



Plays
Thing

A SMALL TOWN GRUMPY/SUNSHINE HOCKEY ROMANCE

CASSIE-ANN L. MILLER

PLAY THING

A SMALL TOWN GRUMPY X SUNSHINE HOCKEY
ROMANCE

THE BRIGHTON FAMILY SERIES BOOK 3

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Play Thing (A Small Town Grumpy x Sunshine Hockey Romance)

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To my Grammy. I'm obsessed with you. Let's call it love, m'kay?

To the girls who've only ever been loved in the dark. Eff that. The light belongs to you, whenever you're ready to claim it.

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RONAN

B *EST. BLOW-JOB. EVER.*

I rise up onto my elbows, struggling to focus my blurry vision on the curvy, dark-haired spitfire kneeled between my thighs.

My strangled groan cracks the humid air of my bedroom as this gorgeous woman makes magic with her warm, wet mouth. She wasn't lying in her text messages—that tongue trick she's doing is mind-blowing.

When her sparkling honey-brown eyes tilt up to meet mine, a playful smirk curves her plump peach-colored lips. “You're looking a little... overwhelmed, Captain,” she says teasingly. “You think I should keep going?”

“Keep going. Yes, Nicky. Fuck,” I command her with a growl. “Don't you dare stop.”

“That's what I thought.”

She gives me a little shove backwards and I collapse on the mattress, my shoulder blades sinking into the soft bedding. With a mischievous giggle, she goes right back to work, driving me crazy.

Sassy thing. She knows exactly what she's doing to me.

I reach down, raking my hand through her cascading mahogany hair. The thick, silky strands coil and tangle around my clenched fingers. My head is spinning. With every twist of her tongue and pucker of her lips, my ceiling fan tilts and wobbles overhead.

Or maybe that's just my universe spinning off its axis.

Damn—she's so good at this.

Almost too good to be true. Am I dreaming? Nah. I'm not dreaming. This

is real. It has to be real. Right?

Out of nowhere, a random thought pops into my brain—I really like this girl.

Well, I mean...I like her hair.

And I like her eyes.

And I like that swirling thing she's doing with her tongue.

And I like the way her mouth is curled around my—

“Rise and shine, sleeping beauties.”

A gruff, obnoxious voice cuts through my slumber, trying to disrupt the lifelike movie playing out in my groggy mind.

“Hello? Anybody home?” The annoying voice rings out again, but I hold onto my vision for dear life. I’m not ready to let go of my fiery, little vixen just yet.

It’s not until a loud, metallic clang reverberates sharply in the air that I startle awake completely, my ears ringing.

“Fu-u-u-ck...” I grumble. I peel my eyelids open. My foggy gaze finds the grim face of the portly police officer who’s noisily unlocking the holding cell.

You mean to tell me that was all a dream? Dammit.

And wait—am I in...*in jail*?!

Ugh. I’m in jail. Right.

Everything comes back to me at once.

Tonight’s brutal hockey match where my team got our asses handed to us—on home ice—by those cocky dipshits from Toronto. The grimy bar where the guys and I tried to drink our pain away. The wasted knuckleheads in the parking lot and the brawl that started out of nowhere.

And now I’m locked up in a holding cell in the Sin Valley police precinct.

Nothing to see here. Just a typical Saturday night. *Well, except for the fact that Darius is going to kill me dead.*

I’m cold. Stiff. Uncomfortable. And I’m a little banged up from the hockey game we lost just hours ago. I knew I’d be hurting from the stick I took to the ribs in the third quarter. I just didn’t know I’d end the night napping in a holding cell.

If I could have predicted that that stupid after-party would get us in so much trouble, I would have probably gone straight home.

Okay. Fine. Probably not.

After almost six years in the league, I know that there's nothing like throwing around a few punches to release some pent-up emotions after a defeat on the ice. And with tonight's loss being our third back-to-back defeat, I had a lot of bottled up frustration to let out.

I ignore the sharp pain in my side and try to straighten up. Except there's a heavy weight dragging down the left side of my body.

One of my teammates is slumped against my shoulder, and he's fast asleep. That wet spot I feel on the upper sleeve of my pale blue dress shirt is connected to the string of drool dripping from the corner of his mouth. *Nasty!*

"Bro, you smell like a dog's asshole," I mutter, roughly shrugging Easton Raines off my side. "Get off me," I grunt.

The mammoth defenseman straightens, blinking his eyes and looking around as he wipes at his mouth with the edge of his crooked necktie.

He lowers his head to his armpit and takes a whiff of himself. He gags. "Fuck. I *do* smell like a dog's asshole."

The cop slides open the heavy metal bars to the cell. "You prima donna football players wanna get bailed out? Or would you rather stay here all weekend?" He rattles the gate impatiently. The sound rouses all three of my teammates who are locked up with me.

I draw to my feet, yanking on my gray suit jacket and pulling my toque down over my chilly ears. I'm dizzy as fuck. Probably because all the blood in my body is currently concentrated at my crotch, thanks to my latest Nicky Westbrook-induced sex dream.

Terrible time for a boner, by the way. But clearly, my man parts didn't get the memo.

In any case, I'm ready to get the hell out of here and crawl into a bed lined with ice packs.

"We play hockey. Not football," I grumble to the officer, discreetly adjusting my crotch as the four of us trudge out of the cell.

The man yawns, clearly unimpressed. "Trust me, my dude—nobody gives a fuck." He locks up the cell behind us.

Ouch! I wince.

The Sin Valley Saints are the newest franchise in the professional hockey league, and we've had more losses than wins on the ice since our inaugural game at the start of the season. We haven't built a loyal fanbase yet. We haven't earned the league's respect. The drama that unfolded this evening definitely isn't helping our cause. And I have a sneaking suspicion that, as

captain of the team, everyone's about to pin the blame on me.

My teammates and I scamper out of the cell, eager to part ways with that urine-soaked drunk guy who's crashing on the bench in the corner of the room.

Our starting goalie, Tipton Bridges, ambles down the gray, windowless hallway alongside me. "Bro, who's Nicky?" he asks.

At the question, my head whips in his direction like a gunshot. "What?"

"Nicky-y-y-y," he moans exaggeratedly, throwing his head back. "Oh, Nicky. Don't stop. Nicky, hell yes." Grinning lecherously, he swings his crumpled navy blue suit jacket over one shoulder. "That's what you were just mumbling a minute ago."

Raines speaks up from somewhere behind me. "Yeah, Brighton. I swear I heard you moaning that name in your sleep a few nights back. When we had to share a hotel room after the game in Atlanta."

Good boy Parker Paige throws a curious glance over his back as he leads the way down the hallway. "You were whispering about her when you fell asleep on the plane home from that game in Vegas, too," our rookie right winger says with a frown.

Tipton's arrogant grin grows wider. He elbows me in my injured ribs. "So, captain. Who the fuck is this Nicky you can't stop dreaming about?"

I give him a shove, pushing him out of my personal space. "Shut up."

Nicky is none of their fucking business. I sure as hell won't be discussing her with my idiot teammates.

An image of the dark-haired spitfire floods my mind again. Shit. I haven't been able to get her out of my head since I first laid eyes on her a little over two weeks back. That was seventeen days ago, to be precise.

Look—I'm used to women throwing themselves in my lap everywhere I go. But Nicky? She wouldn't even give me the time of day.

I think she has a boyfriend. A douchebag boyfriend. At least that's the vibe I got the night we met. Any which way, the fact that I'm now saying her name in my sleep is kind of problematic.

But I've got even bigger problems at the moment. Namely, the angry as fuck billionaire who's currently standing at the service counter in the police station lobby, signing paperwork.

"Shit..." I mutter to myself when my brother, Darius, glances across the distance and gives me an ugly stink eye.

I haven't been his favorite person in a while. To be fair, I've given him

some pretty solid reasons for being mad at me.

When he's finished with the documents, he straightens up, slipping his expensive pen into the chest pocket of his expensive business suit. He continues shooting daggers my way as my fellow 'inmates' and I go through the release process.

Finally, the booking officer half-bows and mockingly sweeps an arm toward the exit. "You're free to go, princesses."

"Thank fuck," I hear Parker mumble as he pushes past the other guys, hurrying outside like a kid who's afraid he'll miss his school bus home.

The rest of us follow him out of the small building, once again free men. When we exit, the piercing cold Iowa air is a slap to the face and snow crunches under our feet. It's dark, somewhere in the wee hours of the morning now. And I'm silently wondering what kind of hoops Darius had to jump through to get us out of here so quickly.

I take a fleeting peek at my phone. My notifications are a shitshow. Mostly my three other brothers and my sister blowing up the Brighton Family group chat.

Tonight's subject of conversation? Me and my latest fuck-up.

Fun times.

I spot a few cars idling in the police station parking lot. I stuff my device into the pocket of my slacks as I watch my teammates pile into different vehicles to be driven home by other members of the team's staff.

Lucky bastards.

Me? My chariot home is driven by Darius. The brother who hates me. The brother who'll probably spend the entire forty-five minute ride home to Starlight Falls giving me a piece of his mind.

It's fucking fantastic.

Exactly what I need after a long day and an even longer night. Especially when all I want to do is ice my bruised ribs and crawl into bed. And stay there for the next forty-eight hours.

But the minute my sore ass lands in the front passenger seat of his luxury sedan, Darius flings a wrinkled printout into my lap. I look down. It's my mugshot.

I try to keep the mood light. "Not a bad shot, actually. I look pretty damn good, all things considered."

"Are you kidding me?!" Darius barks. "You're smirking in your goddamn mugshot, Ronan. Smirking! Showing zero fucking remorse for acting like an

idiot. You've got some nerve!"

I make another lame attempt to get him to ease off me. "The team's media training lady told us to *always* smile for the cameras." I flash him a broad, pearly-white grin.

His angry veneer doesn't crack. In fact, his jaw goes tighter as he glares across the console at me.

Defeated, I drop my skull against the headrest and sigh. "I think you're being a little dramatic."

"Am I?" He throws his phone into my lap next. "Read this shit. Your parking lot brawl is the biggest headline of the night. The Sports Broadcast Network is hanging you out to dry. They're questioning your leadership. Hell, they're saying your behavior is responsible for the Saints' dismal performance over the last few games."

I reluctantly pick up the phone and scroll through the article that my brother has open on his screen. Unless someone has something nice to say, I tend to avoid the sports reporting stuff. It's usually garbage. This blog post in particular is a freaking blood bath. I feel a pinch in my chest when I read the things they're saying about me.

"To be honest, I'm not all that worried," I lie.

These sportscasters are the first to squash you like a bug when you step out of line. But when you have one good game, suddenly, all the bad shit is forgotten and you're praised like royalty.

When I say as much, Darius throws an arm up in exasperation. "Are you kidding me? Ronan, dammit. This whole thing is a PR nightmare."

"Oh, come on. When the full story comes out, they'll all see how innocent it was. That waitress's jealous boyfriend and his dumbass friends were the ones who attacked us. The guys and I fighting back was just self-defense. Any judge would see that."

The dumbest fights always start with a girl at the center of it. A pretty girl and a jealous douchebag...Which is exactly what happened here.

This debacle wasn't even *my* drama to begin with. The waitress at that dirty pub had been all over Tipton, climbing into his lap and sticking her tongue in his ear as she took a bunch of selfies. My poor naive teammate sat there, grinning like he'd just won the lottery. All fun and games, right?

The only problem is, the cute waitress had a boyfriend. And we didn't find out until after she posted photos of us on social media to make him jealous.

Next thing I know, the douchebag boyfriend and his douchebag friends accosted Tipton in the parking lot and started swinging punches.

Could I have tried to diffuse the situation without violence? Okay, fine. Yes. But where's the fun in that? I'd already been itching for a fight. So I was eager to jump in and start throwing fists around. The other guys weren't far behind. The police got involved from there.

But Darius is not trying to hear my explanation.

Because a captain goes down with his ship, and at the end of the day, I'm the one who gets blamed for everything.

No fair.

"Whether you're guilty or not doesn't matter. As an athlete, you're tried in the eyes of the public. You should know that by now," my older brother lectures on, making his stance clear. "How many times have I told you, you've got to stop being so damned impulsive."

"Burying your emotions is not healthy. That's what my shrink says." I don't have a shrink. But if I did, I'm sure that's what she'd say.

"I'm not saying to bury your emotions, jackass," he grinds out. "I'm telling you to get them in check. You wear every single emotion on your sleeve. You let them control you and you end up getting yourself into one mess after the next."

He's right and I'm wrong. Typical when it comes to Darius and me.

Yet still, the truth is, my brother isn't the bad guy here. In fact, he practically handed me this leadership opportunity with the Saints on a silver platter.

A few months back, a rumor started making the rounds that a group of hot shot billionaires were secretly working together to bring a hockey franchise to the Sin Valley area. At the time, I was playing for the New York Troopers, and although I was the team's star player, I'd been getting overlooked for the captain position for years.

Management didn't think I was ready. They said I had an ego problem, that I needed to slow down with the groupies, that I had to cut out all the partying. With my stellar stats and my loyalty to the organization, it felt like a slap to the face that they didn't think I was good enough for the leadership role.

Despite my disappointment over their lack of confidence in me, I loved playing for New York. The last thing I wanted was to be traded to a new team. Especially one with zero track record in the league. But, I didn't have a

choice when I ended up selected as part of the Sin Valley Saints' expansion draft.

I was livid. Especially when I discovered that Darius was one of the mysterious investors behind the new franchise. But then he sat me down and announced to me that he had cut a deal with his business partners, making me captain of the Saints.

Basically, my brother went out of his way to get me set up with this gig. And I'm ruining it.

Shit. He has every right to be pissed at me now.

"Ronan, you're the *team captain*. The organization can't just let this slide. There will be consequences for your irresponsible leadership." He sighs. "The past few months, I've put my neck on the line for you again and again, but at this point, it's out of my hands."

Consequences? Goddammit. What the hell does *that* mean?

The stressful question consumes me as we're driving along the winding Starlight Falls mountain road. It stays with me as we pull into the snow-covered driveway of my secluded mini-mansion.

The worrying thought repeats on loop as I step under my high-pressure shower head and wash the jailbird stench off my skin.

I ruminate some more as I slap together a sloppy bologna sandwich at the granite counter of my expansive open concept kitchen.

But the second my head hits my deluxe organic bamboo pillow, a mahogany-haired beauty struts into the theater of my mind.

Her perfect, peach-shaped backside swings with each sultry step. She throws me a glance over her back and with a cheeky grin she slips one bra strap down the curve of her dainty shoulder.

My cock immediately stands at attention, ready for duty. *Ah, damn.*

My life might be a blazing dumpster fire at the moment, but I just can't get this woman off my brain.

Who is Nicky Westbrook?

She's the woman who's been consuming my head for the past seventeen days. That's who.

And I can almost guarantee she's not thinking about me.

NICKY

Seventeen days earlier - Christmas Eve, to be precise...

I sit forward in my seat, pressing my face to the window as the train enters Honey Hill town limits and starts to slow down.

Fields and fields of white stretch for as far as the eye can see. The barren tree branches are heavy with snow. Kids play hockey on make-shift rinks that stretch too close to the railway tracks. Plastic reindeers decorate the rooftops of small houses lit up by Christmas lights.

Home for the holidays, bitches!

I grin broadly, watching giant crystalized snowflakes land on my window. Everyone wants to wake up to a white Christmas Day. But for me, snow on Christmas Eve is just as important. That's mainly because Christmas Eve also happens to be my birthday, and my mom's as well.

Christmas. Birthday. Snow. Family time later on. I'm winning all around today.

The only thing that could possibly make this day better is a roaring orgasm.

Or two.

Or...three. It's been a while. Don't judge me.

I pull my phone out of the pocket of my puffy jacket and type out a quick message to my... 'friend' Simon.

Me: I'm in town. Let's hang?

I feel a mischievous grin on my lips. Simon and I both know that *Let's hang?* is really just code for *Let's screw each other's brains out until neither*

of us can see straight.

I still have about three hours before everyone is meeting up at Grammy's house for dinner, and getting 'stuffed' before Christmas dinner might be a nice way to pass the time. I snicker at that thought.

Simon totally gets a kick out of my dirty humor. And, on the days when he isn't having one of his pity parties, he's relatively good at *stuffing*, if I'm being honest.

I hit 'send' just as we're pulling into the train station. I sit there and stare at my phone for a moment, barely resisting the urge to bounce in my seat.

It's been *way* too long since he and I last hooked up and I'm really looking forward to this.

But no jumping dots appear on my screen. Not even that little check mark letting me know that Simon has read my message.

My happy smile starts to wobble as I scroll up to the previous message I sent him earlier in the week.

Me: I learned about this cool new tongue trick the other day. If you're a good boy, I'll demonstrate next time we hang out ;)

Also unread.

Chewing down on my bottom lip, I remind myself of the current state of affairs. *Don't read anything into it, Nicky. Simon's not your boyfriend. It's casual. You both agreed to keep things casual.*

An uncomfortable feeling churns in my stomach, but I ignore it. If this were any other guy, I'd be starting to wonder if he's deliberately avoiding me. But that can't be the case. I mean, this is Simon. I spent my teenage years watching him and Jasper fixing cars in Grammy's driveway. He's fallen asleep on our basement couch countless times after playing video games with my brothers all night. Even to this day, he rarely ever misses a Westbrook family dinner.

He and I are friends. He wouldn't ghost me like that...Would he?

It's just that Simon hasn't really been responding to my texts the way he used to. He hasn't been as chatty lately. And it's been harder to make plans to hang out on the occasions where I make it back to Honey Hill.

My eyes flick away from my phone. They connect with the frost blue gaze of the man sitting across the aisle from me. At the eye contact, his lips curl into a little private smile. That smile spells mischief.

I quickly look away. *Nuh-uh.*

That guy has been stealing glances at me ever since I boarded the train in

Chicago. Every time my gaze wanders in his direction, I find him staring. But as hot as he is, I'm not interested. I know his type.

His eyes are a little too hypnotic. His lips are a little too tempting. And the light dusting of scruff on his angular jaw could get me in a whole lot of trouble. He's a walking red flag and after my last dating app situationship-gone-wrong, I made a decision to keep my bed a fuckboy-free zone.

That man is heartbreak wrapped up in a pretty package and I'm not available to join his roster of playthings. No.

In any case, I don't have the time to overanalyze that idea. Right now, I'm focused on not missing my stop.

The train has barely screeched to a halt before I turn and smile politely at the middle-aged guy sitting beside me, his attention lost in the pages of a thriller novel.

"Excuse me," I say, quickly squirming and slithering out of my seat. "Oop. Sorry. Thank you."

Most of the people on this train aren't getting off here in Honey Hill. To half of the passengers, this 5000-person small town is probably nothing more than another middle-of-nowhere stop on this remote Iowa train route. Which is just fine by me. If everyone knew how quaint and perfect this town is, Honey Hill would no doubt lose its charm.

I check my text messages again as I make my way over to the section where my suitcases are stored in the overhead bin. Still no response from Simon. I should probably take a hint and let it go, but I refuse to believe that he's deliberately avoiding me. I decide to entice him by upping the stakes.

Me: Today is my birthday, mister. It's well within my birthday rights to demand that you bring your A-game in the bedroom.

I'm halfway through typing out my birthday expectations in a fairly long and descriptive one-handed text message, when I rise onto my tiptoes, feeling around the storage bin for my rolling overnight bag. But I'm way too short for this shit.

I manage to get a hold on the handle and pull. But my plans go awry when it comes loose too fast and I lose control of the heavy luggage. My phone slides from my grip, and I'm scrambling in vain to regain my hold on the bag as it starts coming down on the head of the adorable old lady seated in the row ahead of me.

Oh my god!

I emit a high-pitched squeak, mentally preparing myself for the moment I

become a murderer. Right here on this train.

But then a pair of long, thick arms shoot forward. And somehow, the bag gets snatched right out of the air like it's nothing, one second before it smashes down on the grandma's skull.

My lungs heave with relief. Wow. Talk about some impressive ninja reflexes.

But now I'm crushed against the side of the seat with the warm, hard chest of a stranger pressed flush against my back.

Before my brain can compute the solid bulge that's jammed against my ass, the elderly lady in the row ahead of me starts screaming bloody murder. "Would you be careful with that? You're going to hurt somebody with your carelessness." Shooting me a fiery glance, she delicately fluffs up the wispy curls of her pouffy silver-blue grandma bob.

I instantly start blurting out apologies. "I am so sorry. Oh my god. I really am. I'm so sorry."

I'm sincerely relieved that I won't be charged with murder today. There's always tomorrow, but at least I get to celebrate my birthday as a free woman.

The old lady wants no part of my apologies, though. In fact, she isn't even listening to me. Her eyes shift past my head and she grins at her savior. "Thank you so much for saving me, dear heart. Such a strong, handsome young man you are."

The gravelly vibrations of a deep male voice spill into my ears and travel down my spine, exploding between my thighs. "You're welcome, ma'am. I'm glad to help."

Something twists inside me and, on instinct, my neck swivels in the direction of the sound. Shit. It's the guy from across the aisle. He's hovering above me with my bag still clutched in his hands.

One good look at him and my words halt in my throat. My thighs clench on instinct as the rest of my body freezes over.

W-whoa...

Ninja Train Stranger is *massive*. And *gorgeous*. And whoops—did I mention that he's *gorgeous*?!

Messy golden brown hair curls around the edge of his worn knitted hat. He has high, angular cheekbones that look like they were cut from stone. And without a question, those soft-looking lips were genetically engineered for making out all night.

A killer smile spills across his mouth as he takes a small step backward,

blatantly checking me out.

His frosty blue eyes sweep around my face, drifting from my mouth to my eyes then back to my mouth. His smile goes even wider when our eyes meet again. “Hey...”

In response, I make a sound. I’m not sure that sound would classify as a word. Definitely not an English word. It’s more of a two-syllable jumble.

I stand awkwardly in the narrow aisle, watching him. Partly because he’s still holding my bag hostage and partly because he’s simply mesmerizing.

Under normal circumstances, I’d be scolding this guy for staring so openly, but—heck—I’m busy staring, too.

The announcer crackles over the intercom, officially announcing my train stop. “Honey Hill,” the staticky voice garbles. “Honey Hill.”

I jolt. The gorgeous stranger does, too.

Offering him a tight smile, I finally force out an incoherent string of words. “I’m, um, thanks. I mean, sorry. Or thanks. I...I’ve never been good at these overhead bins.” I apologize again.

I’m not a girl who easily gets flustered but damn—he’s so pretty it’s burning my eyeballs. And my brain cells, too, apparently.

Never breaking eye contact, the man sets my rolling bag down at my feet. “I’m Ronan.” He stretches a hand out to me. It’s massive. Just like the rest of him.

And don’t get me started on his cologne. The fragrance is subtle but intriguing. Warm and mossy and cinnamon-y. Clinically formulated to draw helpless women in.

Not me, though.

“I’m, uh...” *No fuckboys, Nicky. No fuckboys.* “I’m getting off at this stop!” I announce loudly. “Gotta go! Okay, bye!”

Leaving his hand hanging in the air, I turn and busy myself, quickly tugging on my mittens and hooking the strap of my briefcase over my forearm.

Even with my back turned, I can feel him lingering behind me as I try to get myself together. “Hey, do you think I could get your phone numb—?”

I spin around to face him. “Oh, sorry. I don’t have a...a telephone.” No way am I giving this sex devil my phone number.

He lifts an arm, holding a slush-covered device out in the space between us, dangling it between his long fingers.

“You mean this isn’t yours?” he asks almost innocently, even as one

corner of his mouth is climbing into a half-smile.

It's my phone. My phone that I somehow dropped in the middle of all the melee. My phone where that string of unanswered 'sexts' intended for Simon is glaring at me from the screen.

I snatch it out of his hand, scavenging through my brain for a quick lie. "It is. I just mean, I don't have service on it. Phone plans are so expensive these days. No service on this thing. None at all." Flashing him a plastic smile, I give the screen a swipe down the front of my jeans to clean off all the gunk.

The man nods slowly, staring down at the device as I inspect the glass for any cracks. "Ah! No service! That makes sense. It explains why—" he leans closer and squints at my screen "—Simon, was it?—hasn't been responding to your text messages."

When he says that, every cell of my body winces in unison. *Burn!*

Oh my god. "You read my text messages?!" This freaking asshole read my freaking text messages! "Those are private! Who the hell do you think you are?"

His blue eyes absolutely twinkle, dancing with amusement. "Let me take you out to dinner sometime. And I'll tell you exactly who I am. Or better yet, I'll show you."

I think not!

Anger sizzles every inch of my skin and my cheeks boil with embarrassment. I jam the device into the pocket of my jacket. "No...Thank... You..." I grit out, my tight jaw barely letting the words through. "Now, if you'll excuse me. I don't want to miss my stop."

With a slight shake of his head, he grabs his duffel bag and an over-the-top Holiday gift basket from his seat, finally giving up. "Well, seasons greetings, I guess." He zips up the front of his fleece sweater.

"Yeah. Seasons greetings, you jerk noodle!" I fling out. *Jerk noodle? What the hell is a jerk noodle?*

Chuckling to himself, he turns and saunters off toward the train's exit.

He's getting off at this stop, too? Ugh! Why?!

Instead of grabbing my shit and hustling out the door as well, I stand there, staring after him.

As annoyed as I am with this guy, I have to admit that he's S-E-X-Y. He's an attention-grabber on every level. And I bet he knows it, too. Everybody on the train is watching him and whispering as he walks

away. I even see Mrs. Silver-Blue Bob Lady try to reach out and grab a handful of his ass.

Well, sheesh! That's not very grandmotherly.

When Train Guy—or *Ronan*, I guess we can call him by his name now—is halfway down the aisle, he twists around and shoots me one final quick once-over. “And happy birthday.” He winks. Then he’s gone.

My forehead scrunches into a frown as I watch him exit. Damn him, for leaving me here all flushed, embarrassed and discombobulated.

Fun fact about Nicky Westbrook. I speak my mind. I speak a lot. I am rarely ever speechless. But the way this man’s body moves—all full of grace and power—has left me at a complete loss for words.

Giants aren’t supposed to be so nimble. So graceful. So poised.

But whatever. Now that he’s gone, I can finally stop acting like a weirdo.

Right on cue, my phone dings in my hand, distracting me from all the staring I’m doing.

Bingo!

The possibility of birthday sex is back on the table, and just like that, the gorgeous *annoying* stranger is already holding less appeal.

I look down, expecting a ‘come and get it’ text from Simon. But it’s not Simon.

I grab both of my bags in one hand and march down the aisle, reading a text message from my bestie, Emma.

Emma: We’re here!! Waiting for you in the parking lot :D

My focus instantly shifts. Now my heart is roaring with excitement to see my friend.

Grinning to myself, I exit the train. But while I’m hauling my briefcase and my overnight bag through the mostly vacant railway terminal, my conscience starts to kick in. I wonder if I was too mean to the man from the train.

Now that I think about it, did that poor guy really deserve the full extent of my wrath? I have a tendency to let my feisty mouth get carried away. And sometimes, my temper, too.

Okay, yes, he acted like an arrogant jackass, but he *did* save me from injuring that elderly passenger with my luggage. Plus, I would have totally lost my phone if he hadn’t retrieved it for me.

But my guilt immediately dissipates when I catch sight of the hot guy again a moment later. Right now, he’s surrounded by a couple of starry-eyed

girls who are fawning all over him. He's busy scribbling something down on a piece of paper for them.

Wow. Looks like he doesn't waste any time, huh? Y'see? I was right about him. Of course he's giving his phone number to the first women to catch his eye. Of course he is.

I'm not even surprised. A man who is that striking and muscular and tattooed and tall and—

Yeah. He's got to be a manwhore. It's just how these things work. Nah, I'm sticking to the safe guy.

That's exactly why I started hooking up with Simon.

Simon is a family friend. Simon won't hurt me. Simon is familiar. Simon is safe.

Simon is still not answering my freaking messages!

Glancing at my empty text inbox, I bite back a scream.

Something at the back of my mind starts whispering that Simon might not be so safe after all.

Shrugging off that insecurity and faking a confident stride, I march straight out to the parking lot.

A familiar yelp of excitement catches my attention. "Yay! There's the birthday girl!" Emma announces for all the world to hear.

