakes his head. "Just give him this time. If he doesn't confront it now, I'm afraid he'll never be able to fully commit to you and Caleb. If that's what you want."

I nod. "I do." My lids flit closed in an attempt to keep from crying. Crying over what Reed has been through. Crying over what he's facing at this very moment. Crying, hoping he returns to the team because he loves hockey. And that he returns to me, so I can tell him I love him.

"One more thing. We play Erik's team this weekend."

My dad hugs me and rubs my back. "Erik didn't seem to bat an eye when

Caleb showed his face, so it's possible he doesn't have a clue.”

“If there is someone I don't trust, it's Erik Bratt.”

Chapter Forty

REED

The letter remains unopened on my desk. I threw it there when I came in from Brooke's the night of the Cheer-Off. It put a damper on the bliss I was feeling from roleplaying with Brooke. That girl has layers. I just wanted to revel in Brooke's scent and memories of the night.

So much has happened between then and now. I've been completely distracted in class, at hockey, and at home. I do feel a weight has been lifted off my shoulders after telling Brooke about my past. But it doesn't take away the pain of losing her. She's not going to choose me, I know it.

I have to finish *The Outsiders*. My paper is due on Friday, so I attempt to read the last several chapters. Who knew a letter would be so distracting? After reading the same chapter two times without annotating a single line, I realize it's not going to happen unless I read the letter with the return address of NHL Headquarters.

It makes bile rise in my throat just thinking of what it might say. Maybe it's a letter that all players eligible for the NHL receive, but the timing is suspect, being I was told a few weeks ago who my dad is.

The chair creaks as I fall back into the seat. Snatching the letter, I peruse the front and back before splitting the edge and pulling the contents out. *Just open it.*

Dear Reed,

There's no way to begin a letter that I think will mean so little to you but means so much to me. I've asked your coach for a few days of your time. Coach Sweet said it was up to you and that you must clear it with him if you decide to come visit me.

If you want answers or to fill in the blanks, I'll take time off so we can get to know each other. I hope to see you. This is a standing invitation. All you need to do is show identification at reception of the headquarters. Your name is on an approved list to the executive floor.

Eldrick Cross

There are some instructions on the back of the note about parking.

Hagan pops into my room with Roscoe by his side. He glances down at the opened envelope. "Are you going to the NHL?"

"It doesn't work that way, and you know it," I answer without looking his way.

"Do you want to talk?"

"Not right now, but thanks."

Roscoe walks to the chair and places his paw on my knee. How can a simple gesture make a person feel better? It's hard to believe, but it does. I rub his curly head and lean down, our foreheads touching. "He's the best."

"He is. He can stay in here if you like."

I shake my head. "I have a paper to work on."

"Okay, but we're all here for you. We can go to her and fill her in on the person she knows you are but just isn't trusting herself. She glows in your presence. It's going to work out. I know it."

With a simple nod, he understands that he's not going to get anything out of me tonight. It's been a long day, and I need to get some shuteye before I decide what I'm going to do.

When I leave the house this morning, I throw an extra bag of clothes and my backpack into the car. I want to be prepared for whatever decision I make.

When I talk with Coach, he convinces me that this is the closure I need to stop being so angry all the time. My mom never said much about my father, preferring my stepdad to take his place in our lives.

I wish I could say this road trip consists of the windows rolled down with Imagine Dragons or Twenty-One Pilots blaring. Or that Brooke was with me, her painted, rosy toes on the dashboard and hair whipping in the breeze. Instead, it's snowing as I wind through the backroads on the way to the interstate. It's cold, and the only channel that will come in without cracking with loads of static is a local Sunday morning talk show.

The host talks about basketball, which is how my name pops up. "Reed Bauer, the star of the hockey team, pulled Dane Greathouse from the burning complex. Maybe we should get him on the show."

At least I'm known for something good now.

After several stops to use the bathroom, eat, and pump gas, I arrive at NHL headquarters. There's a code to the parking garage in the letter, so I push in the numbers and blow out a breath as the yellow metal arm rises, allowing me access.

"Act like you don't care what he has to say. Listen to what he has to say. That's why you came," I mutter under my breath.

The reception area is sleek and modern with the stars of NHL behind slim glass frames. The colors are vibrant and when you move, they appear to be three dimensional.

A woman with curly black hair pulled off her face asks, "May I help you?"

"Yes, I'm here to see Eldrick Cross." I hand her my driver's license.

She checks the computer, taps a few buttons, and responds, "Sixth floor. Stop at reception there." Then she points to the bank of elevators.

Stepping out, I don't need to talk to the receptionist because my piece of shit real dad is talking to Roman Beatty, the five-time MVP of the Stanley Cup.

They shake hands, and Beatty smiles as he brushes past me. But I'm looking at the man behind him. He's broad shouldered and as I stare, it's like looking in a mirror. Why did I never notice this before? I've seen him on draft days, countless games, and at least ten times awarding the Stanley Cup.

A tentative smile pulls at the corners of his mouth as he says, "Jenna, don't disturb me. For any reason. Got it?"

"Yes, sir."

Is he still trying to hide me like he has for the past twenty-two years? Does his administrative assistant know I'm his son?