I squeal when I catch sight of my girls waiting outside of the car. "Merry Christmas, *dahlings!*"

I drop my bags on the ground before Emma, baby Sparkle, and I collide into a three-way hug. We rock back and forth for a good minute. Then I snatch my tiny niece into my arms.

Sparkle starts singing an adorably sweet, special edition rendition of 'Happy Birthday' to me, making up her very own version of the lyrics.

I cry big, happy tears. "I missed this little girl." I blubber, watching Emma load her step-daughter into her carseat. "I can't believe how fast she's growing." How is she two years old already?

"Aunt Nicky needs to come to town more often." My bestie pokes me in the ribs before I round the vehicle and stuff my luggage into the trunk.

Laughing, I wipe my eyes with my knuckles. "You know what? I think I agree with that!"

Being the only one of my siblings who doesn't live in Honey Hill, I feel like I've been missing all the Westbrook family milestones. I wasn't here in person when Davis was running his mayoral campaign a few months back. I

came *this close* to missing Cash and Meghan's wedding last spring. Also, when our cousin, Mason, moved in with his fiancée, Karli, I ended up missing the housewarming party.

I'm getting tired of always being left out. And constantly dragging my suitcase back and forth from Chicago to Honey Hill is starting to get old.

Emma and I climb into the front and drive off. As the car cruises through the slushy streets of Honey Hill, my bestie and I fall into our usual rhythm, chattering excitedly and catching up. Just like we do every time I come back to town for a visit.

I was an angsty preteen when my parents got divorced. My mother moved my brothers and me to Honey Hill, leaving our dad behind in Chicago. It was such a shitty time for my family, and as the self-proclaimed daddy's girl that I am, I didn't handle the separation well at all.

But making friends with Emma is one of the things that pulled me through it. She and I just clicked from the very first day of school. Our friendship blossomed over the years, and it only grew stronger when she recently married my brother, Jasper, and adopted his adorable baby girl as her own.

As Emma drives, I can't help checking my messages every few minutes to see if Simon has responded. He still hasn't.

I try not to feel disappointed. I mean, I don't need *the full* three hours for birthday sex. But it's been a while, and the longer Simon takes to get back to me, the less chance there is for sexy-times.

"So, is Jasper working late today?" I ask my bestie.

I figure that, since Jasper is Emma's hubby as well as Simon's boss and his closest friend, Emma is perfectly positioned to give me the details I need.

"On Christmas Eve?" She scoffs. "He'd better not be, or he'll be in big trouble! And I don't mean the fun, naked kind of trouble." She snickers and I make a big show of sticking my fingers into my ears.

That's the one downside of having your best friend marry your brother. Emma always feels the need to share the traumatic details of their sex life with me.

"Ugh! Sparkle and I don't wanna hear about your yucky naked trouble. Right, Sparks?" I glance at my niece, all snug in the backseat.

The child grins cluelessly at me. "No trouble, Aunt Nee-Kee. No trouble."

I laugh. Turning back to Emma, I choose my next words carefully. "Has

the mechanic shop been pretty busy lately? Lots of requests to squeeze in before the Holidays?”

Yes, I’m fishing for information about my hookup from my bestie. It’s pitiful, I know.

I may be trying to be sneaky, but my girl is instantly onto me. Emma’s eyes briefly glance my way. “Are you wanting to know your brother’s work schedule? Or Simon’s?”

Shoot. “I—uh, what? I don’t...” My shoulders fall and I sigh. “I do...”

“I knew it.” Flipping on her indicator and making a left turn, she expels a heavy breath. “Nicks, at first, the thing with you and Simon was all hot and forbidden, but at this point, he’s been stringing you along for far too long.”

I’m already shaking my head. “He’s not stringing me along. We both know that this is just for fun. What we’re doing is nothing serious.”

Emma levels a look at me. “Sweetie, I know when you have feelings for someone. And you, Nicky Westbrook, have feelings for Simon.”

I don’t argue. Because suddenly I’m realizing that she’s not exactly wrong. Simon and I did start out as just having fun. Just an easy hookup when I’m back in town every couple months. Sex without all the vulnerability and the scary emotions.

But somewhere along the way, I think I unconsciously started taking this seriously. I haven’t been seeing anyone else. Hell, I even stopped checking my dating apps.

My feelings are starting to get confusing. And if anyone can help me gain clarity, it’s Emma. Sometimes she understands me better than I understand myself.

I glance in the rearview mirror and find Sparkle snoozing cozily in her carseat. Still, I lower my voice. “Crap. I...I think I’m interested in something a little less casual with him.” I’m almost embarrassed to admit it. Even to Emma.

“Well, I know he’s Jasper’s best friend, but you’re mine, and I think you deserve the best. So, you should either tell Simon to step up, or cut your losses and move on with a man who will give you the love you deserve.”

Nerves zip through me. As bold as I am in life—and in the bedroom—the one thing I’ve never been comfortable asking for is...love. There’s just something about relationships that makes me feel weak, vulnerable, open to rejection.

Luckily for me, my family and friends have always been generous with

their affection. I'm surrounded by fucking amazing people who care about me.

But when it comes to men, it's just a whole different story. I wouldn't hesitate to demand an orgasm. But asking for my feelings to be reciprocated? Just the thought of having that conversation with a man makes me shudder.

Still I have to admit that, that's what I'm beginning to want. And it's time that I open my mouth and ask Simon where he stands.

Emma's right. I need to confront Simon. And let the chips fall where they may.

RONAN

More Christmas Eve shenanigans...

I groan, struggling to shift around in the tight backseat. I tried to bribe my little sister, Karli, to switch me seats so I could sit in the front, because these legs just aren't meant to be squished and folded like this.

But Karli doesn't care about my discomfort. Because Karli and her fiancé, Mason, only care about making out like horny teenagers at every red light we roll up to. In fact, I'm starting to think that Mason is driving slow on purpose, just so he gets to fool around with my sister at every street corner.

It's weird. And cringey.

Slurping-sucking-tongue-smacking sounds emerge from the front seat and my breakfast flips over inside my stomach. I'm one red light away from putting my head through the glass window.

Horns start honking from behind us. But the lovebirds don't even notice.

With a balled-up fist, I thump the back of Mason's headrest. "Bro. The light changed." I struggle to shift around my duffel bag and this big ass Christmas gift basket to make more room.

They reluctantly pry themselves off of each other and Mason throws a quick glance at the green light. "Oh shit. Didn't notice."

Karli giggles and Mason grins at her like she hung the freaking moon.

My future brother-in-law puts his foot on the gas and immediately rests his hand back on my sister's thigh as he drives. It's like he can't stand to not

be touching her.

Damn—the two of them are so in love, it's downright nauseating.

I shake my head. “You guys have been together for months now. Aren't you sick of each other yet? I thought people only did the nonstop PDA thing when they were in new, exciting relationships.”

I'm only half-joking. Mason is a great guy. He genuinely appreciates Karli and he's smart enough to treat her like a princess. My brothers and I all agree that it's nice not having a reason to kick his ass all over town for hurting our sister.

Karli half-turns to shoot me a slicing look. “We're getting married, knucklehead. We have a lifetime of hot make-out sessions ahead of us. Get used to it.”

A lifetime. Geez. That's a long time.

I imagine what it would be like to love somebody that much. The way our dad loves our mother. The way Grandpa loves Grandma. I can't quite wrap my head around it.

I've never even been in a serious relationship. I like telling myself that my career makes romantic commitment hard. What I mean is, with all the traveling and practice and other requirements of my career, it would be too difficult to throw a serious girlfriend into the mix.

Plus, as a professional athlete, I get an unending stream of female attention. It's hard to weed out the girls with genuine intentions from the ones just trying to secure the cushy lifestyle of a professional hockey player's girlfriend.

That's why I haven't made romantic relationships a priority. At least, that's the practiced answer I spew out every time Grandma calls and asks why I don't have a girlfriend. It helps me to not feel too shitty about all the booty calls and one-night stands in my bed.

That sassy girl from the train returns to my thoughts. I could definitely picture myself having a hot fling with her. She not only caught my attention but, she left a mark, too.

She was breathtaking, and that's a word I don't use too often. From the minute she hustled onto the train, I couldn't take my eyes off her. With her mahogany curls and her big, honey-colored peepers and her tiny button nose, all red from the cold. She was the most alluring woman I'd ever seen. I instantly wanted to know everything about her.

And that was *before* I read her horny text messages.

Goddamn—the woman has a dirty mind. I know those text messages will be living rent-free in my brain for the foreseeable future.

I'm not a complete barbarian. I understand the concept of privacy and personal space. I didn't mean to read through her phone. But the device had been unlocked when I picked it up off the ground, and the words on the screen had jumped out at me like a jack-in-the-box.

Cock...Wet...Throat...Choke...Swallow...

Fuck. How was I supposed to look away from that? So, yeah. I read the messages. Sorry, not sorry.

She and I could have had a *really* fun night together. Too bad she chose to give me lame excuses instead of just giving me her damn phone number.

Oh, well. You win some, you lose some.

All I know is, hours after our brief run-in, she's still the reason for the smile lingering on my face now. Adjusting the knitted toque on my head, I chuckle ruefully to myself.

Karli glances into the backseat and squints her eyes at me. "What are you laughing at?"

I give my head a slight shake. "Nothing."

I'm not in the mood to share my inner dialogue with Karli. She wouldn't understand. My younger sister thinks I'm a manwhore. I never like admitting that she's right. It goes to her head.

As he drives, Mason throws my sister a grin. "I don't know how much longer I can wait to make you my wife."

Shooting stars and cartoon hearts swirl around Karli's big head. "Aw, baby. I'm dying to get married to you, too." She leans over and kisses his cheek.

"Just say the word and we'll turn this car around and go find a chapel in Sin Valley right this minute."

Karli giggles. "We'd have to swing by and pick up your Grammy first. She would never forgive us for leaving her out of our wedding." My sister locates my eyes in the rearview mirror to explain. "Mason's Grammy has been slowly losing her vision. It's her dream to see all her grandchildren married off before..." Her words trail off and a forlorn expression comes to her face. "Anyway, that's why it's so important to Mason to make this Christmas Eve dinner even more special for Grammy."

"Shit. I feel that." I rub a palm over the sudden ache in the center of my chest. Family is so important.

Spending the Holidays with our tight-knit Brighton crew is something I look forward to all year long. Time for family and sports and Mom's homemade bread and drunken board games to finish things off...

But this year? I don't get any of it.

The things that mean the most to me are all screwed up right now. For the first Christmas ever, us Brightons won't be having our traditional holiday plans. We're all separated this year and everyone's off doing their own thing.

Our dad retired from his medical practice last spring, and he and mom have been galavanting around Europe ever since. As for my brothers? Felix is spending Christmas Eve with his girl, Daphne, and her family. My twin, Nolan, is taking his five-year-old daughter to spend time with his ex-wife's relatives. I'm not sure what Darius and Archer are up to, but knowing those grumpy assholes, I'm sure they're not doing anything festive.

Anyway, Karli took pity on me and invited me to tag along to the Westbrook family dinner. My stomach growls loudly in anticipation. Hopefully, we'll be there any minute now. If Mason and my sister can manage to keep their faces to themselves for two whole miles.

"Thanks again for the invite," I say as Mason turns onto a narrow bumpy road. "You two are doing me a huge favor. I really didn't want to spend Christmas Eve alone watching old hockey tapes."

Mason gives a curt nod. "Of course, man. You're family."

My chest squeezes.

Sometimes, I forget how intertwined our families are, now that Karli is engaged to Mason, who's a Westbrook.

Karli claps excitedly as Mason pulls his car into his grandmother's gravel yard. "Everyone's here!"

For a moment, I'm taken aback. The Westbrook family is about as big as the Brighton's, and tonight, they've turned out in numbers. The yard is so full of vehicles, there's hardly anywhere to park. Christmas decorations are everywhere. The house is lit up in multi-color string lights. Music and laughter spill out of the thin-paned windows.

The Westbrooks are a fun gang. I met most of them back in the fall at Karli and Mason's housewarming party. We all had a blast that night and I expect this evening to be the same.

Mason helps Karli out of her seat. Then the two of them hustle up the icy walkway to the rustic cottage and eagerly shove open the front door. I follow them in, carrying the large holiday gift basket with me. I'm instantly

salivating at the different aromas fragrancng the air. I can smell cookies and apple pie and some sort of buttery potato dish.

The second we step inside, a wave of warmth rushes in our direction. Each family member greets us, one by one, on our way down the crowded hallway.

Whoa. Mason has *a lot* of fucking cousins.

There's Cash who happens to be one of the billionaires who co-owns the Saints hockey team with Darius. He and his wife, Meghan, are all sly smiles as they stumble out of a dark bedroom, picking cat fur off of each others' Christmas sweaters.

There's Davis, a.k.a. the new mayor of Honey Hill. He's busily clearing a path through the crowd to make way for his pregnant wife, Alana, who's rushing to get to the nearest bathroom.

In the living room, I spot Harry who plays football for the Sin Valley Paragons. He's dressed up in a Santa Claus outfit. His doting wife, Nadia, is seated on his lap as he feeds her a candy cane.

Then we run into the mechanic, Jasper, as he and his wife, Emma, chase after a cute, chocolate-covered toddler who's trying to stick a too-big cookie into her face.

Out of nowhere, an explosion of pink erupts down the hallway. Mason's four younger sisters crash into us, swarming their brother and Karli with hugs and excited chatter.

The hectic energy of this gathering is already hyping me up. I decide here and now that I'm going to make the best out of tonight. It would be impossible to sulk like a bastard at a dinner party like this one.

Mason and Karli get pulled into the kitchen. I head in that direction, too. But then I freeze.

Across the distance, I catch sight of a girl icing gingerbread cookies at the counter. Her curly mahogany hair is the first thing that grabs my attention. And then her smile that dazzles brighter than the Christmas lights. Her head snaps up, and her honey brown eyes lock onto mine.

Holy shit. It's the girl from the train.

The girl who nearly dropped her suitcase on that sweet granny's head. The girl with the dirty-as-fuck text messages on her phone. The girl I'd accepted that I'd never see again. She's standing right there in the Westbrook family kitchen.

My heart beats a whole lot faster and excitement ripples in my blood. My

eyes stay on her as I follow Mason and Karli down the hallway. I can't look away. And I don't want to.

She's staring at me, too. Those eyes say so much, but I can't tell if they're saying that this is a pleasant surprise, or if she still wants to wring my neck. Things between us didn't exactly end on a high note on the train.

Either way, I am so ready to shoot my shot again.

But right as I'm about to step into the kitchen, a tiny woman wielding a rolling pin blocks my path, squinting up at me. It's none other than Mason's infamous grandmother.

"Oh, hi Mrs. Westbrook. Merry Christmas." I offer her the gift basket. I put on my shiniest smile and turn up the intensity to the max. Let me tell you—old ladies *love* that shit.

Except, *this* old lady isn't impressed. "It's Grammy to you, young man."
I flinch.

Her words should sound sweet and welcoming but the scowl on her weathered face doesn't exactly leave me feeling warm and fuzzy. In fact, today, Mason's grandmother is way scarier than I remember her being at the housewarming party where we met. That night, she'd been warm and happy, carrying around a tray of cookies and squeezing my cheeks. Tonight, she's blocking the entrance to the kitchen like a tiny, rolling-pin-wielding gladiator.

One of Mason's sisters discreetly slips the gift basket from my hands, setting it on a nearby table. Meanwhile, Grammy continues our face-off.

"Food allergies?" she barks at me.

I blink. "N-no, ma'am."

She holds out her hand, and I stand there like a fool.

"Take it."

I do, and Grammy sets a hot-from-the-oven cookie into my hand. Then, with a scoot, she sends me marching toward the living room.

Huh? What did I do wrong? I'm getting flashbacks to high school. I feel like I just got sent to detention.

At least this one comes with snacks.

I trudge down the hall, biting into my fresh-baked molasses cookie.

Mason catches up to me, draping an arm around my shoulder. "Sorry, man," my soon-to-be brother-in-law mumbles sheepishly. "I should have warned you. Only family members are allowed in Grammy's kitchen."

"Dude—you *just* said I was family," I argue.

He rolls his eyes. "You know what I mean. Anyway, Grammy has a thing

about her secret recipes. Those recipes are guarded better than the oval office.” He chuckles.

Mrs. Westbrook owns the most popular bakery in Honey Hill. I think it’s called *The Wildberry Bakery*. People come from all over for her famous sweets. I’ve tasted her chocolate mousse pie. That shit was divine. I’m not surprised that she’s protective of her recipes.

Still, I frown. “But Karli’s in there,” I complain.

A proud smile spreads across Mason’s face. He shrugs. “Like I said...*family*.”

I get the message loud and clear. My sister is practically a Westbrook now. I won’t complain about that. This seems like a pretty great family to be a part of.

When I turn on my heel, Mason’s father and his uncle welcome me into the living room for drinks. I can’t say no to that. Soon, the rest of the guys are filing into the living room, too, and we’re clinking together glasses of whiskey in front of the roaring fire place.

Still I can’t help but throw a glance over my shoulder at the mystery train girl.

This time, I catch *her* staring at *me*.

NICKY

So, that hot guy with the giant muscles and the superhuman reflexes from the train? It turns out that he's:

- 1 - My cousin, Mason's, soon-to-be brother-in-law; *and*,
- 2 - The captain of the hockey team my brother, Cash, now co-owns. Holy hockey sticks. What are the odds of that?

Hmm. A professional athlete, huh? Well, at least his lightning fast reflexes make sense now. And the bulging muscles, too.

Also, I'm totally starting to understand where his arrogant attitude comes from, just watching the way the men in my family shine a spotlight on him all throughout dinner. He is literally the center of the discussion all night. It's all...

"How's the trade from New York to Sin Valley been treating you?"

"Do you think the Saints will manage to get to the Cup this season?"

"Will the team be able to trade up for some better draft picks next year?"

The Westbrook men are absolute sports nuts. Between Cash's new venture into owning a hockey team and Harry being a professional football player himself, I see no end to the sports conversation in sight.

A part of me is relieved though. As long as Train Guy is wrapped up in all that hockey talk, there's less of a chance that he'll bring up the train incident and embarrass me. I'm definitely not in the mood to re-live that debacle in front of the whole family. So, I do the smart thing, completely ignoring him and his pretty smile and his big muscles.

Or at least, I try to. It's hard when he keeps peeking in my direction between his stories to the guys.

Meanwhile, Simon is dutifully ignoring me. He showed up partway through dinner, looking nervous and disheveled, and he hasn't glanced my way once.

I know we were never super open about our hook-ups. He was always scared that Jasper would find out and be pissed about it. But normally, I'd expect Simon to be trying to cop a feel in the hallway. Or trying to lure me into the coat closet when no one is looking. Instead, he's flat-out pretending I'm not here.

I keep trying to smile his way or make eye contact when he almost looks in my direction. But, I'm having zero luck tonight. *Seriously. WTF?!*

It's like I bumped my head on that train, never woke up, and I'm in a freakish snow globe nightmare where nothing makes sense.

With a heavy sigh, I turn my back on both men and focus my attention on Meghan, who's sitting closest to me.

"How are you doing, Megs?" I ask my sister-in-law.

"I'm good," she says with that warm smile of hers, "but Cash is mad at me."

My eyes shoot over to my brother and he jumps in to defend himself. "She brought home *another* cat last week."

I barely hold back a laugh. Meghan is a vet tech at the local animal clinic. She has a notoriously hard time resisting new furry friends.

"So what?" I say, just to get under my brother's skin. "You can never have too many cats."

"That's what I said." Meghan grins charmingly and shrugs.

She knows as well as I do that Cash is not a cat-guy. But he's a Meghan-guy. So Meghan gets as many cats as she wants.

My brother pins his angry stare on me. "Okay, then you take one or two of the monsters home with you."

"Oh, no. I'm..." I fake-cough. "Allergic."

Cash shakes his head. "Always full of crap."

He and I have a special sort of dynamic between us. Once upon a time, Cash hired me as his intern. That was back when he was the workaholic CFO at our dad's wealth management company in Chicago. In those days, I truly perfected the art of pushing Cash's buttons.

We used to be The Three Musketeers—Cash, our dad and me. But that was until they both moved back here and left me behind in the city.

Gosh. I really miss those days.

“So, how are things going at work?” he asks me.

Currently, I work as a junior associate at Westbrook Wealth Management. As for Cash, he only occasionally checks in to the office via videoconferencing nowadays. In fact, my billionaire brother manages most of his many business ventures remotely, only providing in-person input when absolutely necessary. He spends the rest of his time doting on Meghan like it’s his full-time job.

I shrug. “Fine.”

Meghan’s eyes narrow. “Fine? Nicky’s not a *fine* kind of girl. Since when are you a *fine* kind of girl?” She nudges my arm.

I glance out the window at the falling snowflakes and let out a heavy sigh. “I think I need a change, guys. I’m...I’m tired of being so far away from everybody. I’m tired of constantly dragging my briefcase and my overnight bag from Chicago to Honey Hill and back. You’re all having babies and building lives out here.” My eyes skate around the table at the happy faces gathered here tonight. “Look how big Sparkle has gotten already. Plus, Mom and Dad are re-married. And Grammy’s getting older.” I sigh. “I feel like I’m missing out on everything.”

Meghan watches me closely, inspecting my expression. “Are you saying you want to move out here? To Honey Hill?”

My head bobs up and down. Then, I shake it from side to side. Then I nod again. “You guys know I’m a Chicago girl at heart, and well, I never thought I’d say this, but yeah. Yes. I think I want to move back home.”

My words surprise even myself.

I love the big city. But there was just something about the seven-hour train ride today. Watching the magic of each small town passing through my window. Staring out at the solitude of the quiet fields of snow. And now, sitting here watching my brothers look all starry-eyed at their women.

Maybe I’m ready for a little less Chicago.

Cash doesn’t question my motives. He doesn’t try to talk me out of it. Instead, his shoulder rises in a shrug. “Say the word and it’s done. I’ll find you a job, and you can start packing your bags.”

“Really? Just like that?” My eyebrows climb up my forehead.

“Of course,” he says, like I’m a fool to doubt his almighty power.

“Well. Can I think about it?”

“Sure. Just let me know when you decide.”

The rest of dinner flies by because I’m lost inside my head. This is a big

decision to make. One that could make or break my future. But I think I know what my heart wants.

After exchanging gifts, we're mostly chatting and catching up and stumbling around the house, refilling our wine glasses. Dad tugs on my arm, pulling me into the middle of the living room and spinning me around on his makeshift dance floor. "How's my only daughter doing?"

"I've missed you!" I lay my head on his chest and give him a squeeze.

"Oh, I've missed you, too, baby girl." He kisses the top of my head. "I miss seeing you at the office every day."

"Yeah, but I'm glad you've finally slowed down," I tell him. "You gave your doctor an entire head of gray hair, trying to get you to step back from work."

"True. Poor Dr. Weiner. I refused to listen to reason." He smiles brightly when his eyes find Mom who's pouring two cups of punch at the snack table. "But in my defense, I eventually listened to love, though."

"And I'm so glad you did." I nod.

He blows out a breath. "After having my priorities screwed up for half my life, I'm just relieved that your mother took me back once I got my head out of my ass."

Dad used to be an even bigger workaholic than Cash. He devoted his entire focus to building up his company. So much so that Mom had to walk away because he wasn't giving our family the attention that we deserved. But my parents' love for each other never died.

After fifteen years of divorce, a health scare or two, and a few failed attempts at moving on with other people, my parents recently found themselves back together and tied the knot for a second time.

Now, Dad is happily retired and Mom is the principal at Honey Hill's local elementary school.

"Haha! You definitely are lucky. Mom's a tough cookie. What's your secret? How did you get her to give you a second chance?" I ask him conspiratorially.

He leans down and makes a big show of whispering so nobody will hear. "I realized that I need to spend the rest of my life loving her extra hard. That way, she'll never remember that she was doing just fine without me."

When he says that, I break out into loud laughter. "Sounds like a great strategy, Dad."

My mother approaches, a suspicious smile on her face as she sets a

cocktail into Dad's hand. "What are you two tittering about as usual?" She questions, her eyes volleying between her former ex-husband/current new husband and me.

"He was just telling me how absolutely in love he is with you." I kiss her on the cheek. "Happy birthday, Mom."

A mega smile breaks out across her face. "Happy birthday, sweetie."

As I shuffle away, Dad's free arm slides around Mom's back and they start swaying to the Christmas music.

I smile. Although it's still weird seeing them back together, I love it so much.

And even though I'm rooting for my parents' rekindled relationship, I haven't forgotten how rough things were in their years apart. I remember seeing Mom struggle to cope with all her pain. It was so difficult to watch, but at least it taught me how to be strong. A strong woman who can stand on her own two feet. Even without a man by my side.

Lost in my thoughts, I wander through the house and inevitably find myself in the kitchen, about to steal another slice of cherry crumble pie. That's when I catch sight of Simon sneaking out the side door with a packet of cigarettes in his hand.

I take a hasty glance over my back to make sure no-one's looking. Then I scuttle across the room and follow after him.

"Simon?" I call out, the moment I step outside.

Frick. It's freezing. I pull my thin sweater tighter around me, cursing myself for not grabbing a coat. Frigid air seeps right through the threads, making me shiver.

Simon turns around at the sound of my voice. He hesitates. "Hey."

It's quiet out here. Well, aside from the neighbors' kids who are playing across the street. But the children are too busy throwing snowballs and playing hockey under the glow of the street lamps to pay us any mind.

I turn my attention back to Simon. "Everything okay with you?" I can see my breath in little white puffs suspended in the air in front of me.

"Yeah. I, uh..." He digs the toe of his boot into the frosty floorboards of my grandmother's side deck. He lowers his head and sheepishly watches me from under a crinkled brow. "I was meaning to get you a birthday gift, actually. But..."

But I'm not his girlfriend.

I force a smile. "It's all right."

Except I'm not so sure it's all right. I'm well aware that we're not dating, but damn, we're friends. *I would have gotten him a birthday gift.*

My smile slides off as I remember why I followed Simon out here in the first place. I open and close my mouth three times before I finally find the courage to speak. "I, uh. I feel like you've sort of been, you know, avoiding me."

It's not eloquent, but I manage to spit it out. It shouldn't be this hard to speak my mind. I do it all the time. But talking about feelings makes me itchy. Some people are actually allergic to cats. And I'm allergic to sharing emotions.

Simon stutters, pausing to zip his winter jacket all the way up to his chin. Then his head moves side to side, as he glances around and makes sure no one's looking. It's only then that he steps a bit closer. *Wow. I really am his dirty, little secret. How was I ever okay with this?*

He gets that 'look' in his eyes. I recognize it immediately. It's a look that tells me maybe there's still time for that birthday sex after all.

For a second, I'm tempted to go right along with it.

But at this point, it just doesn't seem right. Emma's words return to my mind. *You should either tell Simon to step up, or cut your losses and move on with a man who will give you the love you deserve.*

And suddenly, I realize that birthday sex is not enough. I need to know where we stand. I need to stop letting him play with me like this.

I shiver. From the cold air or from the looming threat of rejection? I don't know.

Backbone up, Nicky.

"Look, Simon. I just need to know where things are between us. If you're not into this anymore, just say so."

With a rueful expression, he reaches forward to brush a wayward curl away from my face. But I take a slight step backward.

It's in this very moment that I decide I'm totally taking Cash's offer. Whatever it is, I'm in. Now, I just need to see whether Simon will fit into my new life plans.

"I'm moving back to Honey Hill," I blurt out.

His hand falls away from my face.

"Cash is finding me a job. And I miss my family. And I'm sick of spending hours and hours taking that train back and forth. And..." I carry on, rambling away now that the emotional gate is open. "And I...we...maybe we

could see where things go between us.”

Simon’s eyes bulge.

Then he takes a step backward.

Then another.

“Simon...?”

“I...Fuck.” He pulls on his hair. “Nicky. I think you’re incredible. You’re fucking amazing. But I’m not ready for something...*more*. Hooking up is one thing. You moving here? That’s a full-time thing, and I didn’t sign up for—” He cuts himself off when he’s sufficiently dug his grave.

For a moment, I stare in shock. I just poured my heart out. And Simon threw it right back.

Sadness starts to take root. No one ever said that shooting your shot would hurt like this.

Damn.

But that pathetic feeling of helplessness doesn’t last long. A fiery anger ignites in my belly and races up my chest, pushing out the chill of the night air. Simon is not supposed to hurt me.