He signals for me to accompany him into his office. As we enter, he shuts the door behind us and draws the blinds, concealing the open glass wall that overlooks the bustling executive floor. It becomes evident that he doesn't want prying eyes witnessing any potential confrontation or outburst from me.

I walk to the windows overlooking the city, where there are no blinds but sheers on each end.

"Great view." I stuff my hands into the pockets of my white sweatpants.

He keeps his distance from me. "It is. I'm happy you came."

Excitement and nervousness intertwine as I process the magnitude of this meeting. Finally, after all these years, I'm eye to eye with my biological father. The anticipation builds within me, fueled by a mix of curiosity and hope that this connection could fill the void that has lingered within me for so long.

A part of me also hates him. Maybe none of the bad things would have happened to me if he were in my life. He has the money and means to travel to see me. This side of me wins out as I let out an unintentional scoff.

"Just say whatever it is to make yourself feel better for abandoning me." I almost surprise myself with the calmness in my voice. I've gone over and over this. Each time I've imagined this moment, I'm yelling, grabbing him by

the neck, and pushing him against the wall. Harper's right—I'm growing up.

Slowly, I angle myself where I can see his face. "Your mom and I, well, we didn't date. We..."

"Hooked up. I've heard."

He sighs and walks around, leaning his shoulder on the window. "I'm sure you love your mother, and I don't want to disparage her." He pauses. "But she had her eyes on a bigger prize than me. My teammate had a better outlook for the NHL."

My stepdad called her a puck bunny. No way. My mom was sweet and attentive.

"Are you calling my mom a puck bunny?" My blood pumps faster and harder. Damn, why am I still defending her?

He waits a few moments before he speaks. "We, as you put it, hooked up several times. I started to develop feelings, but she made it clear she wasn't interested in a relationship with me."

Excitement cautiously moves through my veins, but there's also a nagging sense of confusion. Why didn't he claim me as his son before? What could have been the reasons behind his absence? These questions flicker in the back of my mind, adding an extra layer of complexity to this reunion.

"Can we get to the part where you somehow got the court to let me play hockey? How you never contacted me, even though you knew. I mean my coach knew, so you had to know."

He presses a button on the desk phone. "Jenna, I'll be out of the office for a few days." His square jaw relaxes as he peers into my eyes and inches closer to me. "I don't want to talk to you in my office like you're a client. You're my son, and I want to show you my favorite place. Do you have something warmer?"

In that moment, as our eyes lock, he addresses me with a word that stirs up a complex blend of emotions within me—*son*. A surge of conflicting feelings washes over me, caught between anger and a glimmer of hope that perhaps we can forge a relationship.

“In the car.”

“Can I take you there?”

“Yeah.”

Resentment, curiosity, and a dozen other emotions flood my conscience. Resentment for all the years he wasn't there, the moments and memories we missed out on. Curiosity about how he'll explain his absence. Yet, deep down, a small flicker of hope sparks within me. Hope that this unexpected connection can bridge the gap, and I'm ready to admit I need a father just like Caleb does.

We take the elevator to the parking garage to retrieve my coat and gloves. My sleeves inch up on my forearms as I put the coat on. He tries not to stare, but he can't help it. Everyone thinks every tattoo tells a story, and most of mine do, but I know people who just get inked with things that are cool or they like.

The walk to the water is bitterly cold, but at least we don't talk. He guides me through the marina to a boat and gestures for me to get on. I'm a true crime junkie, and I convinced Brooke to watch a documentary with me last week even though we were in different cities. We started streaming it at the same time, and she was enthralled, asking questions and commenting so much, we had to pause a million times. Now, I'm wondering if I should step foot on this boat. Since his staff saw me, I think I'll live.

The boat is spacious, designed with a protective shield around the steering wheel to safeguard it from the gusts of wind, and equipped with a cozy cabin located beneath the main deck. He drives us to a place where there's a canopy of trees and puts the boat in park. “This is where I come to think and fish. I love to fish. Do you?”

I chuckle. “No. Never had time for it.” Moments pass when I finally ask, “Why did you want to see me? Tired of feeling guilty?”

“By the time your mom called me and said you were mine, I had a family and two kids. She waited until you were four years old. I told her I wanted to be in your life, but she said, ‘You live twelve hours away, and I'm not putting my baby through that.’ All she wanted was money. She signed an NDA. Do

you know what that is, Reed?”

I chew on my bottom lip and nod. “I’m well aware. Did you contact Coach Sweet and ask him to take me as a transfer?”

“I did. He needed a star player, and you needed a home with a good man to look after you.”

Mr. Cross answers every question I throw at him. He remains calm, using a soothing voice which ticks me off even more. But my emotions are anything but hushed and levelheaded. I’m angry.

“I knew it. Fuck, this keeps getting worse. Did you give me up because you already had kids? You said you cared about her, but you didn’t fight for me.” For the first time in a long time, tears stream down my face and creek over my jaws. They drop onto my coat.

Everything inside me aches. Not understanding. Hell, if Brooke and Caleb were really mine, nothing would keep them from me.