That’s the whole reason I chose him. That’s the whole reason I...settled.

My jaw tightens and I fold my arms across my chest. “So sleeping with me is fine, but I’m not good enough for anything more?”

Emma was right about everything.

Simon shakes his head over and over, like I’m getting it all wrong. “Look—I’m still really fucked up from my last break up. Plus, the longer this goes on, the worse it will be when Jasper finds out. And you deserve better than all that.”

Silence grows between us. It’s so quiet, I swear I can hear the snow flakes landing on the frozen grass. I almost buy his excuses. Almost. But I refuse to be the weak girl here.

I grow angry with myself when I feel the teardrops forming on my lower lids. I look away, refusing to let him see me cry.

Y’see? This is why I don’t open up to guys. This is why I keep my emotions under lock and key. I hate feeling weak like this.

Rising chatter from across the street catches my attention. My gaze shifts over to where the neighborhood children are playing. Except now, they’re not alone. Their parents are standing by, excitedly talking and taking pictures of—wait, is that Ronan?

The hockey captain is at the center of the group, everyone circled around

him. I watch as a child hands him a hockey stick. Then he's hunched over the ice, giving an impromptu lesson to the crowd of kiddies.

In the middle of the action, his head suddenly rotates in my direction. *Ah, fuck.*

I take a quick step back, moving into the shadows of the house so he won't see me. I really don't want to have to deal with him and his constant staring when I'm in this state.

"Nicky—say something?" Simon mutters softly, pulling my attention back to him.

He and I started this thing just for fun. But now I'm forced to admit to myself that none of it is fun anymore. Fuck. My feelings are hurt. By the one guy I thought was safe.

"I just wasn't expecting this."

"Sorry," he says simply. Like that's enough.

I shake my head, like I'm shrugging off my daze. "You know what? It doesn't matter. None of it does."

"Are you okay, though?" Simon asks a few quiet moments later.

No. I'm not okay. I'm more mad at myself than anything. I should have never put myself in this position. I'm smarter than this. Tougher than this.

"Yes. I'm fine," I grit out.

I feel him staring at the side of my head for a second longer. "I'd better get back inside." After an awkward moment, he shuffles away, leaving me outside alone.

My eyes prickle with tears. I'm so upset, I barely notice the cold seeping into my bones.

Dammit. This is exactly what I was afraid of. Exactly why I chose to play it safe. Exactly why I chose Simon, thinking he'd be a sure bet. Look how well *that* turned out.

I shouldn't have sacrificed my dignity for some guy. Some of the strongest women in my life were able to stand on their own two feet without a man. Look at my mother. Hell, look at Grammy. And Jane Austen. And Oprah.

Some of the greatest women ever were single.

I made an absolute fool of myself over Simon. But boy did I learn a valuable lesson. One I won't let go of anytime soon.

I will *never* give any man the power to make me feel this shitty again. Never.

In fact, on that note, I'm officially swearing off men.

Forever.

Maybe.

Okay, probably not forever. But definitely for the foreseeable future.

Maybe love just isn't for me. I can still be a kickass woman without a man. For now, I'll focus on my career.

"Girl power...Boss babe..." I whisper to myself as I blot at the single tear that tracks down my cheek.

I pull myself together and I'm getting ready to head back into the warmth of the house when I hear boots crunching on the gravel. My eyes shoot up. Hot Hockey Guy—er, Ronan—is approaching from around the side of the house.

Shit. I immediately straighten my spine, blinking fast, and desperately trying not to look like I'm on the verge of tears.

How long has he been standing there? Did he hear Simon ending things with me? And me acting like a pathetic little girl?

Jeez, I sure hope not. I'd be so freaking embarrassed.

In a few long strides, he's standing in front of me. We say nothing to each other. We just stand there, eyeballing each other down.

Soon enough, he breaks the silence. "So I'm guessing that was Simon?" he drawls.

"And I'm guessing you don't know how to mind your business?" I retort, not missing a beat.

A tiny, amused smile peels across his handsome face, accompanied by a low laugh. Ronan takes a step closer. Like, to *me*.

"In all seriousness, are you okay? You look upset."

The concern in his eyes looks genuine. It really does. But as the evidence would confirm, I'm not the best judge of guys and their intentions.

His lips catch my attention, and I stare.

So tempting. *Soooo* damn tempting.

For one hot second, I quietly wonder if those gorgeous lips could help soothe this ache inside of me. A rebound doesn't sound too bad right about now.

But then I remember—Hot Hockey Guy is a man. And I swore off men. Less than two minutes ago. Because men are jerks.

Nope. Not today, sex devil. I snarl at him. "I'm fine."

His eyes tell me he doesn't believe me. He pauses for a moment and I

brace myself for what he'll do next.

Then with a curt nod, he starts to walk away—thank god. But he stops himself right outside the door. “You deserve better than that, Train Girl.”

My eyes zip up to the star-filled sky, struggling to keep more tears from falling. “How do you know what I deserve?” I ask quietly. “You don't even know me, Hockey Guy.”

“You're right. I don't know you. But I've read your text messages. So I know you really know how to hold a man's attention.” He smirks shamelessly. Not in a mean way. In an, ‘I'm trying to get you to crack a grin’ way.

Too bad I'm not in a grinning mood.

I can barely resist rolling my eyes.

Great. Go right ahead and objectify me just because you saw a few sexy messages I wrote to a guy I stupidly trusted with my heart.

I shoot eye-daggers at him across the distance. “Oooh! Yippee! A famous hockey fuckboy who wants to get in my pants without knowing anything about me. Where do I sign up?”

The corners of his lips slightly tip up again, like he's enjoying this little back and forth.

He unzips his fleece and shrugs the sweater from his wide shoulders. Now, he's only wearing a T-shirt, displaying muscled-up arms decorated with colorful tattoos. “You're a real fucking peach, aren't you? Sarcastic, little thing.” His eyes twinkle under the porch lights. “Fine. I don't know anything about you. But there's one thing I know for sure.”

“One thing?” I fold my arms tighter across my middle. “What's that one thing?” Oh, I can't wait to hear *this*.

He comes up behind me, so close that his broad torso momentarily covers my back, like a shield against the biting cold. He drapes his sweater around my shoulders and his mouthwatering cologne surrounds me.

When he speaks, I feel his breath against the shell of my ear. “If I were your boyfriend, none of your text messages would be sitting on my phone, unanswered. Sexy messages, not-sexy messages, no matter the subject matter. You deserve a guy who texts you back, Peach. That's the bare fucking minimum.”

I hate the things I'm feeling right now. The tingling inside my chest and behind my eyes and in the space at the apex of my thighs. Each word he says is weakening my tough girl act. *Christ, Nicky—when did you get so gullible?*

Straightening my shoulders, I turn and face the man head-on, toe-to-toe. “Yeah, well I’m not in the market for your ‘boyfriend services’. So no need to worry about me and my unread text messages.”

I don’t wait for his response before I’m slamming his sweater into his hand.

On that, I turn to stomp back inside the house. But I shoot him one last glance over my shoulder from the doorway. “Also, I’m not your fucking ‘peach’.”

I let the door bang shut behind me.

Yeah, I am so done with men.

NICKY

Present day

I wake up with a smile on my face, sitting up in bed and stretching with my arms up overhead. Sunlight filters through the window curtains. Birds are singing. Bright optimism fills the bedroom, and I'm honestly looking forward to the day.

We're a few days into the New Year, and today is the first step of my new and improved life. I couldn't be more excited.

I may not know exactly what my new job will be about, but it doesn't matter. I trust Cash. It's going to be great.

I eagerly swing my legs over the side of the mattress. And then, I hear noises. *Sex noises.*

"Yes! Yes, baby!"

"More!"

"Ooh-wee!!"

I'm hurriedly making my bed, cringing at all the grunting. And then loud squealing. A bed frame squeaking.

Oh god. Really? Again?

Emma and Jasper have been going at it nonstop ever since they dropped Sparkle off at my parents' place last night. Jeez. I know they're madly in love and all, but it's Monday. Don't they have other shit to do?

With a sigh, I try to ignore all the *sex-ing* and start getting myself ready

for work. I can't be mad at my brother and my bestie for trying to 'get some'. Especially when they were kind enough to take me in as a temporary guest in their home.

When I initially gave Cash the green light to find me a job, I thought the whole process would take a bit longer. But he had an employment opportunity for me within days.

Now, the stuff from my Chicago apartment is packed in boxes in my parents' attic and Emma offered me a guest bedroom until I get on my feet. And here I am, in Honey Hill, ready to start my new life.

Although I was glad for Emma's invitation, the constant *loving* that's taking place on the other side of this very thin wall is reminding me not to get too comfy here.

I've already started looking at house listings. Sure, I'm just window shopping the local real estate market for now, but maybe—just maybe—I'll manage to afford a reasonable mortgage on my new salary.

Sure, I could ask my parents or any of my siblings to co-sign with me. Hell, if I asked Cash for help, my name would be registered on a property deed by the end of the week. Harry would have me a house built from the ground up. And without hesitation, Grammy would reach under her bed and hand me that shoebox of five dollar bills she's been saving up since the '90s. My family is supportive like that.

But I want to do this one thing on my own.

I'm 24 years old. I want to start taking more responsibility for myself. I'm aware that home ownership could very well be an incredibly far fetched dream at this point in my life. But I'm nothing if not an optimist.

I guess the direction of my fate all depends on whatever this job is that Cash has in store for me. I'm super appreciative that he has anything for me at all. But at the same time, I'm really hoping this job will pay well enough for me to get on my feet quickly. I can't stay with my horny best friend and her hubby forever.

"Yes!"

"Smack it! Again!"

"Some more!"

I jump into the shower, flat-iron my hair and shimmy into my sharpest business attire, all in record time. I'm in the kitchen, sitting at the island and eating my colorful cereal when Jasper and Emma stumble into the room. I turn just in time to see my friend draped all over my brother and grabbing at

his—

“Oh my god! Ew!” I nearly jump out of my seat.

Emma startles when she spots me sitting there and her face turns fifty successive shades of red.

“Shucks. We forgot you were staying here, Nicks.” Jasper says it with a chuckle and he looks a little too proud of himself.

I glare at my brother. “Wow. Thanks.” I deadpan.

“He just means that you’re so quiet, and when Sparkle spends the night at her grandparents’ house, we’re not used to being...quiet,” Emma explains more politely, her own eyes twinkling with humor.

“I’ve noticed.” I shoot her a fake scowl.

I figured that staying here would be my safest bet out of all of my family members. I mean, Emma and Jasper have a young child living under this roof, for crying out loud. Turns out, I was wrong.

The bittersweet truth is, I’m surrounded by happy, oversexed couples all around. Harry and Nadia are always running around their house naked and grabbing at each other.

Cash and Meghan are usually conjoined at the genitals, and on top of that their house is covered in cat hair.

Alana may be pregnant but that doesn’t stop Davis from trying to get handsy with her at every turn. It clearly doesn’t matter the time of day. Those two are always all over each other.

Even my parents are newlyweds and I would die-dead if I walked in on any of that action.

I’m glad that the people I love have all found love. I just don’t want to witness the nitty-gritty of it, up close and personal.

I should have moved in with Grammy.

“We’ll be good, I promise. We’ll stop groping each other all over the house,” Emma assures me—even as Jasper starts groping her all over again.

“What?! I don’t consent to that,” my brother starts, but he gets elbowed by his wife.

“I mean it. We’ll be on our best behavior for as long as you’re staying with us.” Emma ignores her man’s pouting. “And, Nicky, you’re totally welcome to stay as long as you need.”

When Jasper opens his mouth to complain, she digs her elbow further into his side.

“Thank you. Both of you,” I say sincerely. “I know this isn’t ideal for you

guys, and as soon as I learn more about my new job, I'll figure out my living situation."

Jasper drops down onto the stool next to me, stealing my box of cereal. Emma rounds the counter and makes a beeline to the coffee pot.

"In all seriousness, I'm glad to have you here, Nicks." My brother reaches over and messes up my hair—ugh!—before pouring milk into his bowl. "With you out there on your own in Chicago, you were too far away. Now that you're here, it's easier to protect you from any dipshits who might be out there trying to mess with you."

When he says that, I flinch. My brother doesn't know that the last guy who hurt me was his very best friend.

"I don't need you all up in my business." I throw a Fruit Loop at Jasper.

Trust me—I've learned a lot from my failed situation with Simon. I did a lot of self-reflecting over the past few days about where I went wrong. With Simon, I settled, I compromised myself, I let myself get strung along. I wasn't protective of my heart. I handed it over to a guy without requiring him to do anything to earn it. And then—big surprise—I got hurt.

That's on me.

I accept my responsibility in that whole mess. Now, I'm trying to be gentle with myself as I patch up my bruises. I mean, we all make mistakes, right? The important thing is that I'm trying to learn my lessons and move on.

From now on, I'm sticking to my standards. I'm not lowering them for any man. And I'm serious about staying single for the foreseeable future. I'm a pretty damn awesome woman, if I do say so myself, and I'm not afraid to be by myself for as long as it takes.

Just as Jasper is about to launch a handful of cereal in my direction, Emma whirls around. "Okay, you two. Behave."

"Yes, mommy," my brother replies with a devious grin that makes me a little nauseous.

My bestie shakes her head and, with a lingering smile, shifts her attention to me. "Are you excited for your first day of work?"

"I am." A large grin stretches across my face. I nod with determination. "I'm ready to take on a new challenge."

Jasper points at the clock on the stove. "Your first challenge is going to be getting across the Sin Valley Bridge on time."

"Oh shit!"

With a squeal, I tell them goodbye, grab my purse, and run out the door.

Jasper is letting me borrow one of his cars today so that's one less thing to worry about. The drive across the bridge to Sin Valley usually only takes a few minutes as long as there's no traffic. But with it being a Monday morning, things are a tiny bit slower than normal.

Only a few minutes into my drive toward the address where Cash told me to meet him, he calls my cellphone.

I put it on speaker. He gives me a hasty debriefing on what to do when I arrive at the front desk and who to talk to about my new job. When I press him for more details, Cash just tells me that he'll see me in a few, and that he'll explain my first assignment to me then.

I'm dying to know more, but Cash is being all grumpy and impatient to get me off the phone. Typical. I try to memorize his instructions and promise to meet him at the office shortly.

Just as I'm pulling into the oversized lot at the back of the building, my phone rings again. It's my mother.

"Hey, Mom. I can't talk long. I'm headed into the office," I say quickly as I'm pulling into a parking spot.

Her kind, familiar voice spills from the phone. "I know, sweetie! I'll be quick. Are you excited for your first day at work?"

"So excited." I smile, looking in the rearview mirror to reapply my peachy nude lipstick. "More than anything, it will be a good distraction from my recent heartbreak. Guys suck."

After everything that transpired in my love life, I sat down with my mother and told her all the pathetic details. She offered me the empathy I needed to stop feeling so stupid. And some solid advice for figuring out my next steps forward.

"I know it hurts, baby girl," she says softly now. "I know you're still upset over what happened. But, as you get older, you'll come to realize that not every ex-lover is a villain. Some guys are just temporary placeholders in your life. When the *real* hero shows up on the scene, you'll be grateful that there's not some side character hogging his spot in your life."

Those words hit me squarely in the middle of the chest. My mom and dad stayed divorced for fifteen whole years after their split. For a while, my mother had this deadbeat boyfriend in her life. But thank god, she finally left that loser. Pretty shortly after that, my parents got back together and now they're re-writing their happy ending.

Mom isn't settling for the wrong guy anymore. It's so good to see her

blissfully in love. I'm wondering if her ex was just her placeholder.

Maybe my mom's right. Maybe one day I'll decide that Simon wasn't a bad guy. He just wasn't the right guy for me. Maybe he was just my placeholder.

"Thanks, Mom," I say on a sigh. "I just need to avoid the side characters for the foreseeable future until I figure out what I really want." Until I'm brave enough to go after it.

"I trust your decisions, baby girl." I hear the smile in her voice. "I love you, and I'm so happy you moved back here."

"Me, too. I love you, Mom."

I hop out of the car and my heels click clack as I make my way to the building's back door. I follow the arrows to the lobby.

Damn, it's fancy here.

Aside from the moving boxes lined up against the walls, everything's all modern and beautifully designed.

Good thing I dressed up. I catch sight of my reflection in the shiny glass walls. I'm in full-on business mode. Blazer. Pencil skirt. Sleek bun. There are shoulder pads involved.

I'm gonna kill it today.

A tall, well-dressed woman with smooth, dark skin and long braids greets me in the lobby. She identifies herself as Florence, the head of the PR department and my immediate superior. She welcomes me to the team and ushers me into a nice, sleek conference room.

The vibe is good. Stylish furniture. Floor-to-ceiling windows. Even the plant in the corner is thriving here.

"Sorry about the mess," she tells me. "The organization is still putting down roots. We're in the process of unpacking. Getting everything up and running is taking a bit longer than expected."

I can empathize with that. "Oh, I totally understand. I myself am living out of suitcases at the moment."

Florence smiles, looking relieved. "Get comfortable. Make yourself a cup of coffee or some tea," she tells me as she heads out the door again. "We're just waiting for everyone to arrive."

Everyone? Who's everyone? The organization? Huh? What does that mean?

Nervous questions start to bubble up but I push them all back. I've already decided that this is my fresh start and anxiety is definitely not invited

to the party.

I select a tea bag from the assortment laid out on the table in the corner. I dunk it into a cup of steaming hot water before taking a seat in a cushy conference chair. I dig the toe of my stiletto into the plush carpet under my feet. *Ooh! Fancy and shit!*

I catch myself gazing out the large windows, enjoying the view. Right across the street, there's a cute little park where I can see kids all bundled up and skating on the ice.

I smile. This is it. I've officially started my new life.

I have a feeling today's gonna be a great day.

RONAN

I have a feeling today's gonna be a shit day.

So far, it already is. And it's barely 9:15 in the morning.

Tearing the toque off my head, I fling open the door to the media room, paste on a smile and step inside. Cameras flash in my face. The whole room is buzzing with eager reporters and they're all staring at me.

Press conferences never get any easier. No matter how many I've had to do over the years. Even worse still? Having to face the media when I'm fresh out of the slammer.

It's Monday morning and I'm still not over the drama from the events of the weekend. Hell. I'm still having flashbacks to the stench of that piss-soaked guy who was passed out in the corner of the holding cell on Saturday night.

Shudder.

I walk up to the front of the room, passing my teammate on his way out. The queasy look on Tipton's face confirms that the reporters ate him alive and left no crumbs. I nervously rake my fingers through my hair. *Great. They've had a taste of blood, and now they want mine.*

The reporters grow quiet as they wait for me to speak. I stand up at the podium, looking down at the electronic tablet that the PR director left out for me. I groan inwardly, wishing I could be anywhere but here.

Still I clear my throat, lean toward the microphone and read off the garbage speech that some intern in a back office wrote for me.

"...I want to apologize first and foremost to my fans..."

"...My actions in no way reflect the kind of leader I strive to be..."

“...I take full responsibility for my reckless behavior...”

“...And can assure you that I am going to do better.”

“...I am going to be better...”

“...I am going to be the leader my Saints teammates, coaches, and fans can count on...”

Yaddy. Yaddy. Yadda.

Blah. Blah. Blah.

Bullshit. Bullshit. More bullshit.

Wiping sweat from my forehead, I manage to finish my apology speech. I feel like I didn't do half-bad. But it's the barrage of dumb questions that the reporters fling at me afterward that have me stumbling and muttering and nearly losing my cool.

Before I can dig myself a new hole to fall into, my agent steps in, says a few flowery words, and brings the conference to a close.

But I'm not off the hook just yet.

Next, I'm trailing down the corridor of the Saints' head offices behind a group of pissed-off billionaires—Darius, Cash Westbrook, Liam Kline, Cannon Kingston, Raphael Silver, Reuben Barre, King freaking Xavier of Ridgeland. Then there's my agent, and the team's general manager. Basically, all the big wigs.

It's hard to believe all their big heads can squeeze into the same hallway.

Judging from the energy in the air, I get a sense that all these rich fuckers are participating in a silent power struggle, competing over who comes across as the grumpiest.

And I have a nagging feeling that it's a really bad omen to get stuck in a room with all of the boss guys at once.

Sheesh—Darius wasn't lying when he said I was about to face some consequences.

It's like back when I was in high school, and I got busted for accidentally breaking that TV in the cafeteria. I still remember the feeling—the principal, the lunch monitor, and my coach all shooting glares at my head.

Out of nowhere, I feel tired.

Jeez. I'm tired of being a disappointment.

A part of me thought I'd grow out of this phase by now. How is it that I'm 27 years old and I'm still fucking up all over the place?

I don't want to be some laughing stock who drove the Sin Valley Saints franchise into the ground.

I want to be a great. A *hockey great*. I want to go down in history as one of the best players of my time. I want to show the New York Troopers that they were wrong for overlooking me, for underestimating me.

I'll never achieve any of those goals if I keep screwing up.

"Stop sulking already," Darius leans over and hisses into my ear. "Because you're the one who got yourself into this mess. You and you alone."

And what a giant fucking mess it is.

Everybody's pissed at me over this scandal.

"I'd call it an innocent mistake. A wrong-place, wrong-time kind of thing. The truth is, if we'd chosen a different bar to hang out that night, none of this would have happened." I try to defend myself.

"An innocent mistake?" He spits out a bitter laugh. He jams a thumb over his shoulder, in the direction of his business partners. "These angry rich dudes call it a bad investment. With millions and millions of dollars circling the drain right alongside their reputation."

I shake my head at Darius, keeping my voice low. "I feel like I'm walking into a lion's den. What's the plan here? If you're going to behead me or something, can you at least make it quick?"

He whispers back, a devious smile making his eyes crinkle at the corners. "Let's just say that, as of today, you now have yourself a babysitter." He claps my shoulder with a heavy palm. "Congratulations, little brother."

The fuck? "A babysitter?"

"That's right, Ronan. Effective this morning, we have a junior associate from the PR department who will be following you around. Supervising your comings and goings." His smile widens.

Fuck. He's enjoying this.

Darius is such a stick in the mud. Sometimes, I can't believe that he's only 30 years old.

"F-following me around?" I stutter. "Following me around for what?!"

My brother balks. "To make sure you keep your ass out of trouble!"

"That's bullshit," I grumble. "Is that even legal?"

"It's legal. Probably. I think. Maybe." A shadow of doubt crosses over his face. He shakes it off. "Anyway, you've definitely earned it," he says with a shrug. "My business partners and I invested a lot of time and money into this hockey franchise, and we refuse to let the Saints become the laughing stock of the league just because our captain can't keep his shit together."

My blood boils just as my stomach goes tight. Honestly, I was expecting some form of punishment along those lines, but to hear him say it out loud just pisses me off.

This whole thing pisses me off.

“I don’t need a babysitter!” I hiss after him as he strides on ahead of me. “Especially if it’s going to be some stuffy, uptight corporate dude in a polka dot bowtie.” At least, that’s how I picture him. “If some jerkwad like that starts following me around, I’m going to strangle him before the end of the week. And right back to jail I’ll go, making headlines again.”

Darius glances back at me, just to roll his eyes. “How come I never noticed you were such a drama llama?” He reaches out to pinch my cheek. I slap his hand away.

I open my mouth but I don’t get the chance to respond. Because when we make it to the end of the hall, the conference room door opens ahead of me. And I don’t see some corporate bowtie dumbass.

Far from it.

I see the hot, sassy Westbrook girl stirring sugar into a teacup.

My heart rate instantly picks up and I pinch myself to make sure this is not the beginning of another one of my x-rated dreams.

It’s not.

It’s her.

In the flesh.

Her hair is pulled into a tight bun. Her shoulders are straight like a statute. Her blouse is buttoned all the way up to her chin.

Our eyes meet and her peach-colored lips fall open.

I smile.

Looks like I was wrong. This day just took a turn for the better.

NICKY

Oh shit. I was wrong. This day is about to be a dumpster fire. My hand freezes in mid-air, sugar crystals falling off the tip of my spoon. I watch as Cash finally enters the conference room.

He's not alone, though. There's a whole crew of guys decked out in expensive suits who are stalking in alongside him. I recognize most of them. They're Cash's billionaire friends. Back when I was interning for my brother, he made me do intensive research into each one of them. It was part of his due diligence when he was trying to develop a business relationship with them.

Suddenly, I realize that this is not any old normal first-day-on-the-job meeting.

Not at all.

I can't lie—these men are kind of intimidating. I've got to put my best foot forward here.

I force on a smile. But when I realize that a rumpled and *gorgeous* Ronan Brighton is right on their heels, my smile collapses. The spoon slips from my hand, landing in my cup with a clang and a big splash.

Hockey Guy...

Fuck. What is *he* doing here? And why didn't it occur to me that I might run into him again?

With him being a Saints player and my older brother being one of his bosses, I should have considered the possibility of having to deal with him. All I know is that I am *not* emotionally prepared to look at his handsome, annoying face today.

When our eyes meet and his trademark smirk unfolds across his lips, my stomach drops. Because immediately, I know that my first work assignment has something to do with Ronan. And whatever it is, I'm not going to like it.

"Shit..." I mutter under my breath.

Florence shoots me a curious look as she closes the door and slips into her own seat. Using a paper napkin to soak up my spilled tea from the pristine tabletop, I mutter a quiet apology.

None of the rich dudes spare me a glance. But Ronan? He's staring. And smirking. *Oh god.*

As soon as everyone is seated, all eyes turn to me. It's Darius Brighton who addresses me first.

"As you might know, Ronan here is the Saints' team captain this season." Darius' eyes slide toward his brother and then back to me. "Unfortunately, my brother has had some...*behavioral issues* as of late. Including a few run-ins with the law."

He slides a printout across the table to me. It's a blog post detailing the arrest of several Saints players over the weekend. Ronan's face is big and bold at the top of the news article.

I watch the hockey player start to squirm under the intensity of his brother's disapproving stare. Suddenly, he doesn't seem so cocky anymore. I almost snort a laugh.

Darius goes on. "I probably don't need to explain how detrimental all this is for the Saints, especially given that this is a brand new hockey team in the league. Public perception is crucial, not just because of fans, but also for sponsorship and endorsement opportunities for all our players."

"There's a lot of pressure on our franchise right now," Cash jumps in. "And if we want to cement our place in the league, any coverage of the Saints this season needs to be positive."

"We all agree that Ronan is an excellent hockey player," a man who I assume to be the team's coach says, clearly trying to ease the pressure off of the scolded athlete. "Obviously, it's why we made him captain. But to put it bluntly, he's also a big PR headache."

My head swivels back and forth as everyone lays out the situation to me. They say all these harsh things about Ronan, as though he's not right here with us in the room, listening to every word. As he continues to squirm at this verbal beating, I almost feel a little bad for the guy.

Although he comes across as a man who loves being the center of

attention, it feels weird to be talking about a grown adult like he's an annoying, troubled kid, sitting in the naughty corner.

All the big wigs prattle on, but Ronan's eyes keep flitting back to me repeatedly as everyone speaks. It's unnerving.

Florence interjects. "As a new team, the Saints are walking on very thin ice," she says. "As you can imagine, any bad press could be disastrous for us. Like Darius was saying, both for team and player sponsorships and for fan perception. For ticket sales. For team performance. That's why this whole mess is becoming the PR department's focus."

A man who appears to be Ronan's agent looks toward me. "We need the public to view Ronan as responsible. Dependable. A leader. On and off the ice."

Florence nods again. "As such, your job, Nicky, will entail working as Ronan's assistant for the rest of the season."

I blink. "Assistant?"

My boss trades looks with her bosses. The billionaires nod.

"Well, for the lack of a better word, you'll be more like Ronan's...*babysitter*. Basically, you'll need to be his shadow around the clock," Florence explains.

Whoa, whoa, whoa! I'm struggling to take it all in.

"B-babysitter? And what do you mean...around the clock?" I ask hesitantly.

"It means you'll need to be with Ronan day in, day out," Darius answers. "You'll monitor his comings and goings. You'll make sure that he keeps his butt on track and out of trouble."

"What about his days off?" I ask in a rush.

"His days off will be your days off," Florence responds.

I sigh with relief. Okay. Fair. That doesn't sound quite so bad then.

But then the team's coach clarifies. "Meaning, you'll spend your days off *together*."