I’m not the only one succumbing to my emotions. Mr. Cross wipes his eyes and clears his throat when he explains further. “I asked for a DNA test to make sure, but I knew it was possible, and the timing matched up. Since I was early into my NHL career, I listened to my publicist and agent. They convinced me to have your mom sign the NDA, pay her support, and set up a trust fund for you. Looking back, I don’t truly understand why she didn’t want me to be in your life, but she was dating a man, and they ended up marrying. She probably wanted him to be your father. I gave her more than she asked because you were my child. I paid for every hockey lesson. Boarding school.”

My bio dad’s eyes beg me to hear him. To believe that he wanted me. But he didn’t. He let two assholes in suits tell him to give up his rights to his child. I assume because it would reflect negatively on the NHL, and his wife would possibly divorce the rising NHL star.

“I don’t know if your other kids think money is enough, but I don’t. Take me back.” My insides shake uncontrollably like I’m on one of those wooden rollercoasters at a theme park.

He crosses from the other bench seat to me. He puts his arm around my

shoulders, causing me to flinch at first. He holds his arm firmly in place. After a minute, when I've succumbed to his touch, he says, "Please come stay with us at my home. Meet my wife. I told her everything when Sweet agreed to offer a scholarship."

"Did you pay him too?" My voice cracks and sounds hoarse from the crying. Damn, I'm such a pussy. If he says yes, I might explode. Please say no. Please say no. He's the one father figure in my life.

"No, and I wasn't paying your mom... or at least I didn't think I was. I paid her support for you for monthly needs... for you. The trust was for the expensive items, and it had a limit on it each year. From what I understand from the money managers, and court documents, her husband convinced her to use the money for his fledgling business and embezzled money from your trust that was set up to pay for your hockey, school, car, or anything you needed."

I let it sink in but all I can think of is my stepdad hitting my mom and that fateful afternoon when my life changed forever.

My voice drops, straining for volume. "I needed you. You're the reason he... fucking beat her. I remember him saying she was in love with you."

"I'll accept responsibility for all my mistakes, but he's the reason he beat her. No one else, especially not you. And as far as being in love with me, I assure you she wasn't." He gets on his knees in front of me and pulls my hands from my eyes. "Go home with me. Let's not lose any more time together. Meet your stepmom. I almost lost the love of my life when I told her my secret. I realize now, that being young and stupid isn't a reason not to tell the truth."

"She doesn't want me around."

Why would she?

"It's the opposite. She always wanted more children but after our second child was born, she almost died in childbirth. She had a complete hysterectomy after holding her son for a few minutes. Was she upset that I had kept this hidden from her? Yes, she was, but when we talked it through, I knew I had to reach out directly and ask for your forgiveness."

Without realizing it, I wrap my arms around him, tuck my head into his

shoulder, and cry. “I don’t even wish I could take it all back if it meant saving my mom. I’m a terrible person.”

“You’re not,” he whispers. “Will you forgive me? I know it will take time, and you won’t forget. Just please give me a chance to be the father I want to be.”

I nod without lifting my head to look at him. My emotions are all over the place.

“Thank you. Holly can’t wait to meet you. Your brothers no longer live at home, so it’ll only be three of us.”

We pull apart, and the thought of having parental figures in my life and siblings has me choked up.

He grabs my shoulders, forcing me to look at him. “I know there are more blanks to fill in, and I promise I’ll do that after you meet Holly, and we have dinner. I want you to stay as long as you want.”

“Okay.” One word is all I can muster. I’m drained and have little energy left.

We walk back to the headquarters and occasionally, he puts his hand on my back, and there is love in his touch. Even when I had a stepfather, he didn’t love me. He loved the money he was embezzling from my trust fund.

During the time it takes to pick up our cars and follow Mr. Cross home, my mind prisms into a thousand different directions. What is forgiveness? Does a man forgive or does a real man hold a grudge? How different would my life have been if I grew up knowing Eldrick Cross was my father?

As Mr. Cross enters his four-car garage, he opens door three. I pull my Jeep into the space and take a deep breath before stepping out.

I’m doing this.

We walk through the garage into a bonus room that leads into the kitchen. When his wife hears the door shut, she turns and smiles. Not at all what I was expecting. A brunette with freckles covering her nose and cheeks, which makes me think of Brooke.

“We’re so glad you came.” She extends her arms as I reluctantly embrace

her. She's a couple of years younger than my biological dad. No, he's simply my dad. Her hug feels genuine, and her eyes are full of maternal love. She doesn't fire questions at me but asks open-ended questions, I think in an attempt for me to open up and share what I'm comfortable with.

After dinner, she walks out to their sunroom where my dad and I are talking. She presents a s'mores maker, and I have the first feeling of family other than when I'm with Brooke and Caleb.

We burn marshmallows, laugh, and burn another one before we finally get it right, creating the perfect three-layered dessert.

I spend two nights and realize that as much as I'm enjoying getting to know Dad and Holly, my teammates are counting on me. Even if I don't play, I need to get back for moral support. I also need to face my future and find out if Brooke wants to be in it.

Before I leave, my dad drops a bomb on me that I'm not sure I can wrap my head around. And I question how Brooke will take it.

We say our goodbyes, and I know I have a father and stepmother in my life. I can't wait to meet my brothers. There's a newfound excitement I feel down to my bones.