I flinch. "Together, sir?"

"It'll be most important to monitor Ronan on his days off," Darius explains. "After games. Between games. Traveling to road games. That's when this guy has a penchant for getting into the most trouble."

I sneak a glance at the subject of the conversation. Ronan is clearly trying to keep his face neutral. But his eyes are extra twinkly and I'm pretty sure I see the corner of his mouth twitch.

Hell, I'm feeling kind of twitchy, too. And not a good kind of twitchy.

I do the math in my head. The whole rest of the season? From now until April? That's more than three whole months and some change.

I gulp. This is *a lot*.

It certainly isn't what I had in mind when I agreed to join the PR department here. Wowzer.

This is crazy. All of this is crazy.

But I can't exactly turn down my very first assignment. I can't risk looking ungrateful or worse—unprofessional.

Cash seems to sense my hesitation. "Look, Nicky. I know this is an unusual proposition. But you can handle it. You were the best intern I've ever had. And as my sister, there's no one else I'd trust with such a sensitive assignment."

Ugh! Butter me up with compliments, why don't you? My brother knows my weak spots. He knows that I take pride in doing good work. And he's shamelessly exploiting that right now.

Let's be real. We all know that no one else is jumping at the opportunity to take on this assignment. It's weird. It's torture. And I was hand-selected for it.

Yay, me!

Not.

"How much money does this gig pay?" I ask suspiciously. Because if I'm going to do this, it has got to be worth my while.

My brother glances at his billionaire colleagues. Then he scribbles a number onto a sheet of paper and slides it across the table to me. This is all very *Risky Business*.

I read the number. Despite my attempt to play it cool, my eyes bulge.

Shit—I'll definitely be able to manage a mortgage with this salary.

I sit up a little taller, already picturing my new dream kitchen and a bedroom that includes zero sex sounds from nearby roommates in L-O-V-E.

I clear my throat. "Well, what are the working hours? I just mean, I'll need to allow for travel time to and from Ronan's home..."

"Oh, no worries," the PR head answers. "You'll be staying with him."

I blink. "Excuse me?"

Florence's shoulders shake. She seems to be fighting back a laugh. "Not to worry. Ronan owns a huge property in Starlight Falls, which is about forty-five minutes from here. We figured that you could stay in the small guest

house on the property.”

My head snaps to Ronan.

The devilish man starts to grin. But he abruptly cuts it off when I glare at him. Then he tries—and fails—to look contrite.

“That would be all right with me,” he says graciously, speaking for the first time since this incredibly weird meeting began.

I thought this was supposed to be a punishment for him. Why does he look like an eager golden retriever puppy who’s ready for belly rubs?

I narrow my gaze at him, then my eyes dart back to the big bosses. “I, well, um—” I start.

“It’s settled, then!” Darius exclaims with a decisive slap to the tabletop. “Nicky, you’ll move in with Ronan. And Ronan, you’ll stay out of trouble.”

Okay. So, this is it. This is my first day of my new life.

Talk about a challenge ahead.

Maybe I shouldn’t have gotten out of bed this morning, after all.

RONAN

My sportscar comes to a screeching halt in the driveway, leaving tread marks on the gravel. I leap out of the car, snatch the shopping bags from the trunk and bolt across the driveway like I'm being chased by an ax murderer.

But instead of dashing into the main house, I take the bumpy, ice-covered path that leads around the back.

My guesthouse is a decent-sized log cabin with large windows looking out over the vast yard with nothing but snow-capped pine trees in the distance. I think the view is pretty dope. I heard that girls like nice views, so that's good.

I burst into the cabin, scanning every corner as I toe out of my shoes at the door. My head is racing.

Fuck. This place is a mess.

Okay, not really. My cleaning and maintenance people were here last week, and with my hectic hockey schedule, I haven't been home enough in the past few days to dirty things up. But I want everything to be spotless.

For Nicky.

She already has a poor opinion of me, for whatever reason. I don't want her thinking I'm a slob, too. And regardless of how she feels about me, I want her to be comfortable here.

Most guys in my position would be pissed about being saddled with a live-in babysitter. Me? It feels like the stars are smiling down on me. All I know is, the woman I'm borderline obsessed with is moving into my house and it's her *literal* job to hang out with me all day. Not gonna lie—this is my

preteen fantasy come true.

What am I even doing? All of this is fucking weird. Since when do I work this hard to impress a girl? Especially a girl who's made it clear she has no interest in me?

Then again, maybe that's Nicky's appeal. The woman is sassy and stubborn and electric. The whole cat-and-mouse vibe between us is fun for me. She's a challenge. And I'm not used to women who challenge me.

Also...It's been nineteen days and I *still* can't stop thinking about those text messages.

No. Don't think about the text messages.

Fuck. I totally *cannot* stop thinking about the text messages. Not even a little bit.

I have to play it cool, though. I don't want to creep her out. Because then she'll quit. And if she quits, Darius will *really* send a polka dot bow-tie dude to replace her, and that won't be fun at all.

I wonder if she's still into that douchebag from Christmas. I hope not. He clearly didn't deserve her. I don't know exactly what they were talking about in the shadows of the back deck that night. But any guy who'd leave a woman like Nicky shivering and fighting back tears on her freaking birthday deserves to get punched in the nuts.

My knuckles tingle, just thinking about it. *Geez—simmer down, Rocky Balboa.*

Anyway, for now, I need to focus on preparing for Nicky's arrival.

I grabbed some scented candles at the pharmacy. I artfully arrange those on the side table in the living room. Girls are supposed to like that shit, I think.

After packing the fridge full of groceries, I put fresh sheets on the bed and make sure the toilet paper dispenser is stocked in the bathroom. I dig the vacuum cleaner out of the storage closet to clean the rug and then I thoroughly steam-mop the floors.

Mom would be so proud of me.

Fists on my hips, I stand back and assess my handiwork. Not bad. I'm sweating bullets but I think I've done a pretty good job making the place cozy.

I'm busy fluffing and re-fluffing the couch cushions when the front door bursts open. My pulse somersaults in my neck and I turn around, expecting to see Nicky standing there.

Spoiler alert: It's not Nicky.

My oldest brother, Archer, carelessly kicks off his muddy boots on the front mat before heading straight for the fridge. "Hey man," he mumbles, barely sparing me a glance.

Felix follows him in. He tips his nose upward, sniffing at the air. "Mmm. New potpourri? Smells nice. Very floral." Dropping a dirty basketball to his feet, he trails Archer to the kitchenette. "Could use a beer. Is there any beer?"

My panic starts to rise as I watch the basketball roll, leaving a slushy trail across the freshly-mopped hardwood floor.

"What the hell, assholes?" I bark, chasing after them with my microfiber steam mop. "What are you even doing here?"

"We were on our way over to see if you wanted to shoot some hoops at the community center. But then Darius called and said that your new live-in assistant starts work today. We wanted to come over and say hi." Felix grins at me before his face disappears inside the pantry.

"Nicky doesn't want to say hi to you," I grouse.

Felix waves me off. "Of course she wants to say hi to me. Everybody loves me. I'm the favorite doctor in town." He stalls. "But don't tell Mason I said that."

Actually, he's not wrong. Felix is Mr. Congeniality. Mr. Friendly. Mr. Happy. And he's been *even happier* since Daphne accepted his marriage proposal a few days ago. I'm a pretty easygoing guy. But Felix? My 31-year-old brother is almost intolerably happy since he got engaged.

Meanwhile, Archer is the polar opposite of that.

I hear him grumbling from where his head is buried deep inside the refrigerator. "Why the hell do you need a live-in assistant anyway?" He shudders violently at the idea. I imagine that the mere thought of having someone in his house gives him the hives.

He's not a people person. In fact, the 36-year-old former military man is a borderline recluse. Saying that he likes his space is an understatement. And sometimes it seems like the only people who can get him to crack a smile are his neighbor, Layla, and her toddler son, Skylar.

My brothers are staring at me now, waiting for an explanation. "Nicky's, uh, she'll just be helping, uh, helping me stay focused for the rest of the season."

Felix hops up, taking a seat on the countertop. He watches me as he digs into the new box of vegetable crackers I just packed into the pantry. I think

girls like vegetable crackers. Right?

“You mean, Darius hired her to keep your ass from getting arrested again,” he says knowingly.

Archer shakes his head, sliding a water across the counter to Felix before cracking his own bottle open. “Poor girl. She has her work cut out for her.” He empties his bottle in two gulps.

“Yeah, whatever.” I grab a wet rag, frantically wiping up the mess Felix is making with those damn crackers. I’m quickly turning into a high-strung, clean freak psycho.

My brothers need to get out of here. I’ve got to take a shower before Nicky shows up. And I want to make her a snack. Maybe a fruit and cheese charcuterie board.

“I’m trying to make a good impression here. You idiots need to leave.”

Felix’s eyebrow climbs up. “A good impression? Isn’t this supposed to be a punishment? Why are you cleaning like your guesthouse is about to get featured in a home decor magazine?”

I don’t bother to respond to that. Instead, I check the time. It’s getting late. Nicky will be here soon. I hope.

“You’re dropping crumbs on the counter. Leave.”

Felix reads the label of the box in his hand and gags. “Eesh! What’s in this shit? You got anything else? I’m feeling snacky.”

I yank the box away from him, carefully sealing the package and stuffing it back into the cupboard. “Stop by the grocery store on the way home. Leave.”

Archer furrows his brows, eyeballs focused on me. He blindly reaches into the fridge, grabbing another bottle of H₂O. “Um, are you blushing? You’re blushing. What’s going on with you?”

I snatch it out of his hand and use my body to barricade the fridge. “There’s perfectly good water in the tap. Stop drinking my bottled water. Better yet, leave.”

“Ugh. What kind of host are you? I don’t feel welcome here,” Felix complains.

“You’re not.” I lead the way to the door, swinging it open for my annoying brothers.

“Fuck you. You’re mean.” Archer huffs.

“You know what they say—go where you’re appreciated,” I tell the growly lumberjack with a solemn nod.

He drops a string of lewd curse words and slaps the back of my head as he stomps out.

Look. I love my brothers. I do.

But I don't want them making me look like a dumbass in front of Nicky. Which is exactly what they'll do if I let them get anywhere near her.

As I hustle them back to where their vehicles are parked, I'm about to breathe a sigh. But my relief is short-lived. I hear the tired rumble of a piece of shit engine clunking up my driveway. Then through the trees, I see a familiar beat-up old car that's barely holding its shit together with duct tape.

I almost cry in defeat.

Archer's boots crunch on ice and twigs and rocks as he walks up the path, back to the main house. "Nice. Nolan's here." He nods solemnly.

"We're halfway to a family reunion!" Felix exclaims. He's like a little kid happy to see his parents after a day at school. He reaches into his pocket for his phone. "Think we should invite Karli and Darius? Really get the party started?"

That suggestion earns him a hard shove. I snarl at him. "Make that phone call and I will assassinate you right this minute and bury your body under my back porch."

He pushes his device back into his pocket then holds his palms up in surrender. "Sheesh! What's gotten into you?"

I check the time on my phone. Nicky will be here any minute. No way am I getting rid of these knuckleheads now.

Forget making a good impression. This is about to be a disaster.

NICKY

My mother tucks her phone between her cheek and her shoulder as she neatly re-folds one of my sweaters and slips it into my suitcase. “There’s nothing wrong with a little choking, darling. As long as it’s done with the right intentions.”

My shriek of horror flies across the bedroom. “Mom!” I scold her.

Her eyes momentarily flit to me. “Just one second, Nicky. I’ve got your dad on the line.” She returns to her call. “You don’t have to squeeze too hard, Luther. Just a little light pressure is all I need.”

Eeeek! “Make it stop!” I cry out and mom dismisses me with a wave of her hand. She steps out of the room to finish her phone call.

“Get it, sexy mama!” Emma calls after her mother-in-law.

Me? I just cry and cry.

Fighting against her laughter, Nadia rubs my upper back. “Oh, come on, Nicks. Your parents are spicing things up. Good for them.”

“Yeah. Good for them.” I’m as single as a Pringle. Meanwhile, every person around me is getting banged within inches of their life. Even my parents.

I scoop another handful of sweaters out of my dresser drawer—the same one I just unpacked into two days ago—in Emma and Jasper’s spare bedroom. I drop the clothes onto the messy bed, where my four sisters-in-law are all gathered, refolding and stuffing my belongings *back* into my suitcases.

I sigh out loud. Again.

At the end of this morning’s meeting, Florence wasted no time

hammering out her expectations and tossing me into my first assignment. So here I am, getting ready to move into Ronan's mysterious guesthouse. I effectively start work tonight.

"You okay, Nicks?" Alana gives my knee a squeeze.

My shoulder lifts and falls in a defeated shrug. "Living out of your bags is annoying. But packing, unpacking and packing again is even worse."

When I landed in this bedroom a few days ago, I thought the next time I'd be boxing up all my possessions, I'd be moving into a cute little Honey Hill house. Some place with a fenced yard and a front porch. Some place I could call my own. Some place I could never dream of being able to afford when I lived back in Chicago.

But now, I've committed to this new job, and as long as the Saints hockey season is going strong, my mortgage dreams are temporarily on hold.

I'm not happy about it.

Right now, I'm holding nothing back, complaining to the girls about Ronan. From our encounter on the train, to the conversation we had on Grammy's side porch, to the way he wouldn't stop staring at me during the meeting today.

"I'm *sooo* not thrilled about this situation. I have a feeling it's going to be awful having to live with this guy."

"Well, it can't be worse than living with Emma and Jasper, can it?" Meghan pokes my ribs.

Emma's head shoots up from where she's sitting at the foot of the mattress, quietly jotting something in a small notebook. "Hey! That's not nice!" She tosses a pillow at Meghan's shoulder.

I laugh for the first time since I left that meeting. "I'll take Emma and Jasper's sex sounds over babysitting Ronan any day. And that's saying a lot."

Emma tries to look offended but I can tell that she's fighting back a laugh. "Wow. I offer you room and board, and this is the thanks I get!"

"Sorry, hun." I shrug. "I love you and my brother but your sex noises will be haunting my sleep for years to come. Can you hand me that shoe?" I point to the heel peeking out from under the bed.

She sets the shoe in my hand and goes back to scribbling.

"Look, Nicky—I get that you're stressed about this and I don't want to invalidate your feelings or anything, but—*damn*—he's really pretty to look at." Alana sticks out her phone and the girls *ooh!* and *aah!* over Ronan's official team photo.

The larger-than-life man stands there in his Saints uniform, with his dark hair and his mischievous grin, charm and sex appeal practically oozing off the screen.

Then she scrolls down to a video of him on the ice. The power and control he exudes with his movements as he handles the puck is raw and animalistic.

The sharp clench between my thighs is involuntary.

Quickly averting my eyes, I drop an armful of jeans on the bed. “Fine. He’s good-looking. Whatever. But he has to be the most arrogant person I’ve ever met. And I say that as a woman who grew up in a house full of Westbrook boys.”

“Is he really *that* bad, though?” Nadia asks. “From what you said, it sounds like he was really sweet to you when you met on Christmas Eve. Especially when he saw you crying on the porch.”

I vigorously shake my head. “He was just playing nice so he could get into my pants. I can assure you of that.”

My attention moves over to Emma. She’s been scribbling in that notebook the whole time while I spill my woes.

I frown at her. “What are you writing?”

She jolts, clutching the notebook to her chest. “Just some, uh, plot ideas.”

“Oh no, you don’t!” I playfully smack her hand. “You do not get to use my misery as inspiration for your next novel.”

My bestie is an up-and-coming romance author, and I swear, no conversation is off-limits to her. She’s always sneakily jotting things down in that notebook of hers.

“Come on,” she begs. “It has *all* the tropes. Grumpy and sunshine. Hockey hottie. Workplace subplot. I promise I’ll dedicate the book to you when it becomes a bestseller.”

Meghan scoffs. “Pretty sure Jasper would take offense to that. He loves to go around bragging that he’s your biggest inspiration.”

I shut my eyes. “Ew. Ew. Ew. Please. New rule—if you girls want us all to remain besties, there will be zero discussion of my brothers and their gross man parts.”

“Then should we talk about this hockey stud and his man parts instead?” Alana suggests, waggling her brows.

“Ugh. Nooo. Let’s not.” I deadpan, dropping down on the edge of the bed with a pout. I lay my head on Alana’s baby bump and fake-sob. “I don’t

wanna go live with a giant hockey-playing manwhor-r-r-r-r-e..." I whine.

Ronan is so full of himself, it's unbearable. I'm sure his nighttime beauty routine has more steps than mine. Plus, I expect that he'll be hosting raging house parties and entertaining a daily rotation of beautiful women. How the hell am I supposed to keep him out of all *that*?

"Maybe there's a silver lining," Alana argues, tenderly stroking my hair. "Think about it. This could be an opportunity to totally immerse yourself in a new experience, and distract yourself from the Simon drama."

I consider her words. "Yeah. Okay. You're right."

Taking a minute, I focus on what's important. This job opportunity allows me to be closer to my family. No more seven-hour train rides back and forth to Chicago. No more dragging around my briefcase and my overnight bag. Plus, I'll earn a big fat salary to boot.

I know I'm a hard worker, and I don't half-ass things. Throwing myself into my new job *should* prove to be a good distraction.

I can do this. I can do this.

Taking a job out in the bushes of Starlight Falls isn't exactly the reason I left Chicago. I'd been hoping to settle here in Honey Hill with my family. But if I view my babysitter assignment as a quick pit stop on the way to my ultimate dream—putting down roots near my loved ones and homeownership here in Honey Hill—that makes it a little bit easier to digest.

Mom rejoins us a moment later and we finish getting me all packed up. On the way out, I tiptoe into Sparkle's room where she's napping to give her a tiny kiss on the forehead. After the girls and I shove the last of my bags into the company car I'm now driving, Emma slaps a paperback book into my hand.

"Is this what I think it is?" I shriek, my eyes widening as I stare down at the glistening, tattooed man chest on the book cover. *His Blazing Bedsheets* by Emma Stanley-Westbrook.

She grins proudly. "Yup. Advance copy of my next book."

"Squee!" I bounce on my toes. I still get so freaking excited every time I see my bestie's name on the cover of a book.

"I figure you might have some free time on your hands while you're sitting around at Ronan's practices and during plane rides and everything."

"I can't wait to get into this. It's gonna be so good."

She rubs her hands together. "Okay. Let me know what you think."

"Um, duh!"

I hug everybody goodbye. As I hop behind the wheel, I see Nadia smack Emma's butt. "Excuse me! Where's my advance copy?"

"Calm the hell down. I've got an entire box sitting on the kitchen table. Come on!"

The girls squeal with excitement as they disappear inside the house. With a smile on my face, I embark upon the short drive to Starlight Falls.

But before long, a jittery feeling takes root in my tummy. I need Hockey Guy to take this seriously. I need him to take *me* seriously.

I've decided I'm going to be successful in my new role, and if this man-child stands in my way or tries to undermine me as the career-minded woman I am, he's gonna have another thing coming to him.

This whole deal has me feeling totally defensive and strangely ready for a fight. I need to get myself mentally prepared for the task ahead. That's why I'm wearing another business suit.

When it's time to let Fun Nicky out the gates, I let Fun Nicky out the gates. But right now, I'm on the clock, I want to be taken seriously. It's something I had to learn to do while interning at my Dad's company. I always had to work just a little bit harder to prove that I deserved to be there, that I wasn't just coasting along because I share a last name with the boss. I intend to tackle this new position with the same approach.

As I drive, I'm practicing my speech to Ronan in my head. "First things first. No funny business. If this is going to work, you're going to have to be on your best behavior, and we're going to have to keep this one-hundred percent professional."

I mutter the words over and over to myself. I want to perfectly nail down my sermon before I'm standing face-to-face with the arrogant sex god. Because like it or not, my thoughts sometimes get a little jumbled when I'm looking into those twinkly blue eyes.

In no time, I'm flicking on my indicator and merging onto the highway off-ramp into Starlight Falls. It doesn't take me long to get ridiculously lost.

Jeez-sus! Who the hell designed the layout of this town?

I accidentally take a left turn on Sky Road and end up on a narrow, loopy roadway called Awakening Field. Then I'm making an illegal U-turn on Morning Star Way and I somehow end up on a street called Chakra Lane.

With each passing mile, my anxiety climbs. My stomach growls and I try to remember the last thing I ate. I glance at the time. Shoot. It's starting to get late. I'm sweating so bad I have to pull over to the side and shrug out of my

jacket.

This new job isn't off to the best start.

Eventually, I end up in the heart of town. Thank heavens. I make a mental note of all the landmarks I drive past so I'll remember them for next time. The hardware store. The movie theater. The little church on the hill. The court house and the police department.

I see colorful banners announcing an upcoming beer festival. Metaphysical stores and second hand furniture shops catch my eye as I drive. I hope I'll get to come back and explore some other day.

Starlight Falls, Iowa, has a population of 5000 just like Honey Hill. But this place seems far weirder and quirrier than my hometown by far.

I drive along a mountain road and triple check the address when I finally come up to the right turn. Then I tentatively pull onto a long paved driveway. Through the copse of trees, I get my first glimpse of the house.

Holy mini mansion!

My car creeps up slowly and I'm unable to take my eyes off the large, lit-up contemporary house hiding here in the middle of the woods.

It's like a modern fortress peeking out from behind the trees, with unusual angles and towering glass walls and spotlights beaming down on the concrete facade. But the forest provides a lush backdrop, giving the house the vibe of a secret hideaway from the world.

This is not at all what I was expecting out here.

There are several vehicles parked in the circular driveway. Hockey Guy must have company over.

Ugh. Is he having a party right now? Am I going to have to go in there and play the bad guy on day one? In any case, I'm up to the challenge, I guess.

I cut my engine behind a beat-up car with a duct-taped fender. On the back windshield, there's a bright yellow sticker that says, 'Princess on-board. Back the heck off!' Nice.

I drape my coat over the crook of my arm. Grabbing only my briefcase and overnight bag for now, I march purposefully up the pathway to the house, practicing my speech again. "First things first. No funny business. If this is going to work, you're going to have to be on your best behavior, and we're going to have to keep this one-hundred percent professional." I'm prattling away as I ring the bell.

Ronan answers the door. Immediately. And at the sight of him, my

mutterings die in my suddenly-dry throat. “Okay. No funny business...er, um...uh...”

Silence.

Confusion slams me so hard that I instantly forget the speech I spent the whole drive up here practicing.

Ronan’s eyebrows dip low as he stares at me. He looks downright confused, too. It’s like he’s trying to decipher what on earth I could be rambling on about here on his front porch.

A small girl runs up and grabs onto his leg, peeking up at me in the doorway. “Daddy...” she whispers loudly. “I don’t think that’s the pizza guy.”

Biting back a smile, he shakes his head. “I don’t think so, either, princess.”

I blink. He has a...a...I had *no idea* he had a daughter.

I don’t know what my expression must be saying but he stands there, eyes on me, looking me up and down. And I quickly realize that he’s not checking me out the way he normally does. Instead of eye-groping me with his usual melt-your-panties-like-butter stare, his expression is more curious than seductive.

I examine him, head-to-toe as well. Something just feels...different. His silky locks seem a shade or two darker than this morning. And the facial hair that was just a light dusting of scruff on his chin at the meeting earlier is a full-blown beard right now.

He’s still oh-so-very-handsome, but for some reason, I don’t feel the overpowering electric charge I’ve become used to when I’m in his presence.

What the hell?

I catch a bit of movement just over his shoulder. And suddenly *another Ronan* pushes his way into the doorway. He sweeps the giggling little girl off her feet and mercilessly bumps the Ronan Impersonator to the side.

Fire crackles in the air between us, igniting a squeezing feeling in my chest.

A glittering smile takes over Ronan’s face—*the real Ronan*—as he stares at me. “Hey...”

NICKY

“Hey...”

That one word uttered from Ronan’s lips immediately sends my heart galloping. It doesn’t make any sense.

I mentally stomp out the visceral reaction and let my eyes bounce between the two men. “Twins. Right.”

I do remember Mason mentioning something about Karli having twin brothers. And although both of these men are so good-looking, Ronan manages to do something to my body that his twin brother does not.

“Uncle Ronan, we don’t think this is the pizza guy.” The little girl eyeballs me suspiciously, clutching her one-eyed rag doll snugly to her chest.

Ronan chuckles. “Nope. It’s definitely not the pizza guy.” His gaze slowly spills over me like warm honey. “Trust me—I’ve never seen a pizza guy who looks like *that*.”

His innuendo makes me shiver. I’m not proud of it.

I self-consciously smooth down the collar of my blouse. My business suit was supposed to establish a professional distance between us. But it’s clearly not doing its job. Now, I feel like I overdressed for nothing.

“So, who is she?” the curious child asks her uncle.

“This is Nicky. She’s my new babysitter,” Ronan answers, taking his eyes off me for just long enough to give her a grin.

“Your babysitter?” the girl guffaws. “But you don’t need a babysitter. You’re a grown-up!”

“A grown-up? Is he really?” The twin brother snorts.

Ronan ignores him. “Well, apparently, I’ve been a bad, bad boy. Uncle Darius thinks I need some...supervision.” His grin only goes wider as he speaks, each word dripping with double-meaning.

“What’s a ‘supervision’?” The child asks.

I decide to jump in there before Ronan can toss out any more innuendo. “It’s a sort of punishment for not following the rules,” I say sternly, my eyes on him, reminding him that I’m not here for his fun and entertainment. This is business.

“Yeah, that’s right. A punishment,” he echoes me. At least he has the decency to try and hide his smile.

He tries. He fails, though.

Ronan’s twin rolls his eyes. “Why do I get a feeling you like this particular punishment?” He stretches a hand out and introduces himself. “Hi, I’m Nolan. The better twin. This is my daughter, Stella.”

“Nolan’s the *bitter* twin,” Ronan mutters. “He’s angry that I got the bigger—”

“Oh look,” Nolan hastily interrupts. “There’s the pizza guy!” Headlights shine over us as a delivery car drives up into the yard.

“Pizza! Yay!” Stella squeals, immediately forgetting this conversation about her uncle and his punishment. She wiggles her way out of Ronan’s arms and he sets her down on her socked feet.

The pizza guy hurriedly jogs up to the porch, depositing the boxes into Nolan’s outstretched hands before quickly running back toward his delivery car. The aroma of pepperoni, cheese and fresh-baked dough fragrances the air around us. Nolan shouts a thank you after the man and Stella is already halfway down the very long hallway, yelling that it’s dinner time.

As he turns back toward the house, Nolan jabs his twin in the ribs. “You’re an inappropriate asshole, you know that?” His eyes shift to me. “You have your work cut out for you, being stuck with this guy.”

I can’t help but chuckle. “I have a feeling I’ll be jabbing Ronan in the ribs too, over the next few months.”

“Oh, you will. A lot...Nice meeting you, Nicky.” He turns on his heel and heads deeper into the house.

“Nice meeting you, too,” I call after him.

Then I’m left standing here, face-to-face with his mischievous twin. Ronan’s hair is wet, one silky brown lock flopping over his strong brow. He smells so fresh and so clean and so manly.

My heart is galloping again as silence stretches between us. A delicious smile unfolds across his lips and my knees falter the slightest bit. Momentarily, I wonder what it would be like to trace my tongue along the seam of those lips.

As hungry as I am, if I had to choose between those lips and the pizza, I'd choose—

Stop it, Nicky. Keep it professional. Besides, didn't you just swear off men?

I smooth down my blouse again. "I didn't realize you had a twin brother." I say, quickly glancing to where Nolan is disappearing around a corner inside the house.

Ronan's fingers brush over mine as he's taking my bags out of my hand. Awareness ignites at the contact and my eyes shoot to his.

He's watching me intently with a playful glint on his face. "I do have a twin brother. But don't pay him any mind. I'm superior on every level." He winks.

"I bet." Sarcasm drips from my words.

Ronan chuckles. "Follow me."

I toe off my boots on the mat. There's already several pairs of mens shoes sitting there alongside a pair of tiny pink butterfly boots. A catchy children's song blares from somewhere at the end of the hallway.

Ronan strolls ahead of me across the buffed concrete floors and I peek at the modern furniture and the abstract art on the walls. It's giving 'I definitely hired an overpriced interior designer to get this shit together' energy. I love that for him.