But when I return to Kentucky, I stop at Logan's sister's house. She's a clothing designer, and I ordered something special for Brooke that she has ready. I'm one hundred percent ready for Brooke to know that I will never keep anything from her again and that I want her with me all the time. It's a gamble, but you don't get anywhere in life if you aren't willing to risk your pain and your heart.

Chapter Forty-One

BROOKE

Despite Reed's absence for the past few days, my dad informed me that he will be returning to the team. Tomorrow afternoon, they have a game against Erik's team. It's a rare Saturday afternoon game, and I'm determined to attend, whether Reed reaches out or not. I'm going to be there, supporting my man. Even though Reed may have seemingly given up on me, I know the kind of man he truly is—loving, caring, irresistibly attractive, and above all, fiercely protective.

I have turned in the play I had to write this morning to my professor. After Reed shared his history with me, I chucked everything I'd written and wrote Reed a happy ending. Yes, the play is full of tragedy and heartbreak, but in the end, Reed gets the girl and a bonus little boy. Now, here's hoping he still wants me.

After working a five-hour shift at the café, I run home and get ready for my ballet class. I've changed the time this week so Caleb can stay at daycare. Sometimes, as a single mom, you have to adjust quickly and make new arrangements.

My group of seven kids consists of six girls and one boy. His dad is the wide receiver coach on the Stallions and wants him to learn flexibility like Lynn Swann. I have no idea who that is.

I select a theme song from one of the kids' favorite movies. We execute all the ballet moves in slow motion, keeping the little boy at the center. Laughter fills the room as the girls find his energetic moves amusing. Out of the corner of my eye, I catch a glimpse of Reed through the glass window, and my heart races instantly. Although he watches the little boy with a smile on his face, his eyes don't quite reach mine, as he lays a box by the door.

Rehearsing the two-minute ballet is the last part of the lesson, so the kids hurry out, telling their parents all about Marcus and his moves.

I grab the box and sit at the desk to open it. When I do, it's a beautiful handmade hockey sweater with the number 7 on the front. The number is applied on in light pink, the color of my ballet shoes. It's outlined in royal blue. The jersey is white with blue and black stripes at the bottom and on the sleeves. The back has the name Cross spread between the shoulders and again the number seven.

And underneath, a handwritten note. "The only answer that matters is the one I need from you. It's my hope that given this time apart, you realize I would never hurt you or Caleb. But again, if someone else hurts you, they will answer to me. Hope to see this on your gorgeous body, soon."

I pick it up, burying my nose in the fabric. He's put a hint of his cologne on it and thoughts of the first night we met play in my mind. The more I inhale, the more memories come. Him in the library. Playing airplane with Caleb, and so many more. I love him. I do.

I lock up and walk fifty feet down the hall to pick up Caleb. The receptionist says, "Your boyfriend picked him up fifteen minutes ago."

"What boyfriend?"

"Your hockey player boyfriend. He had on a hockey shirt."

"Reed? Reed Bauer?"

She shrugs her shoulder as she checks the log.

I hold up my wrist on her face. "Did he have an orange band?"

"Our scanner isn't working, so I didn't ask."

My stomach is in a knot. Where do we start? Reed wouldn't take him without asking me, but maybe they're in the car waiting for me. "Are the cameras working? I need to see Sheila." She's the manager who would know how to work the footage.

"I'm sorry, she left for a home visit for the preschool section," she says like it's no big deal.

My body burns with fear. "Oh God, what did he look like?" It dawns on me that the Stallions are playing Galena U tomorrow, so Erik is in town.

"About six feet-ish and blue eyes, brown hair, I think."

"Well, that describes half of campus."

I rush out of the door, urgently calling Caleb's name. Panic overtakes me, my whole body trembling. Thoughts race through my mind—what if Caleb is hurt? What if he's being taken away from me?

A sinking feeling consumes me. But as I scan the area, I witness Erik holding Caleb's hand, while Caleb reaches for Reed, crying.

Thank God, Reed's here.

I run towards them. Erik shouts, "He has my DNA. Not yours. You don't get to step in and play daddy. Hell, you're probably not supposed to be around children after what you did."

"Caleb, are you all right?" I ask, engulfing him in a tight embrace that momentarily takes his breath away.

I stand, ready to unleash my fury on Erik Bratt. "DNA doesn't make you a father. And you have no right to speak to Reed that way after what you did to me."

Erik is spitting mad and berates me in front of Caleb, while Reed wastes no time making calls.

Reed wraps his hand around Erik's elbow. "My dad contacted your parents and threatened to inform every NHL owner about your poor judgment."

"Your jailbird stepdad has no authority over me or my parents. Do you know

who we are?"

"My dad has more weight in the NHL than you know," Reed states simply.

A mix of surprise and gratitude washes over me. "My dad did that?" I ask.

"No, mine. Caleb's safety comes first, then I'll fill you in," Reed replies, determination in his voice.

Erik continues to spit venom. Reed keeps him in check, and I walk fifty feet away to keep Caleb from overhearing anything traumatic. Luckily, Caleb doesn't know what DNA is.