Finally, we turn into a huge kitchen with high ceilings and stainless steel appliances. Nolan and Stella are sitting at the massive stone island, eating pizza with two other men as a cartoon plays on the wall-mounted TV.

Some wild and crazy party, this is.

Gotta admit—I feel silly. I'd been expecting to be walking in on a drunken rager that I'd have to break apart. Instead, this is the most wholesome kind of gathering imaginable. Complete with kiddie juice boxes and the hottest *Cocomelon* tunes pumping through the speakers.

The men turn and look at me. They don't have to say a word. I immediately know these guys are two more Brighton brothers. The family resemblance is *that* obvious.

Ronan sets my bags on the floor, shooting threatening glares between his

brothers. “This is Nicky.” He lowers his voice. “Say something stupid and I’m cutting you all out of my will.”

The one with the happy green eyes and the reddish hues in his brown hair stands from the counter. He introduces himself. “Hey, I’m Felix.” He extends a hand.

His name rings a bell. “You’re the doctor, right? You hired Mason to work at the medical clinic?”

He nods proudly. “That’s me.”

My eyebrows rise in unison. “My Grammy still hasn’t forgiven you for luring her favorite grandson away from Honey Hill with that job offer.”

He flinches. “Yeah, I know. I sort of figured I was on her shit list. She didn’t give me any cookies when I met her at the housewarming party.”

I laugh. “That sounds exactly like Grammy.”

“This is Archer.” Felix claps a palm on the flannel-covered shoulder of his other brother.

“Hi.” Archer wipes his fingers on a paper napkin, gives my hand a quick squeeze and then returns right back to his pizza.

“We don’t disturb Archer while he’s eating,” Felix tells me in a whisper. “He’s a hangry bear.”

Stella giggles melodically but Archer isn’t amused. He crumples up a napkin and tosses it in the little girl’s direction. That only makes her giggle some more.

I like the Brightons already. The dynamic between them puts me right at home. As a girl who grew up in a big family, the back and forth ribbing is so familiar to me.

Throughout the interaction, I feel Ronan’s eyes on me. I glance in his direction and when I catch him staring, he gives me a smile that’s almost boyish. Is he blushing?

I don’t understand him. One minute, he’s trying to peel my clothes off of me with his eyeballs. The next minute, he’s acting shy and his cheeks are going splotchy and pink. This man is strange.

Nolan steals my attention. “Are you eating with us?” He flips open a pizza box, enticing me with the steaming, yummy-smelling pie.

But Ronan hurriedly interjects. “We’re gonna take this to go.” He quickly grabs one of the three pizza boxes.

Nolan laughs, watching me. “He’s trying to keep you from us. He knows it won’t take long for us to break out the family photo albums.”

“Photo albums?” I laugh. “I’m intrigued. You got something to hide, mister?” I nudge Ronan’s elbow with mine.

Well, that wasn’t professional, Nicky. And how did we end up standing so close? I quickly straighten up and take a step away from him.

Ronan scoffs. “I have nothing at all to hide,” he says, all defensive. Then he drops his voice. “Only the Justin Timberlake-inspired frosted tips hairstyle of Summer 2014.”

Nolan shakes his head. “Still can’t believe Mom let you do that to yourself.”

Felix shrugs. “Every man needs to try the frosted tips at least once in his life.”

“Agreed.” Archer grunts, dropping his head ruefully, like he’s reliving painful hairstyle decisions of his own. That makes me snort with laughter.

“Fine. I rocked some frosted tips. Doesn’t mean I want to let the pretty girl see the photographic evidence a decade later, though.” Ronan is full-on beaming at me now.

Fuck, that smile is pretty. And he called me pretty. My core throbs so hard it almost throws me off-balance.

Grinning with amusement, Ronan hands the pizza box to me. “Let’s go get you settled in, shall we?” He takes my briefcase and my overnight bag from the floor, heading for the exit.

I wave goodbye to the rest of the family, wishing them a good night. But as I’m about to step into the hallway, Felix jogs after us.

He stretches a floral business card my way. “Can’t let you leave without promoting my fiancée’s vintage clothing shop. Wisteria and Grace. Be sure to drop by when you’re in town. It’s right above the medical clinic. Tell Daphne I sent you.”

The proud smile on his face makes my heart melt. *Aww. So sweet.* The way he’s eager to brag about his lady. The way he’s supporting her when she’s not even in the room. A guy shouldn’t want to keep his woman a secret. He should be ready to shout her name from the rooftops.

I feel a pang of jealousy in my chest. Some girls have it so good.

Will it ever be my turn to be loved like that?

“I’ll definitely check it out,” I promise Felix. Then I give another wave and follow after Ronan.

“Good luck, babysitter,” he calls out as I go.

“Thanks,” I mumble. My spidey senses are telling me I’m going to need

all the luck I can get.

Especially when I see Ronan waiting patiently at the door, big and broad and intently focused on me as I approach. He's looking like my very own bodyguard. Good lord.

His steadying hand darts out, settling on the small of my back when I wobble as I'm stepping into my boots. My thighs squeeze together again.

And is there an 'off' switch for this thing? Somebody needs to invent an 'off' switch for this thing. Because my body is acting downright inappropriate now.

Ronan's not safe, Nicky. Ronan is heartbreak waiting to happen. And on top of that, he's my assignment. My trouble-causing, disorderly assignment.

He holds the door open, allowing me to step out first. Then I follow him around the side of the house, the pizza box clutched in my clammy hands.

Ronan moves unhurriedly, in no rush, as I navigate my way down the icy path. My gaze sweeps around as we walk. This property is huge.

We pass by an outdoor pool. It's all covered up, now that we're in the dead of winter. I also notice a standalone sauna right next door to the pool house.

And is that a freaking skating rink? No way. It's massive like at a hockey arena, and it's lit up by bright stadium lights.

In the distance, all I see is the faint outline of the mountains under the starlit sky. It's breathtaking out here.

Is this place even for freaking real?

Sure, Ronan is a professional athlete, but so is my brother Harry. And while their home is spacious and gorgeous, there sure as hell are no football fields hidden around Harry and Nadia's property.

Further down the brightly-lit pathway, I catch sight of an adorable little house. It's a log-style cabin that looks like something from out of a story book.

I'm so fixated on our surroundings that I forget to pay attention to where I'm putting my feet. Suddenly, my boot slides on a patch of ice and I yip.

But before I can go down in a pile of tangled limbs, Ronan's strong arm hooks around my back, his long fingers firmly grasping my hip. There he goes, displaying those superhero reflexes again.

I suck in a sharp gasp, mostly because of the fiery explosion in the spot where his hand is gripping me.

Now his face is so close to mine, his hypnotic eyes holding my gaze.

“You all good?” he asks, his voice a low rumble.

I squint against the darkness to sift through the flecks of blue and gray in his frost-colored gaze. After a moment, I snap back to myself, putting distance between us again. “Yeah. I’m good. Thanks.”

As he steps backward, Ronan looks a little hypnotized, too. “No problem.”

What on Earth is this man doing to me?

I awkwardly clear my throat and force a smile. “And we managed to save the pizza too.”

He smiles back. “Yeah, we saved the pizza. That’s important.”

Ronan keeps his hand at the small of my back as we walk the rest of the way to the cabin. I try to convince myself that I need his support to make sure I don’t land on my ass in the snow. But the truth is, his touch feels...nice. And it’s been a little too long since a man put his hands on me.

I take my time climbing the three short stairs and Ronan jogs ahead, stepping up to the threshold and holding the front door open for me.

We step into the small building and I can see the whole house right there from the front door.

It’s a loft-style cabin with massive windows everywhere. There are hardly any walls. From where we’re standing in the living room, I can see the kitchenette, the living room space and even the bed tucked into the loft upstairs. I spin around and, through the windows, I have a view of the entire yard, the mountains, the dark sky. All of it.

“My god—it’s clean in here.” I sniff at the air. “And it smells good, too. Potpourri?”

He nods proudly, pointing to the cozy corner where a small side table is set up next to an armchair. “There’s some scented candles, too.”

“Oh my god. Reading nook, unlocked!” My paperback is burning a hole in my briefcase now.

Ronan proceeds to give me a tour of the small space. I trail him around, trying to keep my jaw off the floor as he points out the house’s special features. Every door he opens, he politely steps aside and ushers me through first.

Wow—the chivalry is unexpected from this tattooed bad boy hockey player.

It catches me off-guard the first couple times, but then I start to accept it.

I take my time, making sure I understand how to turn the fancy faucets on

and off, and that I've figured out how the lights work.

He's so patient and accommodating the entire time. It almost has me lowering my guard. But then I remember, this is the guy who is thinking god-knows-what about me because he read my dirty text messages.

Right. *Don't lose your grip on reality, Nicky.*

When we're back in the kitchen area, Ronan leans a hip against the granite island and grabs a slice of pizza. He gives me the rest of the rundown. "The thermostat is on the wall next to the bathroom. Set it at whatever makes you comfortable. Everything in the fridge and in the pantry over there has been freshly stocked for you. Towels are in the cabinet next to the bathroom sink. I'll bring in logs for the fireplace but whenever you need a fire, let me know and I'll build you one. The motorized blinds open and close with just a flip of that switch." He scrunches his mouth to the side, thinking. "If there's anything missing, just make me a list."

My head swivels, taking it all in. "Okay, got it. Thank you."

"Let me know if you need extra blankets or something."

I nod. "Yeah. Thanks so much."

"And if you need any of your stuff transported out here, I can arrange that, too."

"All right. Thanks again."

Okay, the prolonged eye contact is starting to get awkward. And by awkward, I mean *'hawt'*.

I glance around at my surroundings. This is far from the hostile work environment I was expecting. I'm relieved. To be honest, this is *really* nice.

Quietness settles in the room and my body is so damn aware of his. It's insane.

Desperate to ease the weirdness, I let my gaze find the nearest window, admiring the view of the forest. This is a whole lot of nature for a Chicago girl. I'm a long way from the big city. But maybe Alana is right. This peaceful, middle-of-nowhere house in the woods might be just what I need as I embark on this new era of life.

"I should probably let you unpack," Ronan says finally.

My head bobs. "Yeah. Sounds like a good idea."

He grabs another slice, takes a step toward the door, and then pauses. "I know we had a weird first encounter, but I want you to know that I'm actually a nice guy, Nicky. And I'm definitely not the total asshole they say I am in the press."

“Okay. Sure,” I mumble.

He chuckles sadly. “Jeez. Will you at least give me a chance?”

My heart jumps, not quite sure how to interpret that. Is he asking for a chance to prove he won’t be a nightmare to work with? Or a chance at something...else?

I give a little shrug, not really understanding why he seems so invested in all of this. “I’m not being paid to have an opinion of you, Ronan, so you don’t worry about that. As long as we keep things professional—and we keep you out of the news—everything should go smoothly until the end of the season.”

Ronan doesn’t speak. He just stands there, searching every corner of my face in a way that makes me tingle. All the way to my toes.

“Right...” he answers eventually. “Well, goodnight then.”

“Goodnight.”

Taking his pizza slice, he heads for the door. But there’s another tiny something weighing on my mind. Right before he steps outside, I call after him again. “Ronan?”

He pauses, peeking at me over his shoulder. “Yeah?”

I clear my throat, steeling myself for what I’m about to say. “One last thing.”

He nods, listening intently.

“Those text messages you saw on my phone? We don’t talk about them. We don’t think about them. We act like they don’t exist.”

His nostrils twitch. It’s almost as if he’s fighting against a smile. “Okay...” he says finally.

It’s not convincing at all.

“I’m serious,” I insist. “I don’t want that to blur the lines of our professional relationship.” I chew on my lip, my voice coming out quieter. “And aside from that...it’s a little embarrassing that you saw them.”

Without missing a beat, he blinks impishly. “Saw what? What text messages? I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Now, I’m the one fighting a smile. “You can’t be serious for one second, can you?”

He drops his head and wags it left to right, like he’s shaking the thought out of his brain. “Fine. We won’t talk about the text messages.”

“Thank you,” I whisper.

He lingers in the entrance for a moment, watching me. “Sweet dreams,

Nicky.”

“Good night,” I say, trying to appear unaffected by the tenderness in the way he says my name.

Then Ronan is gone, shutting the guest house door behind him. As he goes, my feet instinctively pull me to one of the floor-to-ceiling windows. I stand there, watching his strong, powerful body stalking back to the main house.

As he walks away, something occurs to me. He promised he wouldn’t talk about my dirty text messages. But he never promised he wouldn’t think about them.

That realization sparks a throbbing burst of need between my thighs. Despite my best intentions, the idea of Ronan imagining me acting out those dirty deeds is kind of, um, arousing.

Stop it, Nicky.

After all, I’m done with men. Especially charming, reckless playboys I’ve been hired to babysit.

Suddenly, I feel the need to repeat my mantra.

Girl power! Boss babe!

Okay. Right.

RONAN

Sweet dreams. Oh, sweet fucking dreams.

I'm vaguely aware of my fist wrapped around my cock, loosely jerking up and down. "Yeah, yes...Fuck."

My current film reel of Nicky is even more vivid than usual as it plays out in my head. Am I really surprised, though?

The subject of my fantasies is now living just on the other side of my property. Close, but still not as close as I want her to be.

Yesterday, as I gave her the tour of the guesthouse, the sexual tension between us was suffocatingly heavy in the air. There's no way she didn't feel what I was feeling.

But she's determined to keep things quote-unquote professional between us, as she was quick to point out last night. *Fine. Be like that.* We'll keep things professional.

Besides, it's definitely not in my best interest to make trouble with my babysitter. Darius probably already has my casket picked out for if I step out of line.

And even more than that, I need to focus on what's important. Especially if we're going to get the Saints' season back on track. I'm team captain. My teammates are depending on me.

So, no making a move on Ms. Sassy. I'll just keep doing what I've been doing—reserving my steamy Nicky fantasies for my alone time each night.

When a loud, buzzing sound fills my ears, my palm instinctively slaps around in the dark, searching for the snooze button on my alarm clock.

Just five more minutes. Five more minutes of sleep. Five more minutes of

Nicky, sweaty and naked and pressing those sweet peach lips all over me.

Nicky said I'm not allowed to talk about her text messages. I agreed to that. But no way in hell is she getting me to stop thinking about them, to be perfectly clear.

I try to hold onto the fleeting filaments of my dream. But through my fog, I hear a ding. Probably a text message. I ignore it. Well, I try.

More dinging. More text messages. "Leave me alone!" I pull a pillow over my head.

Then the loud buzzing starts again, rattling my bedside table. That's when I realize that it's not my alarm clock that's going off. It's an incoming call on my phone.

Dammit.

My hand darts out again and slips the vibrating phone off of my bedside table. Blurry eyes still half-closed, I slide my thumb over the big green button.

"What...?" I grumble, smushing the device to my cheek.

"Ronan!" A female voice grinds against my eardrum. "I've been calling you and texting you. Are you still sleeping?! No!! No, you can't still be sleeping!"

Nicky.

Panicked Nicky.

What time is it anyway? I glance at my bedside alarm clock.

Oh, shit!

"I'm not sleeping," I lie, bolting out of bed.

"We've got to be at the hockey arena in an hour and the drive is forty-five minutes. Ronan, you should have been up at least twenty minutes ago."

"I've already got one foot out the door," I say, fighting a yawn as I skid across my bedroom floor, with my duvet tangled around my legs.

I can hear a bunch of cupboard-slamming and furniture-banging through the phone. "You have one foot out the door? No, you don't," she calls me out on my lie. "But if we don't get to the arena on time, your coach will have one foot up your ass."

My chest jerks with a little chuckle. Damn. Peach is high-strung in the morning.

"Okay, fine. I lied. I'll be ready in five minutes."

She's not done cursing me out yet. "Am I really supposed to believe that?"

I hear another loud crash on her end. *What the hell is she doing over there?*

“Chill out, Peach. We’ve got enough time.”

“*Nicky*. My name is *Nicky*.” And with that, the line goes dead.

“All righty, then. See you in five,” I say to my phone.

I’m grinning to myself when I peel off my Saints Hockey pajama pants and hop into an ice-cold shower. An absolute necessity for getting this morning wood under control.

My cock is so hard. My body is begging me to rub one out. But I don’t. If I jerk off again, I might sprain my wrist. And if I sprain my wrist, I can’t play hockey. That’s the only thing keeping my hand off my dick right now.

After my shower, I quickly brush my teeth and grab the first clean clothes I can get my hands on.

The Saints are playing Detroit later on tonight. I’m not worried, though. We’ve got home ice advantage and I’m confident that we’ve got this match in the bag. Well, that’s the story I’m telling myself.

The truth is, I’m nervous. I want to win. We *need* to win. But my confidence feels a little wobbly right now.

I push all my doubts aside and make a decision—tonight, I’m stepping on that ice to win. I feel the need to prove myself to *Nicky*.

To prove that I’m good at hockey. To prove that I’m not the asshole everyone say I am. That I’m not going to screw up her new job.

It’s probably silly, but I can’t help but feel like if I’m able to convince *Nicky* that I really care about my career, then maybe everyone else will believe me, too. At least that’s what I *think* I’m thinking.

Yet at the same time, there’s a voice at the back of my head whispering that maybe the only approval I really want is hers. ‘Cause I don’t really give a shit about the public’s opinion of me. We all know that. But I guess, those two things somehow just go hand in hand.

A total of twelve minutes after jumping out of bed, I’m tugging up some sweats with one hand while zipping up my hoodie with the other hand as I jog down the stairs.

Nicky is standing on the landing, glaring up at me.

At the sight of her, I nearly trip over my own feet and fly face-first down the staircase. If I thought she was pretty in my dream, she’s even prettier in the flesh. Even with the way she’s frowning at me.

Today, she’s looking all professional again, in a heavy button-down wool

coat and a knitted scarf looped around her neck. Her mahogany hair is pulled into a sleek bun just like it was yesterday, and her honey eyes are shooting poison darts at my head.

Still pretty, though. So pretty.

“Morning.” I grin when we’re standing inches apart.

She slams a travel mug into one hand and a foil-wrapped *something* into my other hand. “We’re late.” She spins and marches for the exit.

Look at her—pleasant and peachy as ever. And ready to bite my head off. It’s cute.

A weaker man would be intimidated by the tough girl act. But I can’t lie—stern, professional Nicky makes my balls tingle.

In all seriousness, I can already tell that her career means a lot to her. Ambition is hot. Definitely a turn-on as far as I’m concerned. Ambition means passion, and I absolutely love a passionate woman.

Beneath all that, I know that Nicky’s not all sharp edges and hard angles like she pretends to be. I’ve seen a different side of her. I’ve seen her softer side despite her keen attempts to hide it.

“Slept on the wrong side of the bed?”

She bends over and tugs her leather boots up her sexy bare calves. “I slept just fine.”

With one hand, I grab my duffel bag from the front closet, my eyes on her ass in that fitted skirt the whole time. “You sure? If the mattress isn’t comfortable, just say the word. I’ll fling it to the side of the road and buy you a new one.”

Or you can bring that sweet ass right into my bed. Any night of the week.

Nicky straightens fast and catches me staring. *Oops!* Her eyeballs narrow at me. “That won’t be necessary. Thank you.”

Reaching around her for the doorknob, I courteously hold the door open for her. “After you,” I say.

Look at me. All those manners my mother taught me are sure coming in handy today.

Nicky pauses. Her chest rises and falls with an exasperated huff. “Thank you.” She marches out ahead of me and I grin, catching a whiff of her fruity shampoo.

You like me, Peach. Admit it.

We’re taking my SUV today. Normally, I’d ride into Sin Valley in my sportscar. I like to drive fast. But with Nicky as my passenger, it’s safety

first. Precious cargo right here.

My stomach tingles with anticipation as I slip behind the wheel. I'm a little nervous about this forty-five minute ride alone with her. I'm looking forward to it, though. Maybe I'll get to know her a little better.

But the minute I pull out of the driveway, Nicky sets the tone for the drive. She delves right into my itinerary for the day.

"So according to the schedule Florence got from your coach, there's a team meeting at 9:30 and then practice," she begins.

I take a sip of my coffee. "Yup."

"By what time will you be done with that?"

"Right around noon."

"And what will you do afterwards?" she asks as she types out notes on her phone.

"Workout. Shower. Quick lunch." I unwrap the foil and bite into the sandwich inside. *Mmm. Damn, this is good.*

Her head bobs as she continues to type. "And what's next?"

"I have a small apartment near the arena. I usually go there to hang out and decompress until it's time to get to the rink for my pregame routine." I glance over at her. *Maybe we could take a nap together today. That would be nice.*

Her legs look so damn good in those leather boots.

I wonder what she'd look like with those legs tangled around my head. I wonder what she'd taste like. Peaches, I bet.

Nicky rambles away and I nod along, half-listening. I'm not super thrilled about the topic of conversation. I'd rather be talking about her.

There's one question in particular that's been burning on my mind. What's the status of her relationship with that loser she was seeing when we met? I'm hoping she's not dating that knucklehead anymore. I'm hoping she's not dating anyone.

Why? I don't know. It's not like I can pursue anything with her. It's a universally-accepted rule that the babysitter is off-limits. The situation at hand is no exception.

Besides, a girl as beautiful as her probably has a whole roster of men eager to take care of her every need. I've got no way to know for sure, though. Nicky is locked up like a fortress over there. So who the heck knows what's going on with her dating life?

I'm not dumb enough to come right out and ask her about that. She'd

chew my head right off and spit out the bones. So, I'm going to need a way to bring up the topic indirectly.

"You'll have plenty of free time throughout the day," I tell her, taking another bite of the delicious breakfast sandwich she made me. "You can use that time to make phone calls if you need. Personal phone calls."

"Okay," she mumbles, not looking up from where she's still typing on her phone.

"I just mean, if there's *anyone* you need to check up on. Y'know, just to call and see how their day is going or..."

"Mmm." She nods, unaffected eyes still glued to her phone as her fingers dance across the screen.

Sucking in a breath, I try my luck. "*Anyone* like a boyfriend or..."

Nicky stops to glare at me, head tilted to the side. "Can we just focus on making sure I have all the information I need to get you through this day?"

I chuckle. "Sure thing, boss."

The fiery way she's looking at me sends a rush of tingles to my groin. I shift in my seat.

I've always had my pick of women. In fact, knowing I could have any lady I want has been a lifelong point of pride for me. But now, here I am, shutout by this gorgeous little hellcat and it's low-key driving me crazy. I want to pull over on the side of the road and tug her into my lap, hike up that slim-fitting skirt and let her feel what her sassy attitude is doing to me.

Eventually, Nicky is done going over the plans for the day. The car falls quiet for a moment. I finish eating my sandwich and ball up the foil, shamelessly licking my fingers.

"Thanks for the sandwich," I tell her. "In all honesty, it was better than any fast food breakfast I could have picked up on the way to the arena. The sauce was so good."

She doesn't look up from her phone. "My Grammy's recipe," she mumbles distractedly.

"Well, it was very kind of you. Thanks for going out of your way."

She shrugs. "Making sure you don't pass out from starvation on the ice after sleeping in too late to grab breakfast? Pretty sure that's part of my job description."

I chuckle to myself. She's not going to make any of this easy for me, is she?

But the next thing she says really catches me by surprise. "And to answer

the question that's none of your business that you're sneakily trying to ask me—no, I don't have a boyfriend. Now, you can quit asking about my personal life. I'm not talking to you about it anymore.”

She digs into her purse for her earbuds, putting an end to our conversation. After driving a few quiet miles, I hit the off-ramp and we're at a red light. I can't help but peek across the console at my silent passenger. She's scrolling through her phone. I catch sight of the real estate app where she's browsing through house listings. *Real estate? Cool.* Nicky keeps surprising me.

My eyes flick to her mouth. It's a really pretty mouth. Peach in color and perfectly shaped like a bow. Suddenly, I'm thinking about kissing.

I like kissing. Like, a lot.

And it's been a long time—like an embarrassingly long time—since I've gotten to kiss someone. I'd totally like to kiss Nicky.

She glances up and I manage to shift my eyes back to the road in time. But in my periphery, I notice the way she subtly twists her body and angles the screen of her phone away from me.

Mind my business. Stop staring. Point taken.

I mentally shake myself, forcing my mind elsewhere. Needing a healthy distraction, I plug in my auxiliary, turn my music on low and start nodding my head.

Yup. This woman is a fortress.

And I'm permanently locked outside the metal gates.

NICKY

Beaming with excitement, Karli grabs my arm and pulls me down the stairs to the arena's rink side seating area. It's mere moments before the Saints are due to skate onto the ice.

"Welcome to the Brighton front row cheering section," Nolan greets me with a warm grin.

Sure enough, several members of Ronan's family are here, all decked out in Saints merchandise bearing the number 17.

It makes me smile. After having a rough few games, Ronan will need all the support he can get tonight.

Stella has her uncle's jersey number painted on her rosy cheeks. She's bouncing around, holding up a huge poster board that says, *My dad is the handsome twin. But Uncle Ronan's pretty good at hockey.*

I stop in the aisle to admire it. "Well, that's a cute sign!" I say to the little girl with a laugh.

She grins at me. "My Daddy said he'll give me five dollars if I hold it up so Uncle Ronan can see it."

I laugh even harder. "Oh, I'm sure your Uncle Ronan is going to love it."

I'm starting to get the sense that there's an ongoing twin rivalry between those two.

"Do you like hockey?" Stella asks me.

"I'm not quite sure yet," I say honestly. "Actually, this is my first live hockey game ever and I don't know what to expect."

The little girl taps my hand patronizingly. "Don't worry—I'll explain the rules to you."

I can't hide my grin. "Well, thank you."

I may be here for work, but I think that having some familiar faces to explain what's going down on the ice will make this evening super fun.

"I'm so excited that I get to hang out with you guys!" I tell the family.

Karli elbows her way between her brothers, still tugging me along on the way to our seats. "Bring on the feminine energy," she says. "Me and Stella didn't want to get stuck with these hulking losers tonight." She grins teasingly at her brothers over her shoulder.

Archer grumbles after his sister. "Keep running your mouth as always, sis. I'm telling you now, I'm not sharing my popcorn with you. You'd better go grab your own while there's still time."

"Yeah, sure." She smirks. Then she whispers to me. "He *always* shares his popcorn."

"Good to know," I respond with a nod.

I like Karli. It's a miracle we both survived growing up in a home with so much testosterone. When I'm done babysitting her brother, I should try to hang out with her more.

In any case, it's been a long day and I'm relieved that I finally get to relax. From the time we arrived in Sin Valley this morning, I spent my every moment waiting and hanging on the sidelines while Ronan went around, doing hockey player things in preparation for tonight's game. Team meeting. Practice. Workout. Good thing I had Emma's latest five-star romance novel in my briefcase to keep me busy during my ample down time.

Even though I didn't have any major 'official' tasks during the day, it was still draining. I had to keep my guard up the whole time. Vigilantly sticking close enough to Ronan to make sure he wouldn't get himself into any trouble, while also guarding a safe enough distance to make sure things stay professional between us. It's a delicate balance to maintain and I'm learning that it requires a surprising amount of mental energy.

That man wants to get into my pants—as evidenced by those steamy looks he keeps sending me. He's hot as fuck. If I don't constantly stay on guard, I might just slip and land on his dick. *Oops!*

When we were alone in his small apartment in the quiet moments before his game, I was so on edge, I could hardly breathe. While he shuffled around the space, going through his routine, I just sat on the sofa and pretended to be super busy, working on my phone.

The reality is, I was trading book recommendations with Emma and

house listings with Nadia and cat memes with Meghan and baby names with Alana. Yup. Busy, busy, busy.

I kept up the busy act until he disappeared to take his pre-game nap.

Once we got to the arena, we finally parted ways and I could finally relax a little. I still had a bit of time on my hands before the game. So I explored the stadium for a while, hit the bathroom and then purchased something to drink. When Karli texted to ask if I was around, I was more than excited to see a familiar face. Now that Ronan is about to take the ice, I feel like I can take a breath for the first time all day.

The place isn't jam-packed. I guess the Saints are still in the process of building a loyal fanbase. But the fans who are here tonight are absolutely buzzing, dressed in Saints merch with their homemade signs at the ready. It's clear that this crowd believes in the home team.

I'm hopeful, optimistic, fingers and toes crossed, that the Saints will secure a much-needed win tonight.

Karli peeks down at her phone. "I usually drag my friends, Layla and Daphne, along to the games with me. But they couldn't make it tonight," she's saying as she settles into the seat beside me.

"Can't wait to meet them," I say. "Where's Mason?" I glance around the arena for my cousin.

"He'll be here soon," Karli tells me, tugging a Saints beanie over her long black hair. "He and Felix are working late at the clinic this evening."

My eyes flit to the rink at the exact moment that Ronan skates out. The moment he hits the ice, he steals the scene. There's just something magnetic about him, something that draws the attention of the crowd. The fans in the arena start chanting his last name.

"BRIGHTON! BRIGHTON! BRIGHTON!"

A switch seems to flip on inside of him. Head high. Shoulders back. He feeds off of the energy. His confidence shines through. It becomes clear that, despite the problems with his reputation, people love him.

He skates by the plexiglass, lifting his stick over his head to acknowledge his family. Stella jumps around, enthusiastically yelling his name. He chuckles when he reads her homemade sign.

But when his eyes land on mine, our gazes hold for a moment that seems to draw on. And I can't bring myself to let go.

Ugh. Why does he have to be so captivating? Especially when he grins at me like that.

Karli nudges my arm, pulling my attention away from Ronan. “Did Mason tell you? We’ve set a wedding date.”

“You have?!” I feel my eyes widen as I light up with excitement.

She mentions a date that’s only a few months away. I immediately pull out my phone to slot it into my personal calendar as well as Ronan’s.

“That soon?” I ask. “Are you sure you’ll have enough time to plan it all?”

Her shoulder lifts in a shrug. “I know it’s all short notice. But Mason and I agree that we don’t need anything big and fancy. We just want to start the rest of our lives together.”

I squeeze my cousin’s fiancée into a quick hug. “A Westbrook-Brighton wedding! You know it’s going to be *epic*, right?!”

Right then, a grinning Mason slides into the seat next to Karli. He sets the hugest bucket of popcorn into her lap. “We’re counting on it.” He kisses the top of her head and she leans into him, looking absolutely smitten.

The buzzing energy in the arena grows as the players warm up on the ice. Between the rowdy crowd, the excited announcers, the blaring sirens, and flashing strobe lights, the whole atmosphere is electric.

Wow. This is nothing like watching old game clips on the Sports Broadcast Network’s website.

From the drop of the puck, my eyes are glued to Ronan. I barely even notice the other players as I watch the captain flying across the ice.

Ronan Brighton is *good*.

He skates around the ice like he’s flying. He looks graceful enough to be an olympic figure skater. But at the same time, he comes across too dangerous. Edgy. Intense. The hockey stick is like his weapon, an extension of his body as he slices it through the air, with such precision that he barely shaves it across the surface of the ice when he shoots and scores the first goal of the game.

“Ronan plays one of the forward positions for the Saints,” Karli explains to me, beaming with pride as the crowd roars with cheers. “He’s downright essential to his team’s offense.”

“He’s the center,” Stella interjects from where she’s tucked herself between her aunt and me.

“That’s right,” Karli says proudly. “And what does that mean?” she asks the little girl.

“It means that it’s his job to score goals or to assist by passing the puck to a teammate so they can score.”

“I’m impressed, Stella!” I say as Karli gives her beaming niece a high five.

I’m still playing catch up on my hockey knowledge. I’ve never been a puck bunny by any means. I’ve never even been interested in the sport. So working with Ronan, I’m learning on the fly.

The only thing going in my favor right now is that I have four brothers, so picking up on sports lingo is somehow part of my DNA. I’m hoping to learn this quickly.

I was up half the night Googling his stats. Yes, I Googled him. Only because it’s practically in my job description to know what’s being said about Ronan Brighton online. And judging by the stats I read about his game, he is good at hockey. Damn good.

Karli turns to me, her expression grave. “Ronan could be one of the greats, if he manages to keep himself out of trouble for more than two minutes. I know he can be a huge pain in the bum but what you’re doing—keeping him out of trouble—is so important, Nicky.”

“I’m doing my best,” I say with a sigh.

In the second period, Ronan regains control of the puck. When he comes speeding by the clear divider in front of us, I actually gasp out loud. Wow—that’s talent.

I’m a girl who’s not impressed all that easily. But this man is impressive to watch first hand.

Players from the other team are coming at him from all angles. Somehow, he manages to slip from their reach and maintain possession of the puck. But before he can take the shot, he gets slammed into the boards. Hard.

I freeze, gasping out loud at the brutality of the hit.

Anger roars through the crowd, Sin Valley fans furious over the dirty play. Karli bolts out of her seat, slapping at the plexiglass with her palms and yelling at the referees. Her brothers are yelling right alongside her.

And as for Ronan? He throws his stick down and launches at the defender.

Oh boy...

Both hockey players go down, fighting. I’m on my feet, yelling right along with the crowd as bodies roll and arms fly on the ice.

Can’t lie. I’m surprised by my reaction.

Hockey is an aggressive sport. I get *that* part. But it’s different watching it in person. It’s electrifying. At least that’s the way it feels here in the stands

as I'm rattling the glass divider and hollering and yelling with the rest of the crowd.

I'm sure that my unexpected overreaction to this fight has absolutely nothing to do with the fact that it's Ronan who's swinging fists after getting bodychecked into the plexiglass. He quickly gets the upper hand, though. Pinning his opponent to the ice and raining down fists.

The referees are blowing their whistles and teammates are rushing in to pull the brawling players apart. When all is said and done, both players get sent to their respective penalty boxes.

Somehow, the game loses its appeal now that Ronan is on the sidelines. Instead of tuning into the match, I find my eyes lingering on him as he sits out his punishment.

I feel someone's shoulder bump into mine. I turn and find Karli looking at me. "The game is on the ice, not in the penalty box," she mumbles, a smile pulling up the corner of her mouth.

Busted.

"What?" I blink innocently at her.

She smirks knowingly, shifting her eyes back to the game. "Nothing. Never mind."

While Ronan is still inside the penalty box, the other team scores a goal. My eyes flick immediately to where he's at. He's pissed. Understandably so.

I see him slamming his helmet against the bench. He yanks off his gloves and flings them over his back. Then he hangs his head in shame.

His reaction is not great. His glove almost thwacks a fan in the face, and there's no way that won't be on the news tonight.

Oh, dammit, Ronan...

Anyway, things go downhill for the Saints from there. The team loses the match, 4-2.

The interviews after the game follow the same trajectory straight to hell. During the press conference, Ronan definitely doesn't put his media training into practice. He answers every question with some rude remark, and the sports journalists are not impressed. I watch the shitshow from the side of the room. At least he doesn't say anything about not wanting to be here, but his body language screams it loud and clear anyway.

And lucky me. I get to ride all the way back home with this grumpy man.

NICKY

As expected, Ronan's terrible mood continues in the car. He's super sulky during the whole drive back to Starlight Falls. I spend my time quietly scrolling through my phone and reading what the blogs are saying about tonight's game. It's not good.

After half the trip has gone by with him huffing and puffing and sighing, I decide that I've had enough.

I break the heavy silence in the car. "Look, I can totally understand your frustrations about losing the game. But in public, you have to get your emotions together."

He scoffs, throwing me a glance. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"I mean that you wear your emotions on your sleeve. If you're pissed, everyone knows it. If you're out for revenge, everyone knows it."

"Whatever," he mutters, shaking his head and leaving me out in the cold.

Whoa, grump face. I'm just doing my job. He's not being receptive to this conversation at all.

I try again, using empathy as an entryway this time. "I get it—they say it's good to let out your emotions now and then. But like it or not, you're a public figure. Flying off the handle like that all the time will be your downfall."

Ronan's eyes slice my way before glaring back out the windshield. "Well, you seem to be an expert at hiding your emotions," he bites angrily. "So tell me, how's that been working out for you, Nicky?"

My neck jerks back at the blow. "What?" And since when is this conversation about me?

“You heard me.” He doesn’t back down. “I mean—who are you to give me advice on how to deal with my emotions? Especially when your own strategy for handling the way you feel consists of burying it all under your tough girl persona?”

Well now I’m ready to drop my gloves, too! “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about but it sure as hell sounds like you’re about to cross the line. And if I were you—”

“That guy at Christmas,” he cuts me off, fearlessly plowing over my professional boundary. “I saw that guy be a tool to you. But you didn’t bat an eye. You just went on acting like it didn’t bother you. Trying to act all tough and keep it inside.”

His cutting remark slams into my chest.

And now I’m the one losing my cool. “None of that is your business,” I yell at him. “It has nothing to do with your PR nightmare. I’m not the one on every sports channel, getting blasted for being a jackass—again! I’m not the one whose career is on the road to hell! I’m not the one about to selfishly drag down an entire hockey franchise along with me!” My arms flail wildly as I speak.

Ronan barks out. “Everybody thinks I’m not invested in what happens to my career. But I am. I do give a shit. Because this may be a job to you, and it may be a fat paycheck to the team owners. But this right here? This is my *actual* life. So yes, Nicky, I do fucking care about myself and about my team and about the future of this team. I wish I could make everyone see that.”

“You’re invested? Then start acting like it,” I spit out, my blood hot with anger. “And let’s make one thing clear—I will *not* talk about my personal life with you. In fact, as of right now, I’m not talking about anything at all with you. I’m officially off the clock.”

I’m done.

I press my lips together, not trusting myself to say anything more. Because if I open my mouth, there’s no telling what I’ll say in this state of mind.

Emotions are running high. I don’t want to keep pushing this conversation, only to have one of us say something that we’ll end up regretting.

Ronan’s jaw works and I half-expect him to keep arguing. But thankfully, he stays quiet. Crossing my arms, I shift so that I’m looking out the passenger window. I’m so mad, I can’t even look at that frustrating man right now.

We drive back in silence, and I'm more than okay with that.

When we pull into the driveway, I can't get out of his car fast enough. Bag strap slung over my shoulder, I fling open the door and jump out, without even glancing at him.

"Hey, wait up!" he calls out after me. "Nicky, wait! The walkway to the guesthouse is dark at this time of night. And it's probably slippery too."

I ignore him. It's been a long day, and I just want to get inside and go to bed. The last thing I need is to finish our argument out here in the cold, just because he wants the last word. No thank you.

I hear his heavy footsteps as he jogs after me.

Great.

I spin around to face him, so I can tell him to back the heck off. "Why won't you just—?!"

Before I can finish my sentence, I step on a patch of ice and slip.

My arms pinwheel. My feet slide.

I'm mentally preparing myself for the moment when my ass meets the cold, hard pavement.

But somehow, Ronan manages to catch me. Like lightning, his arms shoot out, sweeping me up against his chest. Next thing I know, my body is draped all over his. My feet are dangling above the ground and he's cradled me against his strong, warm torso. He's carrying me like Superman carries Lois Lane.

"Put me down," I protest, wiggling against his hold.

He ignores my demand. In fact, his arms tighten around me.

"Ronan, let go of me."

He doesn't. He just starts marching toward the guesthouse and I'm nothing but a prisoner in his muscled arms.

I continue to fight him but it's half-hearted, at best. We're in such an intimate position and Ronan's proximity distracts me. I can smell the soap he used in his post-game shower. I can see the faint dusting of freckles on the bridge of his strong nose. I can feel the blazing inferno emanating from his body. I just want to melt into the heat of him.

I inadvertently fling an arm around his neck and he carries me down the path, bridal style, like I weigh nothing at all.

Once we're safely on the porch, he sets me down on my feet at the front door. I quickly straighten, trying to regain my composure. My bag slips from my shoulder hitting the floorboards with a dull thump. Face hot, jaw ticking,

I angrily swipe my palms down the front of my wrinkled skirt, smoothing out the fabric.

He steps closer, a concerned look on his face. “Look, Nicky. I’m sorry for being an ass to you back in the car.” He speaks in a low rasp, gently touching my hand. “I was...I was wrong. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings.”

I’m glowering as I stand here, watching him.

He takes one more step, effectively crowding me against the door. “Peach...?”

The broken tone in his voice makes my knees falter. Is the mere sound of his voice supposed to make me feel this weak? *Backbone up, Nicky.*

If he thinks I’ll just buckle, he’s wrong. I’m good and pissed and I’m about to tell him all about it.

“You are the most infuriating man I know.” My palms shove at his chest, trying to put space between us.

I fail. His massive body doesn’t even budge.

“You don’t get to have an opinion about my personal life.” I push at him again. “You don’t know a thing about me. You have no fucking right sticking your nose in my business like that.” I carry on and on and on.

On my next attempt to push him, his fingers circle my wrists. He effortlessly yanks me right up against his warm, solid body.

“You are absolutely right,” he concedes, his lips tenderly brushing over my knuckles where they’re trapped between us. That takes me off-guard.

“Where do you get off acting like you know me?” I croak as I feel his hand fall to my waist.

“I apologize for that,” he says softly, his mouth grazing over my cheek in a soft kiss. Further weakening me.

What the fuck? What is he doing?

“I’m trying to establish a professional boundary between us,” I declare, even as my fingers slide up the tight, muscled planes of his torso, caressing him. I feel his muscles jump beneath my touch.

“Yeah, I should respect your boundaries,” he whispers, right before he presses another soft kiss to my jaw.

I can actually feel myself falling for his apology. That only makes me angrier with myself.

“And you’re doing everything in your power to blur the line.” My head falls back against the door, giving him better access.

His arm tightens around my waist as his face dips into the curve of my

neck.

“And everything you do just pisses me off,” I say breathlessly.

I feel his teeth draw a path along my throat. “I’m just a bad, bad boy. Yeah, I get it.”

“Ronan...” I whimper drunkenly, my head spinning.

He slips a knee between my legs and on instinct, my fingers clench in the front of his sweatshirt. At this point, I can’t tell if I’m pushing him away or pulling him closer.

All I know is he keeps kissing my face, causing maddening tingles to erupt every place his lips touch. I want his mouth on my mouth. And I’m well aware that I shouldn’t.

Ronan’s hips pin me to the door. He grinds against me, giving me a feel of the thick rod in his pants. My jaw falls open. Instantly, my thoughts are all jumbled up.

“Are you done running your mouth yet?” His rumbling voice travels down my spine, tickling my most sensitive parts.

I gulp around the rock in my windpipe. “Uh-huh...”

He pulls back, just enough to look at me in the dim light. A self-satisfied smirk comes to his lips. He knows there’s a battle raging on inside me. And he knows he’s winning.

That smirk of his pisses me off. I don’t wanna see it.

That’s why I pop up onto my tiptoes, yank him down to my level and kiss that smirk right off his face.

The growl that leaves his mouth travels straight to my nipples before diving into the space between my thighs. His lips slide over mine, pressing firmly before his tongue laps gently at the seam of my mouth.

I don’t hesitate to let him in. In fact, I throw my arms around his neck and let my tongue dance with his.

I block out all the reasons why this kiss is a very, very bad idea.

Instead, I slide my fingers into his hair and his toque falls away. I’m clutching two fistfuls of the silky strands and getting hopelessly lost in this moment.

Ronan lets his hands explore. He grabs at my ass and my thighs and my waist before snaking his hand beneath the hem of my coat. My skirt gets all bundled up around my waist as I work myself against the steel in his pants. The hard ridge of his zipper rubs against my aching clit. Sparks explode in my belly and the bud of nerves between my legs sings at the friction as we

rub all over each other.

Wait. What the hell am I doing?

The guttural echo of his groan reverberates through my body, making my thighs tremble and my nipples ache. But when I feel his fingers skim up under my skirt and trace the lacy edge of my underwear, my good sense comes barreling back, all at once. That's when I can no longer push out the voice in my head. The voice that's yelling at me that we plowed right over the line.

Shit.

Eyes pressed closed against the glaring obviousness of this mistake, I hurriedly steal my lips away from his.

We stand here, tangled in each other's arms, his forehead leaned on mine.

His chest heaves with each rapid breath. "Fuck, Nicky..." His words form tiny puffs of air in the space between us. "That was—"

"A mistake..." I whisper before he can find whatever word he's looking for. "We made a mistake."

He blinks. His arms drop from around my body. "Right. A mistake."

I momentarily search for something to say. Something to fix this. But my head is a complete mess right now.

So, I grab my bag off the floor, turn on my heel and rush inside the house, letting the door shut behind me with a heavy slam.

What the hell was that?! Since when do I behave like a crazy person? Nothing makes sense in my brain right now.

This man is driving me absolutely nuts. He's an expert at getting on my nerves. As fired up as I am, I need to keep distance between us.

Because if I don't, I might accidentally lose my mind. And drag him right upstairs into my bed.

4 :44 a.m.

I roll to my side.

Then I flip to my back.

I stretch my limbs.

I groan.

By now, my bare legs are all tangled up in the sheets, and no matter what I do, I'm still no closer to falling back asleep.

On the days when I'm having a fantastic dream I don't want to wake up from, the hours fly by, and I'm forced to drag myself out of bed before I'm ready.

But today, I'm wide awake hours before my alarm is due to go off. And time is creeping on unbelievably slow.

I glance at the clock again and—*seriously? How is it still 4:44?*

I'm fidgety as hell. My body is exhausted. But my mind keeps spinning. And every time I close my eyes, I feel the weight of Nicky's lips, I hear her little whimpers in my head, I feel the bite of her fingernails sinking into my skin as she clung to me.

Fuck.

That was the hottest kiss of my life. And we weren't even naked.

From the moment I first saw her, I knew that kissing her would be explosive. And it was. It was everything. It was more than everything.

But when my mind rewinds further back in the evening, all the sweet memories turn sour.

All I see is the embarrassment on Nicky's face in the car. I feel the rage

bouncing off of her as my mouth blabbered on, saying things I had no right saying to her. Dammit.

Yes, I was pissed that the Saints lost yet another game last night, and that I disappointed everyone all over again.

Yes, I was annoyed that Nicky kept being closed-off and refusing to have a damn conversation with me like a normal person.

But that doesn't excuse the fact that I went about everything all wrong.

I was a dick to her last night when I brought up her ex-boyfriend. I shouldn't have done that. After all, I know she's just trying to help. Nicky's just doing her job, trying to make me better.

And I do want to do better. I want to *be* better. I don't want to leave a hockey legacy that's a laughing stock of the Sports Broadcast Network. But in the moment, it was just so fucking hard.

I'm no fool. I know that our hot-as-fuck kiss didn't fix things. It made everything a hundred times worse. And now, Nicky *really* won't want anything to do with me.

That's why I can't sleep. I'm too damn wired.

I stare at the clock, the glowing numbers mocking me. I even start counting out the seconds, because I'm convinced my clock is not running right. Time has never moved this slow.

Don't I have better things to obsess about anyway? Namely, my hockey career. It's safe to say that things aren't going too great for our season. Losing more than we win is not exactly a good look for a new team. It's definitely not helping me or The Saints become one of the greats. Sports analysts are already starting to write us off for the year. I even heard them calling us *hosers* after last night's loss in overtime.

Yet, all I can think about is some girl with killer tits, honey brown eyes and a sassy mouth. I'm an idiot.

When it finally hits five a.m., I give up on sleep. Even though it's still dark out, now is a respectable time of day to wake up. At least that's what those overhyped podcast bros on YouTube are always saying.

I whip off my tangled sheets and slide out of bed. I head into the bathroom and peel off my favorite pajama pants with the Saints logos all over them.

After taking my shower, I still feel like shit. Even after coffee, my mood doesn't improve. I figure there's just one thing that will make me feel better. Hockey.

I throw on some sweats and a fur-lined hoodie. I take the path around the back of the house, heading toward my private rink. It was the first thing I had built when I bought this property. I had to live in a trailer for a couple long weeks since I ordered the construction crew to prioritize the rink over the renovations on the house. But it was worth it. On days when I feel like shit, skating around and shooting pucks really helps to clear my head.

Yeah. Practice is important. I won't be the useless guy on the ice who's just skating around, hoping to get lucky and put garbage in the net. I want to be the best. The most skilled. I want to stand out.

Not just blend in with every other asshole who jumps on the ice with a stick in his hand. God, no. That's a recurring nightmare of mine.

On the way to the rink, I stop to grab my hockey gear from the shed out back. When I glance toward the guesthouse, I notice a lamp on by the window downstairs. I look more closely and see Nicky curled up in an armchair in front of the fireplace.

At the sight of her, there's a weird twist inside my chest.

Fuck. I like this girl.

Her head lifts in my direction. I raise my hand in a wave and I keep walking toward the rink. I don't wait to see if she'll respond. After the way things went down last night, she probably doesn't want to talk to me anyway. And I don't want to further rock the boat.

But then I hear her call out across the distance. "Hey."

I stop. I glance over my shoulder and she's standing at the open guesthouse door.

Her hair is curly today. Those messy mahogany curls I love are falling adorably into her face. She's wrapped all the way up to her chin in a thick duvet, her fingers clutched around the edge of a paperback.

"Why are you up?" she asks, a slight note of panic in her voice. "You don't have practice this morning."

"My *team* doesn't have practice this morning," I correct her, turning and taking a few steps in her direction. "But I do. I'm going to skate." I motion toward my skating rink in the yard. Even after playing hockey for as long as I have, I still take practice seriously.

Nicky frowns at me now. "Oh...okay..."

"Why are *you* awake?" I ask her, taking a few more steps toward the cabin.

She holds up her novel. "Just reading." Her lips twist to the side and her

voice drops low. "Couldn't sleep."

I nod in understanding. "Same here."

Silence settles in the space between us. Her body language tells me she feels just as awkward as I do.

I hate this.

I'm about to walk away but I stop myself.

I stare at her from where I'm standing at the bottom step. "You wanna come with me?" I feel the corner of my mouth lift in a playful smile as I point at the rink.

She frowns and pulls the blanket tighter around her shoulders, taking a step backward into the cozy warmth of the cabin. "What? Why would I come with you? It's freezing out there."

"Well, technically, you're supposed to keep an eye on me." I shrug. "That's your job, remember?"

She looks at the skating rink. Then at me. Then back over to the rink. "Ronan. I'm pretty sure I don't need to come with you. You'll only be like a hundred feet away."

"I could get in lots of trouble over there. Like *lots*. Lots of trouble," I argue.

She lets out a groan, not at all looking happy with me.

I let the grin slip from my face. "Just kidding," I say finally.

The situation between us is way too fragile to keep teasing her right now. One wrong word and things between us could very well explode again.

With a sigh, I take a step backward, my shoes crunching on the icy ground. "Don't let me keep you from your little reading cocoon." I motion to the cozy corner where she was sitting with her book. "See ya later."

The corners of her lips turn up into a faint, forced smile. "See ya later."

I resume my stroll toward the rink. Through the window, I see Nicky go back and curl up in her armchair. Book in hand. Blanket wrapped around her shoulders.

But she pulls her armchair closer to the window, and instead of returning to her book, she props her chin on her fist and focuses all her attention on me.

Excitement surges inside my chest. I hit the ice with a big, cheesy-ass grin on my face. I can't wipe it off.

Yeah. This grin will be stuck on my face for a while.

NICKY

Setting my paperback on the side table, I perch in my cozy armchair by the window. I watch Ronan practice. All by himself.

He's zipping around the ice and shooting pucks into the net, one after another. Just a few minutes into his pre-dawn session, and I can already see that this man is not messing around.

In the early morning darkness, the rink's stadium lights shine down on him and he is absolutely mesmerizing to watch. Ronan Brighton is a man who's found his passion in life, that much is clear. Out there in the icy cold dead of dawn, you'd never know that Ronan is considered an impulsive troublemaker who can't keep himself on the straight and narrow.

From the speed and fluidity of his movements, I'm starting to second-guess whether hockey is really meant to be a team sport. He looks powerful enough to carry an entire match on his own. All I know is, this man loves hockey. I can't help but find his dedication admirable.

And my favorite part? The blissful smile he wears on his lips the whole time.

Those lips.

Those lips that were all over my lips last night. Oh my god.

I didn't sleep a wink as I laid in bed in the hours after that kiss. My body was on fire, my skin burning with need.

The way his mouth glided over mine. The way his hands touched my skin. The smell of his skin. The taste of his tongue. All of it made me so hot.

I tried reading my steamy book as a distraction from the memory loop. But that turned out to be a not-so-great idea. I somehow ended up with my

hand between my thighs, making a sticky mess all over my fingers and panting Ronan's name, as a violent orgasm shook me from head to toe.

But when I was done touching myself, I just felt ashamed, battling the guilt and lust inside my head.

That guilt is part of the reason why things were so awkward with Ronan this morning. The tight smiles, the forced jokes, the uncomfortable air between us.

Everything is one big mess. From our heated argument in the car to that explosive makeout session on the front porch, nothing is going according to plan. And I'm doing a terrible job of keeping things professional between us.

Jeez, Nicky. What ever happened to swearing off men? And playing it safe? And focusing on career?

Because Ronan Brighton is the *last* man I should get involved with. There's absolutely nothing 'safe' about that sexed-up man. Getting personally involved with him is a surefire way to get my heart broken and burn my career to the ground at the same time.

This is precisely why I don't allow myself to indulge in my emotions. Nothing good ever comes of it.

I've got to get my ass back on track. I have goals for myself. And I'll never reach them if I allow myself to get distracted by my reckless emotions and my horny hormones.

The longer I sit here staring at him, the more I start to feel bad for the way I yelled at him last night. Yes, he crossed my boundary when he started prying about my personal life. But maybe I pushed his buttons first when I got on his case for how he handled the post-game interview.

After replaying our argument a few hundred times on the screen of my mind, I came to the conclusion that, maybe he *is* right in his assessment of me. Maybe I do hide from my feelings. Maybe it's something I've done for a long, long time.

While I'm very good at putting on a tough front for the world, that doesn't mean I don't feel. Deeply. It doesn't mean I'm immune to hurt. It just means I'm not comfortable showing it.

"Is that something I need to work on?" I ask myself.

I quickly shut that thought down.

"No. It's not something worth changing." Being vulnerable never, ever did me any good.

I tune back in to Ronan. Throughout his entire practice session, he

remains determined and laser-focused on each drill that he puts himself through. He doesn't mess around. He doesn't stop when he's tired. He clearly stepped onto the ice with an objective in mind, and each minute of his training, he pushes himself to reach that and beyond.

Right now, I'm having trouble reconciling his two different personas. The reckless bad boy who's quick to throw punches in a parking lot brawl, and the dedicated captain who will wake up at the crack of dawn on his day off to work on perfecting his craft.

Ronan Brighton is a riddle I'm struggling to solve.

As Ronan skates around the ice, he makes sure to shoot glances toward the cabin every now and then. It's almost like he's trying to make sure I'm still here. It gives me tingles in my belly. I'm getting my very own private show from this great athletic specimen.

When he's finally done practicing a full ninety minutes later, he stores his stick and gear in a nearby shed. Wearing a goofy grin, he marches across the yard, right past the window where I'm sitting.

I hear heavy footsteps jogging up the front steps. A moment later, there's a knock at the door.

My heart beats a little faster.

I frantically finger-comb my hair and sniff-test my breath as I waddle out of my cozy seat. Then I inwardly scold myself for caring what Ronan thinks about me. *Jeez—I'm such a mess because of this guy.*

I open the door, a warm blanket still wrapped around my shoulders. Ronan greets me with the wobbly grin. The slightest hint of nervousness flashes across his face. He tugs the edge of his toque down over his ears. "Let's go grab breakfast?"

Both of my eyebrows jerk upward. "Breakfast?"

That's not what I was expecting. More like, *Thanks for shamelessly ogling me for the past ninety minutes. Now you can go back to reading your smutty book for the next three hours, you perv.*

But I wasn't expecting this. He wants to hang out with me? Even after the way we yelled at each other last night? Even after we kissed and made an awkward situation even worse?

His cheeks are red and there's a playful glint in his eyes. "Breakfast. I'm sure you've heard of it. It's the first meal of the day, usually eaten in the morning. Breakfast." He pulls out his phone. "Hold on. Let me see if I can pull up an official definition on the internet. I might even be able to find a

few pictures.”

“Don’t be a jerk noodle.” Tilting my head to the side, I give him a little shove.

Big mistake. I forgot how touching him sends electricity rushing to my nipples. *Mmm.*

Ronan doesn’t seem affected, though. He barks out a hearty laugh. “Come on. It’s my treat.”

I dip one toe out onto the porch and poke my head outside. “I can see my breath.” I whine, blowing a cloudy puff of air in front of my face.

He laughs. “There will be heat.”