"Brooklyn!" Dad rushes to my and Caleb's side. The Galena coach isn't far behind him. Dad looks to the other coach and says, "Get Erik to the hotel. We're going to think about pressing charges."

Reed inches closer to Erik to where they're only an inch apart. "There won't be a second chance for you. There's no statute of limitations for kidnapping in Kentucky. One wrong move, and my dad will destroy you."

Erik, though clearly unnerved by Reed's threatening words, musters the audacity to respond, his voice tinged with arrogance and a hint of fear, "You have no idea what I've been through, and that little boy is mine. He has my DNA."

Reed bawls over, looking like he's been hit in the stomach with a medicine ball. "If that's the case, then you go about it using appropriate channels. Do not. I repeat do not contact Brooke or Caleb unless it's through attorneys. I doubt you could get partial custody after tonight."

My mind is utter chaos, not understanding what Reed is talking about. My nerves are at an all-time high with angst and fear running through me.

When Erik and his coach leave, Dad says, "I'm taking Caleb for ice cream. You two have a lot to talk about."

My apartment complex isn't far, but Reed and I can't get there fast enough.

Reed rubs my leg. "He's a tough little boy, and he won't remember this in a year."

Reed maneuvers the car sharply into the nearest parking space, causing our heads to jolt forward from the sudden halt.

We make our way inside my place, and overwhelmed with gratitude, I wrap my arms tightly around Reed's waist, clinging to him as tears of joy and relief soak his worn sweatshirt. I find comfort in his embrace as his fingers make featherlight circles on my neck. "I don't blame him for wanting you back and for wanting to have a relationship with Caleb."

I pull back, craning my neck to see his face. "How do you know that's what he wants?"

"Because you're an incredible woman. You're intelligent, responsible, shy in a good way, and more than anything else, you're loving. And your son is adventurous, curious beyond his age, and the best snuggle buddy in the world."

I soak in his words as tears of relief coat my face, then I remember I need answers. "Where did you go?"

"To curse out my biological dad."

"Oh, how did that go?"

"Good, good. I'll tell you all about it later." His hands cup my face. "I love you, Brooklyn Dulce Sweet, and I know I'm worth loving."

More tears stream, but his thumbs wipe them away as I cry and begin to laugh.

"Is that funny?" he asks.

As my laughter subsides, a deep breath escapes me, releasing not only the exhilaration accumulated throughout the evening but also the underlying anxiety that has plagued me for the past three nights of worrying about Reed. And the part I played in him feeling like he needed to leave.

"I love you and can't wait to wear the jersey. But is it yours? Wrong name and wrong number."

"It's my lucky number." He gives me a lopsided smile, and my heart thumps against my chest.

Lifting my brows, I ask, “Oh really?”

“The bonfire was on the seventh. Caleb’s birthday is July seventh. My dad wore number seven. You have seven different color tank tops. You have seven boxes of cereal in your cabinet.”

“A girl can never have too many boxes of cereal.”

“When I kiss your body, there are seven places that give you goosebumps.”

“Seven?”

“Seven. The delicate skin on your wrists. Behind your ear. Between your legs. The small of your back. Your nipples, neck, and hips,” he whispers into my mouth as he kisses me.

I relax into his arms. After a dozen mini kisses that melt my heart, he says, “Let’s take Caleb to the pizza place where there are video games and skeeball. Do you like skeeball?”

“Are you kidding? I’m the reigning champion.”

He curls his lips and raises an eyebrow. “Against whom?”

“My dad.”

Reed invades my space, kissing my nose. “Let’s change the course of the night and give Caleb a happy memory.”

At that moment, I call my father and put him on speakerphone. “Dad, meet us at Chuck-E-Cheese.”

We’re out the door in seconds because Caleb comes first—before anything or anyone else.

For two hours, the four of us play games, ride bumper cars, ride the motorcycles, and yes, play skeeball.

“Cookie, I think your dad let you win the last time you played.” His lips land on the apple of my cheek, kissing my freckles. His eyes then move to Caleb, fast asleep in his arms. “I love him too.”

“The feeling is mutual, Weed.” And his deep, happy laugh tickles my heart in

ways never before.

Chapter Forty-Two

REED

“Thanks for coming in. How are Brooke and Caleb?” Her dad looks serious. Maybe the gravity of last night is just now hitting him.

“I went and bought donuts from Magee’s. They were drinking hot chocolate and reading books when I left to grab my gear.”

“Good, good. I spoke with Eldrick. We called him Dick or Cross back in the day. He said he told you about your mom and me.”

“Hooking up. Yes, he did. He said that she wanted me to be your baby.”

“After we were together, she started dating Roman Beatty. You’ve heard of him.”

Scoffing, “Yeah. I saw him in my dad’s office.”

“Anyway, they dated a while and when she started showing, he thought the baby was his. We all played college together, although he was a year older than your dad and me. I hate to say this because I liked your mom. But in my opinion, she thought she had found her pot of gold with Roman. His rookie season in the NHL was the best rookie season ever. He wasn’t a saint, none of us were until we found *the one*.

“In his first year, he had three women claiming their babies were his. He had

all of them take DNA tests. The other ladies were telling the truth. Your mom was not.