I tug the blanket over my head like a cloak. “I’m not sold.”

“What if I promise you the absolute best pancakes in Starlight Falls?” he offers temptingly, waggling his brows. “Scratch that—the best pancakes you’ve ever had in your life?”

My stomach growls.

Yet still, I narrow my eyes at him. “That’s a big promise, sir. You sure you can back that up?” I’m Maud Westbrook’s granddaughter. My Grammy’s *breakfast anything* puts everyone else’s to shame.

“Absolutely,” Ronan says with complete assurance.

I pause and consider his offer. Pancakes sound *real* good right about now. Yeah, I could definitely eat some pancakes.

Plus, I think I like the way his hair is peaking out from under his wool hat. It’s cute.

No. Not cute. He’s not cute. Not at all.

He reaches out and gently touches my hand. “Also, we need to talk, Nicky. About last night.”

That simple touch, that slight dip in his tone of voice—it’s my undoing.

I make a big show of sighing heavily. “Fine.”

When I accept his invitation, Ronan beams so bright. Suddenly I’m questioning the most basic things.

What is the meaning of life?

Why are we all here?

Why are my panties soaking wet?

Do we really need sunshine when Ronan Brighton’s ear-to-ear grin lights up every corner of this early morning sky?

I try to fight my own smile but I’m a weak woman when he’s looking at me like that. Like gaining my approval is the most important thing in the

world to him.

This guy is good. He's a professional charmer. *Don't fall for it, Nicky.*

I turn away from him to hide the blush creeping up my neck. "Let me grab my coat."

A few minutes later, I'm ridiculously bundled up and ready to brave the cold. I can confirm that my extra layers of clothing are doing absolutely nothing for me.

I've got on my warmest boots. My thickest winter socks. Coat. Gloves. All of it. I'm wearing leggings under my jeans—that's what kind of cold it is. But my warmest gear does nothing to ward off the icy January deep freeze, especially when the sun has barely even woken up yet.

This is craziness. Why am I letting this man lure me away from the heat and warmth of the cozy cabin? Who the hell am I anymore?

I'm starting to think that Ronan Brighton has worked some kind of Starlight Falls magic on me.

NICKY

I follow Ronan to the main house. I wander around, giving myself a little tour while he takes a quick shower.

Then he grabs his wallet and keys. Next, we climb into his flashy sports car. The shiny vehicle seems so impractical for the midwest winter drive, but he blasts the heater to the max, and I melt into bliss.

Before pulling out of the yard, Ronan starts fiddling with his stereo and his phone. I fully expect loud, obnoxious music to start blasting from the speakers. Every guy I know has his driving jams, right? Lordy—Harry’s pregame playlist screams so hard I get an instant headache every time I get into his car.

As I buckle my seatbelt, I’m bracing myself for immediate ear pain. But once again today, Ronan Brighton proves me wrong. When he hits the end of the driveway and pushes play, an old audio recording filters through the car. I listen closely, not quite sure I’m hearing right. *Are you shitting me?*

My gaze shifts to him. “Is that Earl...um, Earl What’s-His-Face...?” I search my brain for the last name.

He looks at me, seemingly as surprised as I am. “Earl Nightingale. Yes. You’ve heard of him?”

“My dad probably listened to this same audio *a million times* when we used to work together back in Chicago,” I say with a chuckle. The nostalgia of it causes a faint twitch in my chest. A happy twitch, though.

Popular in the fifties, Earl’s motivational styles were starkly different from what you hear nowadays. The outdated radio recordings are so old, they crackle, despite how fancy Ronan’s speakers are.

Ronan nods slowly. “My old college coach introduced me to this tape. It’s been my favorite go-to ever since.”

“So, Ronan Brighton listens to motivational tapes?” I don’t think I’m doing a great job of hiding my shock.

“I do,” he responds with a little chuckle of his own.

As we drive down the mountain toward the heart of town, it becomes clear that we both know the words to the audio by heart. We listen intently, both mumbling along with Earl’s smooth voice.

He glances over at me.

“What?” I ask.

His shoulder lifts and falls. “Not many people know of good, ole Earl these days. At least, not the people I meet.”

“That’s true,” I concede.

I glance in Ronan’s direction, and we make eye contact across the console. He grins at me, and I just can’t help but grin back. A warm feeling comes over me, momentarily making me forget all the reasons why I need to keep my walls up.

“Look at that. We have something in common.” He does a little dance in his seat.

“One teensy, tiny thing. Let’s not get carried away,” I shoot back.

He shrugs. “Gotta start somewhere. Next thing you know, we’ll be friends.”

I turn away from him. Again, I’m trying not to smile. “Don’t get your hopes up.”

When the current audio segment draws to a close, Ronan turns down the volume. There’s a heavy stretch of silence. Then we both speak at the same time.

“Look—I’m really sorry about last ni—”

“I just want to apologize for—”

He pauses, the smile on his lips almost boyish. “You go ahead.”

Ronan clears his throat. “I was just saying sorry. Last night, I crossed a lot of lines. With the way I acted after we lost the hockey game, to the things I said to you on the drive back—” His eyes flit to my mouth “—to the kiss.”

Instinctively, my fingertips jump to my tingling lips. “Right. I...I got carried away, too. Maybe I shouldn’t have told you how to react after your team lost the game.”

He shrugs. “It’s part of your job.”

“Sure, it is part of my job,” I pull in a breath. “But that doesn't mean I needed to be so blunt about it. I...I was rude.”

His brows knit tight. “Okay. But you were right, though. I was acting like a total asshole. I was pissed. We lost that game because I was stuck in the penalty box when I should have been on the ice, scoring goals. And instead of just accepting that I'd fucked up, I deflected my bad vibes onto you. That was really fucking immature of me. And I'm sorry.”

Nodding, I run my tongue over my lips. “Thank you for saying that,” I mutter quietly. “A...and you were right, too.”

“About what?” He glances my way. “I do bottle up my emotions. I do try to act all tough and unbothered whenever I get my feelings hurt. When you pointed it out, I got defensive. I shouldn't have lost my cool like that. It was unprofessional. But more than that, it was mean. I'm sorry.”

His lips curl at the corners. “I accept your apology.”

“And I accept yours.”

Even after saying all that, there's still an elephant sitting in the back seat of this car. An elephant I'd rather not address. But I have to.

“And about that kiss...” I dare to say.

Ronan's head shoots my way. His eyes sweep me up and down. Sort of like he's checking me out. “Do you expect me to apologize for that, too?”

“I...I, uh...we...”

He continues watching me in a heated way that makes my mouth tingle and my breasts ache. Lust stirs deep inside my belly.

I squirm in my seat, feeling self-conscious under his gaze.

Self-conscious? Really? What the hell? Since when do I get self-conscious under a man's gaze? Now that I think about it, Ronan Brighton is the only man who has ever rattled my confidence this way.

“Nicky, I can't apologize for that kiss.” His jaw ticks as he turns his attention back to the road.

“Oh, um...Oh.” The apex of my thighs squeezes on impulse.

But I straighten my shoulders. Clear my throat. Try to stop melting like butter on his heated leather seats.

“That kiss was unprofessional. We can't do it again.”

He's perfectly silent.

“Ronan,” I insist forcefully. “My job is to help you keep your head in the game. To keep you away from distractions. Not to become one.”

He emits a growly chuckle. “So bossy. Who's the captain here? Am I the

captain or are you the captain?”

I glare at him.

“Okay, well that answers it. You’re the captain. Sheesh!”

“Stop joking around, Ronan. This is serious.”

He stubbornly holds onto his silence for a moment longer. “Fine,” he says eventually. “It won’t happen again.”

Tension sits heavy in the space between us. The conversation dies down completely. I try not to let that awkward vibe return.

When we pull up at a cute diner in the center of town a few minutes later, Ronan parks at the curb. Before I can gather my purse and get out of the car, he’s at my door, holding it open for me.

“Thank you,” I say.

He gives me a brief nod, his eyes never leaving mine as I step out onto the sidewalk.

Jeez-sus.

Do I have a fever? I probably have a fever. Because that’s the only way to explain why I’m burning up now when I was freezing just a few minutes ago.

Wordlessly, Ronan stands at the restaurant’s door, politely holding it open and ushering me inside.

“The Pancake Village...” I muse, intrigued by the yummy smells that greet us at the door.

“Best breakfast place in town,” he tells me, eyeballing the crowded room for an empty table.

My gaze roams around, taking in the decor while my fingers and limbs slowly stop tingling.

“Do you want to sit by the window back there?” he asks. “It’s nice and quiet and—oh, shit!”

“What? What’s wrong?” My head snaps around looking for danger when Ronan takes a quick step backward and his face dips into his collar. Clearly, he’s trying to hide from someone. Oh my god—what did we just walk into?

“Look. There’s Ronan!” I hear a male voice shout from across the room.

“Captain! Hey! Over here!” Another man says.

All of a sudden, Ronan is deaf, apparently. Because although everybody in the restaurant is looking at us, he acts like he doesn’t hear someone calling his name.

I see three men sitting at a booth. They look familiar actually. Wait—they’re Saints, aren’t they? I think they are.

“Some of your teammates are over there.” I point across the room.

“Where?” Ronan asks, looking anywhere but the direction I’m pointing.

“Ronan! Ronan, I can see you. You’re six foot three. You can’t hide behind the waitress. Get over here.”

One of the other guys laughs. “We’ve got seats over here! Come join us!”

I feel my lips curling. “Let’s go say hi,” I tell Ronan.

He just groans. “Do we have to?”

Now, I laugh. “Yes, we have to. Stop being a baby.”

I’m really curious to talk to these guys, actually. For some reason, I suspect that they might have the inside tea on their captain, information that might come in handy for me in doing my job.

But Ronan still hasn’t budged. I loop my arm through his and give him a little tug.

His head whips toward me, surprise in his expression. His eyes drop to where our arms are linked, before rebounding to my face.

Oh crap. *Boundaries, Nicky. Boundaries.*

I drop his arm.

Quickly stepping away from him, I lead the way to the table. Ronan trudges along behind me, grumbling something that sounds a lot like, “But I don’t want to share.”

“Share what?” I ask with a cursory glance over my shoulder.

He gives me an embarrassed smile. “Nothing. Never mind.”

When we reach the table, the guys ignore Ronan completely, introducing themselves to me one at a time.

Easton Raines—number 33 is one of the teams defensemen.

Parker Paige—the rookie right winger who wears number 26.

Tipton Bridges—the team’s first-line goaltender is number 10.

I catalogue all that info in the filing cabinet of my brain.

The guys invite Ronan and me to join their table. Tipton stands to pull out a chair for me. “Have a seat, gorgeous.”

I nearly roll my eyes. A shameless flirt, isn’t he? But I catch the slicing look Ronan sends to Easton. The team captain bumps his teammate out of the way, possessively claiming the seat beside me.

Ooh! Jealous Ronan. That’s a version I don’t think I’ve met as yet. This could be interesting.

I deliberately ignore Ronan’s grumpy face as I let Tipton shake my hand. “I’m Nicky. Also known as the new assistant.”

“So very nice to meet you,” Tipton says gallantly, lifting my knuckles to his lips.

Before I can curl my fingers into a fist and punch him in the throat—because I don’t know where this dude’s mouth has been—Ronan intervenes, karate-chopping his teammate’s hand away. “Watch it,” the captain growls. All territorial and shit.

Hot.

As we sit down, Ronan slips his hand around the back of my chair. Like we’re on a date or something. I look his way, frowning at him. I can’t for the life of me figure out why he’d do that.

He gets the message loud and clear, and he quickly drops his arm.

“Sorry. Force of habit,” Ronan says with a sheepish smile.

“Okay, buddy,” I say under my breath.

Secretly, I like it. But I’m not about to admit that to him.

A waitress comes and takes our orders. Ronan gets some over-the-top whipped cream and sprinkles pancake extravaganza. I go for crêpes with chocolate drizzle and fruit on the side.

“I heard rumors that Ronan got a babysitter,” Parker says, leaning back in his seat and looking amused, “I didn’t believe they were true.”

Easton nods, shoving a massive slice of his pancake stack into his face. “Yeah, when I asked him about it the other day, he flat-out denied it.” He watches Ronan accusingly.

“Because she’s not my babysitter. She’s my *assistant*,” Ronan corrects his teammates. A boyish hint of embarrassment colors his cheeks.

Oh, my god. How can a towering giant be so cute-e-e-e-?!!

“Call it what you want.” Tipton shrugs. “What I want to know is, why *I* didn’t get a hot assistant, too?”

“Probably because the organization is trying to avoid the scandal of you getting caught in a compromising position with one of the employees.” Easton suggests. “Workplace harassment suits are not a vibe.”

Parker titters and Tipton throws a fistful of sugar packets at his face.

Easton explains that he recently bought a house in Starlight Falls. Apparently, he had a little ‘gathering’ last night, which is why Tipton and Parker are in town. It was nothing too wild, according to them. But the guys do all get sheepish looks on their faces when Ronan questions why he wasn’t invited.

When someone opens the front door, a gust of cold air flies inside. I pull

my coat tighter around me, simultaneously shivering and fighting off a yawn.

Easton smiles at me, eager to change the topic. “You look like you’d rather be anywhere but here, Nicky.”

I laugh a little. “I’d rather be sitting in an armchair with a view of the mountains, bundled up in a blanket with a book in my lap. But *someone*—” I turn my glare on Ronan. “Dragged me outside, kicking and screaming, into the cold death of the morning. So you’ll have to forgive me if I’m not my bubbly self today.” Our waitress brings coffee to the table. I thank her and take an eager sip of much-needed caffeine.

With a frown, Tipton reaches over and punches Ronan in the shoulder for being an asshole. I fight back a grin as Ronan rubs at his sore arm. “Well, excuse me for trying to feed you.” He faux-glares at me as he defends himself.

“There’s more than enough food at the house,” I challenge him. “I could survive the zombie apocalypse in that stocked-up pantry.”

His face twinkles as he pulls off his toque, ruffles his gloriously messy hair and pulls the hat back on again. “Some fresh air is good for you. I spent over an hour on the rink this morning. Now I feel better than ever.”

“He forced me to watch him the entire time,” I tell his friends.

“Ugh! What a sicko!” Easton makes a face.

“Yeah, he probably got some weird pleasure out of it.” Tipton shakes his head.

Ronan’s eyes shoot to his teammates for support. “It’s her job to keep an eye on me. What if the ice had cracked and I had gone through it? If I die, surely she gets fired?”

Easton rolls his eyes. “It’s not a frozen pond, dumbass. You can’t fall through your million dollar custom ice rink, remember?” Then he leans over, whispering loudly to me. “You should know...Ronan isn’t that smart.”

I laugh, throwing an elbow into his ribs. “Don’t say that. It’s not nice.” I sneak a look at Ronan, whose eyes narrow at our antics.

The hockey captain grabs the leg of my chair, pulling me an inch closer to him. “Well, at least I’m pretty,” he torments Easton while pouting like a baby.

But, wow, he sure is hot...

The moment the thought pops into my head, I immediately will it away.

Girl power! Boss babe!

No more swooning over gorgeous hockey gods who fly around the ice

and listen to motivational audio tapes from the twentieth century.

Nope.

None of that.

You gotta stay strong, girl.

Tipton rolls his eyes. “Yeah, yeah. You’re pretty and you’re tall and you have a lot of money.”

“And a big dic—”

Ronan’s phone rings, cutting him off.

He eagerly answers the call, a big smile on his face. “Hi, Mom!” Silence. “*Girrrrl*. Yes, I did watch the latest episode of *A Chance with Vance*. Did you see the way Inez had that man eating out of the palm of her hand?” Silence. “Uh-huh!” More silence. “Uh-huh! Get Grandma on the line. We need to talk about this.” Ronan rises from the table, holding up a finger. “I’ll be right back,” he mouths to me. Then he turns to his boys. “If you say anything dumb to Nicky while I’m gone, I will chop off your weiners and have them served with spicy mayo to the next person who orders sausages.”

Parker visibly recoils.

Tipton isn’t alarmed, though. He chuckles to himself as Ronan hustles off. “Look at that mama’s boy.”

After all the teasing and tittering simmers down, Parker brings his eyes to me. “We give him shit but he’s a good guy.”

“He really is,” Easton says. “Can I just say—I think that everyone’s being too harsh on him these days.” He sips his coffee.

“That’s true,” Tipton says, growing serious. “We all messed up that night when we got arrested. But Ronan was the one to get all of the blame.”

“We all messed up?” Easton questions. “If I remember correctly, you were the one who got us into that mess, fooling around with that waitress.” He whacks Tipton upside the head.

Parker nods. “I warned you about her. That woman was a screaming red flag.”

Tipton waves off his teammate’s concerns. “The red flags are always the most fun.” He winks at me. I scowl in response.

“Yeah. Fun, fun.” Parker grouses from behind his coffee cup. “You know what wasn’t fun. Explaining to my Nanna how I almost ended up with a criminal record in my rookie year.”

Easton sits back in his chair, stretching his legs under the table. “You’re a fucking shit disturber, Tipton. Next time you get in trouble, I’m not jumping

in to save you.”

“Same here,” Parker says. “In fact, the only reason I got involved this time is because Ronan was the first to jump in to defend your ass. If our captain hadn’t jumped in, you would have been on your own, fuckface.”

When he says that, I interject. “Ronan was the first to jump in?” I ask, surprised.

Easton nods. “Yeah, we would have let Tipton get his ass beat. He’s earned it, after all. But when the waitress’s boyfriend and his friends rushed into the parking lot and attacked, Ronan took the lead.”

My eyes shift to Ronan where he’s hovering by the door, animatedly discussing what I’m guessing is his favorite TV show with his mom and grandma. It feels like I’m seeing him in a whole different light.

The guys keep on talking but I sit there, ruminating over what I just learned. Ronan didn’t initiate a brawl out of nowhere, like the press insinuated in those blog posts. He actually stepped in to help a teammate who was under attack. That’s...noble.

“You seem lost in thought, Nicky,” Parker says.

“I’m just processing what you guys said about Ronan,” I admit. “All along, I thought he was just a hothead who likes to swing punches. But...” Was I wrong?

“Yes. He likes to swing punches. Just like the rest of us,” Easton says. “But I think that people forget to look at his motives, what drives him to do the dumb shit he does. His willingness to stand up for what’s right gets overlooked all the time. That’s not really fair.”

By the time Ronan gets back to the table, the guys are done with their meal. Ronan offers to get their tab. They all thank him, broadcasting happy grins. Then they say their goodbyes and they’re off.

That leaves Ronan and me alone at the table. We finish our pancakes together, laughing and trading food.

When there’s a lull in the conversation, his twinkling eyes linger on me. “I’m about to ask you a personal question.”

“Don’t,” I warn him.

He ignores me. Surprise, surprise. “Tell me why you don’t have a boyfriend.”

“I’m not doing men at the moment,” I say with my nose pointed in the air.

Ronan’s eyes widen, his hands shooting out in front of him. “Whoa there, Captain. No need to get all overambitious, *doing men*. Plural. Maybe you just

do *one man* to start? And see how it goes from there? Then add another one or two or three to your roster, if need be?”

I bark out a laugh, slapping his forearm and trying to correct myself. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it! What I mean is... I’m not doing relationships. I’m single. Celibate. Whatever you want to call it.” I reach over and stab at his food with my fork. “Now, stop being nosy. Mind your bacon before it gets stolen.”

And I don’t know why things feel different now—but as we finish our pancakes together, the jokes and the laughter and the effortless conversation with Captain Brighton come much easier than before.

RONAN

“It’s cold as balls,” Nicky whines as she bustles down the sidewalk alongside me. “Hell, who am I kidding? It’s colder than balls. It’s cold as a corpse.”

“A corpse?” I glance over, chuckling at her dramatics.

She nods, the red and frosty tip of her nose pointed at me. Nicky is obviously freezing. “And that’s precisely what I’m going to be if you keep me out here much longer.”

She’s fucking adorable. That’s why I’m always staring at her. I can’t help it.

All throughout breakfast, my teammates seemed to get a kick out of ganging up on me. It was my fault, though, for making it super obvious that I’m totally into Nicky. I can’t hide it. I’m not even sure I’m trying all that hard.

I almost breathed out a sigh of relief when the guys finished up and left Nicky and me to enjoy our breakfast in peace. The meal was far better when it was just the two of us, laughing and eating and sitting side by side.

I won’t lie—I’ve been looking forward to getting some real alone time with the gorgeous Ms. Westbrook.

After paying for our pancakes, I guided Nicky out onto the sidewalk. I somehow convinced her to wander around Starlight Falls with me. She had so many questions about the town during breakfast, I thought it would be a great day to let her explore. I’m proud to show her around. I don’t know why, but it feels important that Nicky comes to like my quaint—and peculiar—hometown.

She's been complaining the whole time, though.

As we stroll down Main Street, I keep stealing peeks at her. Because she's so damn pretty. When she catches me staring—as always—I try to play it off.

“Poor you,” I say. “January in Starlight Falls just plain sucks if you're not ridiculously hot-blooded like me.” I quirk a shoulder.

“Your big ego always finds a way to insert itself into every conversation, doesn't it?” She laughs.

“Shush!” I whip off my worn, knitted hat and plop it onto Nicky's head, pulling it low over her ears. I half-expect her to get angry or give me another long-winded speech about professional boundaries. But she just smiles up at me, looking goddamn cute.

“My ears thank you,” she says.

I grin back. “Your ears are quite welcome.”

I'm barely resisting the urge to wrap an arm around her shoulder and pull her into my side. But Nicky and I are getting along just fine for once. I don't want to push my luck. So instead, I jam my hands into my front pockets and keep strolling along.

Side by side, we walk through the heart of town.

“This is my dad's medical clinic.” I point out the ground level unit of the brick building as we approach. Then I correct myself. “Actually, dad opened it years ago, before I was even born. But it's Felix and Mason's clinic now.”

“So cool,” she says. She peeks inside the large front window and waves when she spots Karli on the phone at the reception desk. Then her eyes shift to the upper level of the building. “Wisteria and Grace,” she muses to herself when she peeks up at the vintage signage. “Isn't that your sister-in-law's clothing boutique?”

“Sure is,” I say. “Wanna go take a look?”

She beams. “Definitely.”

I follow Nicky up the staircase and the minute she steps inside, she's like a kid in a candy shop. Daphne isn't busy in this weather so she has the time to be Nicky's personal stylist as they browse the racks of clothing and chat. I smile to myself as they get to know each other because I can tell that Nicky is really hitting it off with my brother's fiancée. That's really special to me. Daphne's a shy girl so if she's getting along with Nicky that's a testament to the kind of person Nicky is.

“So, why did you leave Chicago anyway?” Daphne asks when Nicky

steps into the changing room with a bunch of hangers clenched in her hand.

“Family, mostly.” Nicky’s voice carries through the curtain sealing her in. “All my brothers and my best friends are in Honey Hill. I have one niece already, and another niece or nephew on the way.”

I sit in a chair in the corner, keeping out of everyone’s way as Nicky puts on her little fashion show, changing into outfits in the dressing room, coming out for a twirl in front of the mirror and then disappearing to change again.

“Oh, I see,” Daphne says, nodding. “It’s always tough being far away from family.”

“Yeah,” Nicky calls out. “I was just feeling so left out living hours away. It was fine when I was working with my father in Chicago, but now that my parents are back together, I just wasn’t happy out there, seven hours away, by myself.”

I nod to myself because I feel the same way. My brothers and sister drive me insane, but I sort of felt the same when I was playing in New York. It was tough living that far away. At first, I was pissed when I got drafted by the Saints. But now I feel lucky being on a team that’s basically my hometown.

Anyway, I don’t know how some guys get bored shopping with their girlfriends. Every outfit Nicky tries on makes my cock jump with delight. Every time Nicky disappears, Daphne turns and gives me excited thumbs ups, mouthing *She’s so pretty!* and *She’s smart, too!* and *She’s so perfect for you!*

My face is hot, I can feel it. Because I think Nicky is great, too. Problem is, I don’t think the feeling is mutual. Especially after the mess I made between us after the game last night.

My brain goes completely blank the next time Nicky pulls the curtain back. She steps out in a dress that immediately steals my breath.

It’s a lacy wine-colored with its hem brushing the floor. It fits her curves like a glove, with a neckline that plunges low enough to emphasize her perfect rack, and every time she moves I get a peek of her sexy thighs through the dangerously high slit.

“Wow. This is gorgeous on you,” Daphne coos.

“Oh, it really is,” Nicky says, admiring the way it looks on her. Then she discreetly glances at the price tag. She drops it like it’s hot. Then she starts spewing out excuses. “But y’know—I don’t think it’s the right color for me. And I don’t really have any place to wear it to. I think it would look better on a taller body type.”

It’s all bullshit. Her excuses make no sense. But I don’t say so because

Nicky and I are on pretty shaky ground right now. Accidentally commenting about her tits or her perfect peach-shaped ass in that dress will only get me punched in the throat.

A few moments later, Nicky has changed back into her own clothes. The girls exchange hugs and phone numbers and promise to hang out together soon.

“Wanna go check out the farmer’s market?” I ask Nicky when we step back out into the cold.

“It’s open at this time of year?” she asks, her eyebrows hiked up with intrigue.

“It has limited operations during the winter. But there are still a bunch of booths and crafts. Desserts. Root crops.”

The more I speak, the more Nicky is lighting up with excitement. All of a sudden, it’s like she’s not so cold anymore.

“This way first,” I say, setting a hand at the dip of her spine to guide her through the rows and rows of booths. “I want you to meet Rainbow, my astrologer bestie.” We head toward a large stand in the back.

Nicky laughs, throwing me an incredulous look. “You have an astrologer bestie?”

“Psht! Of course I do. You know what they say—millionaires don’t have astrologers. Billionaires do. Or, something like that.”

“I didn’t know they said that,” Nicky quips.

“Yup. They all do. All of them.”

She shakes her head, a ghost of a smile on her face as I reach over Rainbow’s counter to give her a big squeeze.

Rainbow barely spares me a glance. She’s all intrigued by my companion for the day. “Well, who is this lovely lady?”

With an arm outstretched, she grins. “I’m Nicky.”

The women shake hands. “It’s wonderful to meet you, Nicky. I’m Rainbow. My, you’re gorgeous!” She turns to me, her metal bracelets clinking as she pats my cheek with her cold, sticky hand. Her colorful hair fans out around her smiling face. “I’m so happy that Ronan finally found himself a girlfriend.”

Nicky practically jumps a whole foot backward, whipping her head left to right to left. “Oh, no, no! I’m not his girlfriend.”

I chew down on my grin. “Nicky’s my personal assistant for the rest of the hockey season.”

Rainbow's eyes bounce between the two of us. She says nothing, but I can practically see her computing and calculating and running synastry charts in her head. Her expression says she doesn't believe for one minute that nothing's going on between us.

I won't complain. I have the hots for Nicky. They say I wear my emotions on my sleeve. So I'm guessing my interest in Nicky is probably all up in my aura. Plain to see. Especially to a seasoned fortuneteller like Rainbow.

Eventually, the wise old woman cracks a smile. "So, how's my favorite hockey player?" Rainbow gushes, her attention coming to me.

"I'm doing good, but I'm all out of your famous beets and carrots. Can't make my vegetable soup without 'em."

"We can't have that," Rainbow answers, winking at Nicky as she starts preparing a bag for me. "We need our athlete eating healthy."

Nicky starts going around the table, peeking at Rainbow's offerings. Along with her variety of winter crops, Rainbow is also selling goods that she produced from her summer's harvest. Pickles, jams, pies, and preserves.

Farming is Rainbow's livelihood, no matter the season. Along with her husband Jimmy, she feeds half this town.

I give Nicky some space. I stand back, watching her fall in love with all of Rainbow's goods. She seems enamored with everything. The lights. The smells. The local music. I had a feeling she'd like this place.

She's asking Rainbow a thousand and one questions. And drooling over the flavors of the pies. And taste-testing some of the jams. And commenting on the handmade jewelry. Rainbow is eating it up. She loves all the attention.

When Nicky's back is turned, Rainbow gives me a subtle nod of approval. I can't help but grin.

"Oh, this looks divine," Nicky says when Rainbow gives her a small sample of the cherry crumble. "I brag all day about my Grammy's secret recipe pie, but this right here—this might give her some competition."

The older woman absolutely beams, laying a hand on the center of her chest. "Well, that's a compliment. I'll take it."