“When your mom approached me, you were nearly four years old. I was married to Brooke’s mom, totally in love.” A puff of air escapes his lungs. “Not a good track record with women.

“It made me suspicious. I had talked to Roman when she made the claim. He said, ‘Hell, that little boy is probably yours or Cross’. I was never good at math.’ I also had a DNA test, and it was negative. That’s when I knew you must be Cross’ son. I told her I would give her some money because I liked her. I just never loved her. And I was one hundred percent in love with Brooke’s mom. In my conversation with Cross, he mentioned that she hadn’t approached him yet, at least not at that point. Anyway, I need to tell Brooke.” Coach Sweet interlaces his fingers and then rests his head on them.

“I told her last night. We promised to never keep anything from each other again. She was surprised, but it didn’t bother her, other than the fact you kept it secret. I explained you’re my coach, and there are privacy issues. She thinks you hung the moon, so don’t worry.”

He shakes his head. “Wow, you’ve come a long way. Have fun on first line.”

“Thank you, Coach. Can you keep Caleb tonight? I want to take your daughter on a proper date after the game.”

“Reed, just take care of them. They’re the two most important people on earth to me.”

“Yes, sir. You know I would step in front of a car for them.”

A tap on the door snaps our attention. Kandy, the kinesiologist, is sporting Stallions gear instead of her usual scholarly suit. Sometimes she wears a skirt and blouse, but today, she looks relaxed.

“Coach Sweet, I’ve taken care of the details. Good luck today.”

“Thanks for having a new jersey ready for me.” On that note, I shake Coach’s hand. It seems like they have something substantial to talk about.

I head to the locker room and get my cold gear on, pull on my practice jersey,

then step onto the ice. I skate around the perimeter without my stick. Then I make large figure eights, exhaling a cloud of white fog, thinking about Brooke wearing my jersey today.

This morning, I went to the courthouse and petitioned to change my name legally to Cross, but regardless, that's the name I'll wear on my back. It's become obvious that my mom was all about the money, and she was more than likely culpable in embezzling from my trust fund that Eldrick set up for me.

It's game time. My team, the Kentucky fucking Stallions, versus the Galena Giants. My focus is usually on the ice, but today during warmups, I find myself searching for Brooke. To my surprise, I spot my biological dad and Holly first. He waves at me like a proud papa and for the first time in my life, I have a dad. He's made mistakes, but so I have I. And if I expect people to forgive me or think of me differently, I need to do the same.

My dad kept the events surrounding Caleb and what happened last night a secret. He shut it down so the news outlet didn't get hold of it. Instead, he said he wanted to get Erik treatment.

Two minutes before the game starts, I notice my friends streaming into the cold barn. Harper, Logan, Adalee, Lettie, Dane, and the people I love most in the world, Brooke, and Caleb. My heart skips a beat, and I put my hand over my heart. Cupid shoots a dart to my heart, and it feels like I'm having a heart attack; the feeling of support overwhelms me.

For the first time in my life, I have a cheering section. The last time was before juvenile detention.

The national anthem plays and with my hand over my heart, I promise to be the best version of myself. Will I still check the hell out of the other team? Hell yeah. But will I be a broody son of a bitch. No, because I'm happy. I have found a woman who lets me love her and worship her. Who loves me for all my flaws. Who loves me to tease her. And her son loves me as much as I love him. I. Have. A. Family.

Coach taps my shoulder and says, "I'm asking you this one time not to do anything. Beat Bratt with your skates, your speed, your finesse, and your skills."

“Yes, sir.”

My new jersey has Cross stitched across the shoulders, and I proudly wear number seven. We win the faceoff. Erik isn't in at the moment. Dawes is in the zone and passes it to the right to Flynn who gets checked into the boards but not before he flicks the puck to me. I'm in the middle lane, and it's like the parting of the Red Sea. Working the puck, I shovel it into the net just under the goalie's leg. The buzzer sounds, and the fans explode in cheers.

We've never had a full arena during a day game. These are actual fans, not just drunk college students looking for a good time at midnight.

I glance into my cheering section, and Caleb is holding a sign. I skate over and wave for Brooke and Caleb to come down. His sign reads, “Weed, Mommy says you can buy me skates.” I put my hand up to the glass, and his little fingers mirror mine. Brooke mouths, “I love you.” And my heart feels like it may burst from my rib cage.

Before I can return the sentiment, my teammates hit me against the board, slapping my helmet and as I look up to my dad, I make a cross using two fingers. He knocks on his chest and returns the gesture. His wife claps, then kisses him on the cheek. They're proud of me.

For a guy who never got lucky, I hit the jackpot. My girl is wearing my jersey, and I can't wait to make love to her while she's wearing it.

When we're leading 3-0, Galena's coach has no options but to put in Erik. He's by far their best player and is on his way to the NHL. Our coach mixes it up and puts Wynward in with me and Flynn. He's healing from his injury, and Coach wants to see where he's at.

Erik has the puck and instead of passing it, he tries to take me one on one. Big fucking mistake.

I steal the puck and do a spin move with my back to our goal and skate behind it. He's trying to catch up, but he's not fast enough, and I score with a sweet wraparound goal.

Erik trips me as I start to celebrate, and my teammates do my job, slamming into him. I stand there with less than a minute in the game, feeling for the first time the icy ground beneath my feet is as solid as it's ever been.

The celebration continues when I come out of the tunnel and meet Brooke, Caleb, my friends, and family in the waiting area. My jaws hurt from smiling. Caleb leaps from his mom's arms to mine. He talks a mile a minute. He loves hockey as much as I do. Instead of taking Brooke on a private date, I ask everyone to go downtown to the park where they have a small ice skating rink.

We rent skates for Caleb, and our fathers take the ice together for the first time in twenty-something years. They're enjoying themselves, reminiscing and competing.

Kandy came too. She's a bit of a mystery but fun underneath those glasses.

Sitting on the bench, I lace Caleb up, while Brooke shows off her figure skating skills, twirling and jumping in the air. Her ponytail swings out as she spins so fast, it appears blue with water fountains shooting up behind her. When she stops, her cheeks are red, and her eyes sparkle.

While I finish tying his skates, Caleb claps along with the rest of our crew as she skates towards us. "You're amazing and beautiful," I say, kissing her in front of everyone. "You could teach Caleb to be a figure skater, or a I could teach him to be a hockey player."

She says, "I want him to be just like you and my dad. There are no two men in the world better for him to emulate."

Harper, Logan, Lettie, and Dane let out a collective sigh. "Aww."

Under the night sky and the valentine lighting displays, we each hold Caleb's hand as his blades touch the ice for the first time. Something tells me it won't be the last.

Epilogue

BROOKE - THREE MONTHS LATER

Devastated over losing in the semifinals of the Frozen Four Championships, Reed sits on the edge of the bed. Bruises spot his body. I crawl along the mattress and gently press my lips against the one on his lower back and wind around to the ones on his obliques. His muscles are tight, and I feel his body soften as I kiss each purple spot.

“I never asked why your favorite color is purple. And I’m wondering why.”

He glances over his shoulder and expels a breath. “The bruises were always proof that I fought back against my stepdad. That I fought hard to win every game. I would look in the mirror and when they turned purple with shades of blue and yellow around the edges, I thought they were beautiful— a badge of honor.”

“And how do you feel now? Do you still love your purple bruises?” I place my finger under his chin, rotating his face towards mine and kiss his lips.

He twists his body, and I feel him wince. “Each bruise is a reminder, but since you plopped into the hammock with your big-ass tote, my favorite color is now green. Because I love your green eyes rimmed with gold. And I love the green sexy lingerie you’re wearing right now.”

I run my fingers over his chest and down to his abs.

“Miss Sweet, are you trying to make me feel better?”

“Yes, Mr. Cross, I am.”

My hand roams low enough to unfold the towel wrapped around his waist. His erection pops up, and I gently caress it while sucking on his neck. Reed relaxes into me as he utters, “You’re so fucking sexy, harder... slower... you make me feel like a king.”

He removes my hand as he moves onto the bed, covering my body with his. “I know you want to ride me, but I don’t think my ribs can handle the pressure of your hands.” He kisses the inside of my thighs, fondling my center until my folds are soaked and the noise of his fingers slipping through makes me hungry for him. “So, put your ankles on my shoulders, Cookie,”

“I feel so vulnerable like this,” I say. “The anticipation.”

His lips press against my calf before placing my ankle back on his shoulder. “I know what you love. You love for me to make love to you hard a few times and end up weighing your body down with mine.”

He pushes his thick erection into me, and I moan at how he fills me completely. That still after all these months, it’s even better than the first time. He knows everything or more about what I like. Some things I wouldn’t admit aloud except to him. Because with Reed, I don’t hide who I am. I’m the person who loves to have sex with my boyfriend. He makes me feel so incredibly safe to do things I never imagined.

“I love you,” I say, holding onto his inked forearms, gazing onto the new tattoo on his chest. A cross. He went with his dad, and they both got one. It’s their promise to each other to be the best fathers they can be. Even though we’re not engaged, we both know that is the ultimate plan down the road.

He pumps faster and plunges deeper as he wraps his hand around my ankles, raising my ass off the mattress until he groans so loud and unloads inside me, and we reach the highest high together. It’s so much better when you love someone, and they know what to do to make your toes curl.

Reed eases my legs down and carefully lowers himself beside me. He traces my stomach, contemplating his words. “When I was driving to the NHL office, I passed a field of weeds. Hills and hills of mostly dead weeds. I

thought it was a metaphor for my life. That I would never have a parent who loved me and that in no way did I deserve your love. When we took that same drive last weekend, the same field was filled with wildflowers. So many different colors and shapes blowing in the wind. That's how I feel about my life now. It's so full of love and changes. I can't imagine my life without you and Caleb and all the color you bring to me. I love you."

Tears roll out of the corners of my eyes into my hair. "We feel the same way about you. We better get to sleep. Tomorrow is the big day."

Reed

We look around our house, filled with boxes of Caleb's toys, while new furniture is being delivered, courtesy of my new Name, Image, Likeness contract.

Logan owns three houses next to each other. Since Harper and Logan brought home their newborn baby last week, Brooke, Caleb and I are moving into the house next door. Hagan and Adalee are renovating the third house. Hagan graduated and decided to pursue a career in architecture instead of the MLB. And of course, Adalee is an engineer, so this is their first project together.

Brooke and Lettie collaborate to organize a Welcome Home Baby celebration, while my old roommates have Sunday Brunch with their families. Meanwhile, Caleb and I labor diligently to assemble his new big-boy bed. In the background, my father and Coach exchange frustrated exclamations as they navigate the process of constructing the swing set and obstacle course in the backyard.

When it's time, we all go to next door to celebrate their new baby, Evy Harper Warren. Now that they know Logan's been drafted to the Louisville Heavyweights, they decide to stay here until she finishes med school.

Brooke and I will be here for one more year. I love this team and school and want to keep Caleb around at least one of his grandfathers. Although this summer, Brooke, Caleb, and I will be spending two weeks at my parents' house, taking out the boat and giving Caleb new experiences. There may be a

few hockey lessons involved or maybe art.

Harper holds Evy in her arms, and I choke up.

“We’re going to make a baby soon. Caleb needs a baby sister or brother,” I say, looking at Brooke. “I hated being an only child.”

Brooke says, “I did too. Now, I want a big family like theirs.” She points to Hagan and Harper’s parents and then to Logan’s sister, who has three children. “If we don’t start using condoms, then it may happen, even though I’m on the pill.”

“Cookie, if you want a baby, I’d be one hundred percent on board with it. I make plenty of money because of my pretty face and mad hockey skills.”

She kisses me on the lips, then wipes the lipstick from the corner of my mouth. “Babies cut into *adult time*.” She uses finger quotes. “Let’s break in our house a few hundred times and then talk about it.”

I pull her into my body. “One day, I want Caleb to have at least three brothers or sisters. But first, I need to make an honest woman out of you.”

“You do. But not today.” She smirks.

“No, this is Evy’s day.” I soak my hands in antibacterial gel and when they dry, Harper hands me Evy.

She’s so beautiful. Her delicate fingers and squirmy movements. I look over at Brooke, so full of kindness. And then to Caleb, who is playing with Dani, Logan’s niece.

There’s so much chatter in the room, and Hagan makes his way to me. “You’re going to be a great father to Caleb.”

“Thanks, Erik has given up his rights, but Brooke added in a clause that at any time, Erik could have a relationship with Caleb, just not custody. Cheating is awful, but he did things to her that are unforgivable.” Tears threaten under my lids, thinking of him hitting her with his fists.

Hagan shakes his head as Harper and Brooke stride towards us. “My turn,” Brooke says with excitement in her voice. We switch Evy into her arms. Watching her with a baby gives me ideas for when we get home.

After we clean up, my dad and Holly take Caleb to play putt-putt golf, so Brooke and I can get our own bedroom ready to sleep in. Of course, we've need to test out the new mattress. We laugh as we perform a reenactment—I was the bad boy, hockey player, and she was my coach's daughter.

Claim your copy of [Out of Bounds](#), Dane & Lettie's love story.

His name says it all.

Dane Greathouse has twenty-five thousand people chanting his name on a weekly basis like he's God.

And on this campus he's even bigger. But the one person he craves has been his best friend forever, and she can't take a hint. It's going to take one bed to peel back the layers of their friendship.

But will fear of rejection keep them from crossing the line from best friends to lovers? Or will they stand on the line, look at the basket and shoot to win?

Click here for a [BONUS SCENE of Reed and Brooke](#) doing a little role playing. And find out what that cutie-patootie, Caleb has his sights set on now. It's not hockey.

Also by Kristin Lee

Campus Stallions (A spin-off series from the Sarasota Sharks)

[All Your Fault \(Hagan/Adalee\)](#)

[On My Knees \(Logan /Harper\)](#)

[On Icy Ground \(Reed /Brooke\)](#)

[Out of Bounds \(Dane /Lettie\)](#) Coming 2024

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Anthologies

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[Craving the Roommate](#) - Coming July 2024

Standalones Coming Soon

[The Billionaire Proposal](#) - Coming May 2024

[Ride with Beckett](#) - June 2024 (Yes, this is Beau's twin brother, from Bourbon & Brawn, years down the road.)

About the Author

Kristin Lee is a USA Today Bestselling Author and writes heart shattering, heart melting romances with a shot of humor and a twist of suspense.

If she isn't writing or reading, you'll find her streaming her favorite shows, or attending sporting events. Did I mention she loves having a Bourbon cocktail while at the horse races?

If you haven't found your match, don't worry, you will. But for now, take a romantic journey in one of her romance novels, where you are sure to meet a swoon worthy book boyfriend.

[Join my Newsletter](#) for Sales-Freebies-Recipes, inside tidbits on my inspiration and my works in progress.

Stalk me on socials & follow!



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My teenage son tells everyone I'm a romance author and now some of his teachers read my books. What? When they grin at me, I wonder what passage they're thinking of.

My mom is my biggest fan and married my stepdad when I was five. So when Reed loves Caleb in *On Icy Ground*, I was thinking of the love he had for me and my siblings.

Thank you to the readers who support me by reading and spreading the word about my hot as hell book boyfriends. So many of them have become friends of mine and I hope many more will in the future.

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