Nicky emits a heavy sigh. "Rainbow, everything you have here is amazing," she says, eyeballing the rest of the goods on the table. "I wish I could buy one of everything. But I promised myself that I'd be good and I wouldn't spend any money today."

I don't like the way she says that.

I step forward. “Why not indulge a little? You can’t go wrong with some mulberry jam,” I say.

Nicky bites her lip. I can tell she wants to support Rainbow and the other locals here. But she clutches tightly to her purse. “I know. I’m just trying to watch my budget.” She takes a step backward from the table.

My brows dip low. I’m sure my face gives away my concern. “How come? My brother and his buddies better be paying you good for this babysitting assignment. If I hear they’re swindling you out of what you’re worth, then there’s going to be hell to pay.”

Nicky lays a hand on my arm. I love the way it feels when she touches me. “Everything’s fine, Ronan,” she insists. “I’m just trying to save up a little, so I can buy a house.” Her cheeks redden. “When I’m not, y’know, staying in your luxury guesthouse, I’ve been bunking at my brother’s house. I’m really ready for a place of my own.”

“Fair enough,” I concede with a nod. “I find your need for independence respectable. Admirable, really.” I give her a little bow and she giggles.

Nicky Westbrook is a woman who goes after what she wants. She deserves to have everything her heart desires.

The jellies and jams, included.

So, every time Nicky picks up an item that interests her, or every time her eyelids flutter closed in delight when Rainbow offers her another taste-test, I pay for it behind her back. All of it.

I follow her around, filling up my bags with pies, homemade bracelets, crystals, and herbal teas just for her. Each time Nicky gets distracted by some new item, I keep slipping Rainbow more cash.

When Nicky is finished exploring the booth, she looks at me with a satisfied grin. “Ready to go?”

But Rainbow isn’t done with her yet. She pulls up a stool and motions Nicky over. “Sit, dear. You just have the prettiest aura. Let’s see what the cards have to say about you.”

The next thing I know, Nicky is seated at Rainbow’s table, and the spirited old woman is shuffling her tarot cards.

To my surprise, Nicky is totally into it, asking a bunch of questions.

“Did I make the right move, quitting my job in Chicago to come out here?”

“What’s the current energy in my career sector?”

“Am I moving in the right direction when it comes to my finances?”

“Can you foresee any obstacles to me buying a house?”

My lips curve into a smile, as this woman shocks me yet again. Nicky is everything and nothing like I expected, all at once. With a whole lot of spice tossed in.

Rainbow smiles as Nicky’s avalanche of questions pours down. “Got it. Do you also want to know what’s next in your love life?”

Nicky glances at me self-consciously then she lowers her voice. “No thank you. I’ve sworn off men for the moment.” She flinches, holding up a palm. “Please don’t ask.”

Rainbow mimics zipping her lips and tossing the key over her shoulder. Then the old woman begins shuffling the deck.

“A tarot reading, huh?” I come up close, gripping the back of Nicky’s stool while I check out the cards Rainbow is flipping over.

“Yes, sir,” Nicky answers with a grin. “My friend Ziggy from back home reads tarot cards for me all the time.”

Rainbow’s head whips up from the cards she’s shuffling. “Ziggy? Ziggy is my *niece*. No wonder I like you so much!”

“No way. Really?” Nicky whips around to get my confirmation.

I nod. “Everyone around here knows Ziggy.”

“Oh my gosh!” Nicky beams. “Small world. Well I’m glad we met, Rainbow. If I’m going to be in Starlight Falls for a while, I’m going to need my connection out here, too. How else will I know what my fate holds?”

“Hey, now,” I argue, kidding around. “Rainbow’s only allowed one astrology bestie, and that’s me. You keep your own.”

“No fighting, Ronan,” the mystic scolds me. “My gifts are powerful enough that you can both share my insights.”

Nicky laughs.

I sigh. “Fine, then. Rainbow, work your magic. She’s a Sagittarius. Born on Christmas Eve.”

“A Capricorn,” Nicky corrects me, peeking over her back at me.

Rainbow’s eyes gleam, bouncing between the two of us. “Ooh! A Capricorn and a Libra. That could be an interesting match.”

“We’re not dating!” Nicky and I say at the same time.

Our eyes meet, and we burst into laughter.

Rainbow continues her reading, dropping subtle hints about Nicky and my compatibility through out. Nicky brushes the comments off but I just grin at the possibility that the stars might have my back on this.

As we're leaving, Rainbow is still mumbling on and on about my aura. She's openly eyeballing the two of us closer than I feel comfortable with. I don't know what colors she's seeing around me, but at the moment, I don't need to ask.

Because all I know is—Nicky Westbrook is making my chakras dance.

RONAN

“That’s it. I’m officially frozen stiff.”

We spent the rest of the morning, wandering around the farmer’s market. Now it’s sometime around lunch time and Nicky has officially reached her tolerance limit for the cold.

“Too frozen to visit one more clothing shop?” I ask her, pointing to another boutique just down the road.

“Oooh! Look at the pretty dresses,” Nicky coos longingly. Then she dances in place. “But nothing could distract me from the toe-aching cold seeping into my bones right now.”

I laugh. “Come. I know the perfect place for us to warm up.”

Then I guide her around the corner and up the walkway to the very best bar in town. “The North Node Tavern?” she reads the sign hanging over the door.

“Nolan—my evil twin—owns the place,” I tell her as I hold the door open.

“He does?” She looks intrigued, stepping inside.

“Yup. This place has been in our family for decades. My grandparents opened it. And when they retired and moved to Ireland a few years ago, they passed it on to Nolan.”

“Nice.” She grins, taking a moment to admire the old photographs in vintage frames, the scuffed wooden furniture and fraying upholstered seats in the dimly-lit pub. “Gotta love a good generational business.”

“Yeah, we really do love this place.” I mirror her smile.

The tavern is busy but I manage to spot that my favorite booth is open at

the back. I lead Nicky in that direction.

“Anyway, back before he owned this place, Nolan was on his way to becoming a professional hockey player.”

“Oh, yeah?” Nicky asks, surprised. “I didn’t realize he played hockey.”

“Yeah.” I lean close to her ear, my hand on the small of her back. “Don’t tell him I said this—but he was a better player than I was at the time.”

She hikes an eyebrow at me over her shoulder.

I feel a pained smile pull my lips as I continue the story. “But then his girlfriend at the time got pregnant with Stella. Nolan decided that he didn’t want to be on the road all the time. He wanted to be at home to support his woman in the way that she needed him. So he dropped hockey and Grandpa passed down the bar to him and he’s been working here ever since.”

Nicky’s eyebrows knit tight. “Wow. That’s very noble of him.”

“It is. His wife—well, ex-wife—has been in and out of the picture the past few years. But Nolan has always been consistent for his daughter.”

There’s a pinch in my chest. I feel it every time I think about how Nolan ended up in this place. Don’t get me wrong—I absolutely adore Stella. She’s the little sunshine in my life. I wouldn’t trade her for anything. But I still haven’t made peace with the way my brother had to give up on his dream.

“So he’s been raising Stella on his own?” she asks.

“Pretty much. He spends most of his days slinging drinks behind the bar. But he still finds a way to make Stella his priority. We drive each other insane most days, but no one can say that my brother doesn’t work his ass off.”

We start to sit down at our table, but when Nolan runs by with his hands full, barely enough time to shout out a hello, I see that he’s struggling with the lunch time rush.

“It’s busy in here,” Nicky comments.

“Nolan recently lost his best worker. Inez used to keep this place running like a well-oiled machine. Ever since she left, my brother’s been struggling.”

“What happened to her?”

I point up at the large television screens playing all around the bar.

“*A Chance with Vance?*” Nicky mumbles the words displayed on the bottom corner of the screen.

“Long story short—Nolan blew his shot with her, and she left Starlight Falls to go find a husband on that reality TV show.”

Nicky’s jaw drops open. “Are you for real?”

I nod. “My brother has had a thing for that girl for years. And he never made a move. Now, she’s on TV fighting a dozen other women for the attention of some corny ass Hollywood D-lister. It’s tragic.”

“Oh my god,” Nicky gasps, her eyes fixated on the hot mess television show. “It is tragic. Poor Nolan. Did you say her name is Inez? And wow—she’s really pretty, though.”

I give the screen a cursory glance before my eyes come back to Nicky’s profile view. “You think?”

As far as I’m concerned, Nicky is the prettiest. Ever since I first saw her, I can’t see anyone else. It’s like other women don’t even exist anymore. She’s the only one I think about. The only one I dream about. The only one who gets me hard with the slightest brush of our hands. With a simple smile. With

—
Shit. Put your dick away, Ronan. My crush on this girl is throwing me out of balance.

Out of nowhere, a lightbulb goes off in my head. Things start to make sense. I see how all of my twin brother’s dreams were derailed the minute he fell in love. He had to give up on hockey and settle for running the family bar when he could have been one of the best players in the league if he’d followed his head instead of his heart.

Is that why I’ve never let myself have a serious relationship? All this time, have I been afraid that love would be the distraction to throw the rest of my life off track? Shit—that’s deep. Can’t think about that right now.

All I know is, Nolan may have missed out on his dream career. But it’s all good. Because every time I step out on the ice, I’m not just playing for me. I’m playing for Nolan *and* for Stella. I’m representing all three of us. That’s all that matters.

I glance around the bustling room to distract myself from my thoughts. “What do you say, I go give Nolan a hand, and then we grab a bite to eat after the rush?”

She’s already unzipping her coat. “Only if I get to help, too.” She grins in my face. Such a pretty grin.

“Nicky Westbrook, the barmaid?” I quirk a brow.

“I started working summers at Grammy’s bakery when I was fourteen. I can handle one shift at a bar. Put me to work, Hockey Guy.”

I touch her arm. “Let’s go.”

After a fifteen second chat with Nolan—who’s grateful for some help—

Nicky and I come up with a game plan. I start grabbing plates from the kitchen and bringing customers their food, while Nicky goes behind the bar and helps the bartender with the drink orders.

For the better part of an hour, we're circling around and bumping into each other. It's hard to keep my eyes off her.

I've worked at my brother's bar a shit ton over the years, but I can assure you I've never had this much fun doing it. We're laughing, teasing one another, and if I'm not mistaken, I'm pretty sure Nicky Westbrook is even flirting with me.

Late into the rush, she's grabbing a few cups of ice when she backs up and trips on a cord. It happens so fast, but I'm right there. Throwing out my arms, I catch her before she lands on the sticky floor. She just looks up at me, still in my arms, and laughs.

"Thanks for saving my ass. Again."

"Well, it's definitely an ass worth saving, Peach." I wink at her, and help her back to her feet.

I'm waiting for her to correct me, like she always does. To remind me that she's not my peach. Instead, she just smiles.

She's been trying to resist my charms from day one, but I think she's starting to see that it's no use. There's something between us.

"Want to order something to go and get out of here?" I ask her.

She runs a forearm across her sweaty brow. "Sure."

Nolan thanks us for our help, and sends us home with several sacks of food. When we're walking to the car, we keep the conversation going. "I meant to ask this morning. Do you skate?"

"Me? Oh, no." But then she adds, "Though when I was a kid, I went through this phase where I was convinced that I'd grow up to be a figure skater someday. I never followed through though, and somewhere along the way, I forgot about that. I always meant to get back to it, but some dreams you just grow out of."

I furrow my forehead. "Not unless you want to." I glance at her. "We're going to fix that."

Nicky glances my way and laughs. "That sounds ominous. What do you even mean?"

She turns to drop her purse into the back seat. That's when she finally notices all the bags and bags of things that I bought for her earlier at the farmer's market. She forgets all about the conversation we're in the middle

of.

“Is that what I think it is?” She peeks into one bag and then another. She turns and eyeballs me suspiciously.

“Maybe.” I slip behind the wheel. I can’t wait to get home and chill out.

“Ronan,” she scolds.

“Nicky...” I respond, echoing her tone.

“I can’t. It’s really sweet that you bought all that stuff, but I can’t accept them. It would be unprofessional of me.”

“Says who? I’m not your boss. You’re not mine,” I say, pulling away from the curb.

“I guess...”

“And besides, most of it is food anyway,” I fib just a little. “I’m pretty sure there are no rules against you eating while you work with me. Right?”

She sighs. “You’re right.”

“Man. I love being right.”

My eyes follow her plump lips as they curve into a smile.

I smile too, glad I convinced her to accept my gifts. I can’t call them gifts, though. Or that would freak her out.

Reaching over, I squeeze her arm. “Seriously though. Just because you’re watching your budget doesn’t mean you don’t deserve to have everything you want.”

“You’re not going to become a billionaire if you keep buying me things,” she whispers.

“That’s quite alright. Being a billionaire seems to make my other brother grumpy anyway. Who wants that?” I joke. Darius would not find that funny.

“Oh my god. Cash is the same.” She laughs.

“It’s decided—I don’t want to be a billionaire. I’ll be poor and happy instead.”

She tilts her head. “Ronan, you’re a professional hockey captain with a multimillion dollar contract. You’re hardly poor.”

“But I am happy. With you.” Those last two words slip out before I can stop them. And fuck it—I don’t want to take it back. “I fucking like you, Nicky Westbrook. We should really take a shot at being friends.” Preteen Ronan is somewhere applauding me for wearing my big boy pants right now and telling the pretty girl how I feel.

Nicky is not impressed. Or at least, she pretends not to be. “What did I tell you about wearing your emotions on your sleeve?”

But despite her words, I see the deep pink flush spreading across her cheeks.

“Oh come on. Admit you want to be my friend too.”

“This is not middle school recess,” she retorts.

“It’s also not the after-school detention room. We’re allowed to be friends.”

She gives me nothing.

I’m not fazed. “Well, in any case, I had a really good time with you today.”

She hesitates. “I did, too.” She lays her skull against the headrest, mahogany curls peeking out at me from under my hat that’s on her head. “Thank you. For today, and for everything.” She turns her neck and her eyes float to the backseat where the bags are sitting. “I’m really, really looking forward to that pie.”

NICKY

When we get back to the house, Ronan pulls into the driveway. I get out of the car, and Ronan is already grabbing all the bags from the backseat.

“Thank you.” I stretch out my arms, expecting him to hand over my load and send me on my way.

Instead, he gives me one of those shy smiles. “Let me walk you over to the guesthouse.”

My belly flutters. Those shy smiles of his are quickly becoming my kryptonite.

He’s making me nervous. I’ve never been a nervous kind of girl.

“All right,” I say.

We head for the frozen path to the guesthouse.

“Careful,” he warns as he walks ahead of me.

I take careful steps after him. “Oh my gosh! It’s slipperier than ever today,” I comment, being extra vigilant. I’m sliding all over the place.

He peeks at me over his back. “You look like you’re struggling. Here.” He crouches down in front of me and taps at his back. “Hop on.”

I blink. “What?”

“Hop on my back,” he says.

“Ronan, I don’t need to hop on your back.” I laugh incredulously.

“Nicky, get on my back,” he says sternly. “I can’t have you falling on that pretty ass of yours.”

“Ronan.” I say his name in a growl.

He laughs. “Climb. On. My. Back.”

I huff. “Fine.”

I approach, locking my legs around his waist and my arms around his neck. When I’m all loaded up, Ronan straightens to his full height and now, I’m clinging to his back like a baby monkey as he walks toward the cabin, my million and one bags draped from his arms.

My giggles rise up in the air around us. Oh god! We must be a sight to see. What would my bosses say if they could see us like this?

Yet somehow that seems irrelevant when all I can think about is the warmth of his hard body beneath me and the smell of his skin. I just want to bury my face in his neck and breathe him in.

Way too soon, we’re standing on the porch. Ronan sets me down. Then he turns to face me, a goofy grin on his face. “There. All safe and sound.”

I roll my eyes, trying to hide my smile. “Are you proud of yourself?”

“Very.” He gives a curt nod.

I laugh. I can’t help it.

We stand there, and I don’t know why it’s so hard to just take my bags and say goodbye. But I’m realizing I don’t want this day to end. Not yet.

“I had a really fun time today,” I tell him, and I hate how breathy my voice sounds when I say it. *Good grief, Nicky. You’re acting like the man took you out on a date or something.*

“I did, too.” A soft smile lingers on his face.

“I’m keeping the hat, by the way.” I touch his toque that’s still sitting on my head.

His eyes flare with delight and he shrugs. “Might as well. It looks fucking adorable on you.”

Then his gaze moves to my lips. I feel a sharp tug in the pit of my stomach, an urge to take what I want even though I know it’s wrong.

Ronan moves a step closer, his eyes hazy with want. *The way he’s staring at my lips, though...*

I’m trying to formulate a plan for how I’m going to resist him. But my brain keeps coming up blank.

My hand leaps up, pressing into the center of his chest. “You can’t kiss me again,” I whisper, my voice hoarse.

He freezes. Something snaps across his face. Acceptance, I guess. “I know...”

I reach for the bags and he slides them into my hands.

“Enjoy the rest of the day, Nicky.”

“You, too.”

With a sigh, I turn and unlock the door. He’s still staring at me. I can feel the weight of his gaze on my back. It sends a tingle up my spine.

I hear him start to walk away and I can’t resist the urge to look back as he retreats to the main house. Our eyes meet when he glances back, too.

He grins. I grin.

Ugh! I want him. There! I admit it. I want Ronan Brighton.

But I won’t act on my lust. Without a word, I head inside and shut the door behind me.

It’s the smart thing to do.

Even if my keyed-up body violently disagrees.

NICKY

“**E**very mic is a *hot* mic.” Florence pins Ronan with a harsh look before carrying on. “Don’t assume otherwise, and don’t say anything you wouldn’t want the whole world to hear.”

“Right. Every mic is a hot mic.” He nods, half-listening as he takes long strides down the brightly-lit hallway.

Darius looks up from his phone to eyeball his hockey captain brother from under a stern brow. “You’ve got to keep your shit together, Ronan. Whether the Saints win or lose tonight.”

“Win or lose, huh? Let’s be real, D. The Saints can’t afford to take another loss at this point,” Ronan complains, adjusting the strap of the duffel bag on his broad shoulder.

I sort of agree with him. The Saints lost four of the six games they played in since I started working with Ronan. It’s been another rough two weeks for the team.

But at the moment, my mind is distracted from the team’s dismal performance. As Ronan walks, I can’t help but check him out.

He’s decked out in one of his expensive game-day suits. And holy shit, he looks hot in a suit. It’s one of those fitted ones, and it shows off those incredible arms and those long legs he has. *And his butt, y’all. His tight, muscular butt.*

It’s making me a little warm and tingly in all the right places.

Or the *wrong* places. Clearly the wrong places. All wrong. Because I’m not going ‘there’ with Ronan. Ever.

Doesn’t mean I won’t stare, though. Staring is allowed. Staring is

inevitable.

Staring is what gets me in trouble.

Ronan peeks over his shoulder and his eyes land directly on me.

That's when he catches me. With my eyes on his butt.

Busted!

His lips curl into a conceited grin. Like he knows exactly what I've been up to. I look away, brushing at the invisible lint on the skirt of my business suit.

Look—I've been celibate for months, and considering I'm around this man almost twenty-four seven, I'm pretty sure he has been, too, at least for the past few weeks. For two healthy adults who aren't saving themselves for anything special, that's a long freaking time.

Anyway, Florence and Darius are still preaching to Ronan. I'm trailing behind them, rolling my briefcase along with me as we hustle down some back hallway of the arena. We're in New Jersey right now, in the tense moments before the start of tonight's away game.

A lot is at stake and we all know it. That's why Florence is choosing her words very carefully, walking the line between '*Of course, we're going to win this game*' motivation, and '*But if not, don't be an asshole about it.*'

"Obviously, we're all hoping that we'll get a win today," Florence assures him. "But the root of the issue isn't the losses. The root of the issues is your *attitude* after the losses."

Ronan just grunts. "Look, Flo. You can't expect me to go around, cheesing for the cameras when I've got a bunch of reporters throwing idiot questions in my face."

I make an involuntary noise in my throat. *Oops. That was louder than I expected.* But seriously, Ronan has a point. Some of those reporters go out of their way to sabotage him with their asinine questions.

He turns over his back and peeks at me again.

Florence draws his attention back to the conversation. "You know what? Try this," she suggests helpfully. "As you're changing after the game and walking down to the press room, try practicing some talking points."

"Talking points?" he questions, sounding skeptical.

"Well, you already have a pretty good idea of what they'll ask if you win. And what types of questions they'll ask if you lose. So, we can rehearse a few lines to have ready when those questions come up. That way, you'll be mentally prepared and you should be able to sail through."

“It’s not the regular, run of the mill questions I have trouble with,” Ronan points out. “It’s the dumbass curveballs they always throw my way. The last time some idiot reporter asked me if I think I should just voluntarily resign the captain position before the end of the season. I mean, come on. What kind of fucking question is that?!”

Darius huffs in annoyance. “*Ronan.*”

“I get it,” the head of PR assures him. “Even the fans get it. But you can’t treat any question like a dumb one.”

“Easy for you to say,” Ronan mumbles.

When he glances back, our eyes meet again. It’s almost like he’s checking to make sure I’m still here. I don’t know why that gives me butterflies in my tummy.

This time, I cock a brow and tilt my head to the side, wordlessly telling him to stop being difficult.

Ronan’s lips curl faintly at the corners, then he releases a sigh. “Okay. Fine. I’ll try my best.”

“Please try.” She briefly presses her palms together in prayer. “And don’t sit there all grumpy and act like you don’t want to be there.”

“Me? I’d never do something like that!” He fakes offense.

Darius turns and side-eyes his brother. “Remember that game a few nights ago when the Saints lost by four, and you literally walked in the room and said you were only there cause you had to be?”

Ronan laughs ruefully at the reminder. “Oh, *that.*”

“Yeah. Don’t do that, Ronan.”

“Got it, boss. Is that all?” He gives Florence a salute, a smile lingering on his lips. “I need to jam to my playlist and get in the right mind space before the game. No more press stuff. It stresses me out.”

“Fine.” Florence gives a resigned smile. “Kick some butt out there.”

“You know I will.” He flashes a grin but I notice the way it wobbles as a glint of self-doubt sparks across his face. It only lasts for the blink of an eye, though. And then he’s back to his usual cocky self when he looks at me. “I’m gonna score all the goals tonight. I want to show my babysitter that I’m a big boy.”

Before I can interject, Ronan’s coach spots him from where he’s standing at the locker room door, huddled with a couple of the other players. The man waves the team captain over to join the discussion. Darius strides off along with him.

I hear one of the players whistle. “Who’s the hottie in the business suit?” Number 69 asks.

Ronan is quick to shoulder-bump his fellow hockey giant to the side. He growls. “Don’t even think about it, Lance. She’s mine!”

At his outburst, multiple eyebrows shoot up in the huddle. Whispered words are exchanged among the hockey players as eyes bounce between Ronan and me.

I feel my cheeks warm up.

Ronan clears his throat. “Mine...uh, my assistant, I mean,” he corrects himself, his ears turning pink. Then his lips curl into an embarrassed smile.

I roll a hand over my middle, smoothing out the fabric of my pencil skirt and the sudden butterflies in my tummy.

“Damn, coach. If I cause trouble and get arrested, can *I* get a hot assistant, too?” One of the other guys asks.

“You can get a knee to the nuts if you don’t stop interrupting me while I’m trying to start this team meeting,” the coach barks back. “Now, listen up, all of you!” The man heads into the locker room and his players follow after him.

Florence chuckles. “Hockey players...Let me tell you. Those guys make you work for every single penny of that fat paycheck.”

I nod slightly. “I believe you.”

Today, she’s wearing a puffy jacket with the Saints’ logo stitched onto the back. She’s paired it with dark jeans tucked into furry winter boots. She looks casual and cute.

She touches my elbow, nudging me to continue our stroll down the hallway. “So, how things going with Ronan?”

For a half second, a surge of apprehension hits me.

Does she know how many times I checked Ronan out while he was sleeping during our plane ride this morning?

Does she know that I’ve been having dirty thoughts about that man all night and all day?

I give my head a slight shake. No, Florence only cares about me helping the Saints’ star player to keep his public image squeaky clean.

“Things are going well with Ronan,” I tell her. *If you don’t count him being an effortless sex god and a total pain in my butt.*

“Good. Good.” Florence says slowly. Then she sighs. “That guy gets so worked up about everything. He wears all his emotions on his sleeve. I really

hope he keeps it together today.”

When she says that, I feel myself getting unreasonably defensive. “People really aren’t fair to Ronan. I’m sure that anyone who’s watching just sees a hothead who can’t control his anger or his actions,” I start, my forehead pinched, “And that may be true to some extent. But I also see a man who really *does* care about his teammates. A man who puts the whole team on his back. A man who beats himself up when he can’t carry everyone successfully. I think that Ronan has good intentions. He needs to be given the benefit of the doubt sometimes.” I lay a hand on my chest. “It hurts my heart to see him so frustrated. He blames himself every time the team doesn’t win.”

Florence quirks an eyebrow at my passionate little rant.

Geez. What the hell is wrong with me? *Rein in the dramatics, Nicky. Your emotions are getting away from you.*

I clear my throat. “Uh, um. I think he’s ready.” I nod.

“I sure as shit hope he is,” she says after a pause. Then she looks me up and down, like she’s taking in my business attire. “Make sure to have some fun today. You’re allowed, you know that?”

“Right.” I force a smile.

“See ya later, Nicky.” With brisk steps, she heads off in the other direction, stalking down the hallway.

She leaves me there, frowning down at my business suit. Maybe I do look a little bit uptight. I smooth my fingers over my perfect bun. It’s been such a pain, having to flat-iron my hair all the time. Maybe I can afford to let loose a little bit.

The game starts a while later. Since I don’t have Karli and the rest of the Brighton crew tonight, I end up sticking in one of the executive suites with some of the Saints staff.

Our team comes out with a vengeance tonight. Ronan is in tiptop form on the ice. He’s focused, determined and downright lethal as he slices across the rink.

He plays like a beast, shooting one puck after another after another past his opponent’s goalie. New Jersey doesn’t stand a chance. The Saints absolutely demolish their competition, leaving them in ruins. 5-2. Three of those goals scored by Ronan.

Every time he sends a puck slamming into the net, his eyes find mine. Even as the crowd is screaming and his teammates are pouring down on him in celebration, Ronan always finds me in the crowd.

I feel electrified, watching him. I shamelessly lose my mind, yelling and cheering my team on.

My team?

Welp. Looks like I'm a hockey girl now. A Saints girl.

A Ronan girl.

I block that thought out.

During the post-game interviews, I stand at the side of the room and I can't wipe the smile off of my face. Ronan is still guarded as he answers the reporters' questions. But at least he doesn't say or do anything that can be used against him in the court of public opinion.

I ride with Florence and some people from the PR department back to the hotel. I'm waiting in the lobby when Ronan and the rest of the team exit their bus and stroll in.

Ronan's eyes find mine and they hold as he prowls in my direction. Jesus—he's hot.

And he's striding across the lobby, hockey stick in one hand, duffel bag in the other, one golden brown lock flopping across his forehead, looking like a hockey warrior returning from battle. I really like the way his hair curls over his brow after a shower.

Heaven. Have mercy on me.

"Shots! Shots! Shots!" Tipton barrels in. One hand cupped around his mouth, he's pumping his other fist in the air.

The rest of the guys join in the shouting, looking around for the hotel bar and drawing the disapproving attention of the hotel staff. Their coach half-heartedly tells them to simmer down, but from the grin on his face, it's clear that the man doesn't give two shits if his boys make some noise. They won the game and that's what matters tonight.

Parker notices me standing there and he grins. "You gonna drink with us, Nicky?"

"Thanks for the invite but that wouldn't be a good idea," I say, smiling back at him.

Ronan reaches out and touches my hand in that gentle way he does. It still amazes me how that simple touch does such disorderly things to my whole body.

And then when he throws in a smile, I literally feel my knees buckle. "You should come have a drink with us."

I raise both eyebrows at him. "A drink? Who says *you're* having a

drink?”

He blinks. “Um, what? Of course I’m having a drink.”

My only response is to tilt my head.

“No way,” he says disbelievingly. “We won tonight.” He jabs a thumb over his shoulder to where his teammates are still celebrating.

Florence steps in. “Yes, you did win. And we want to keep the headlines positive. So I think it’s best if you just go get some rest, Captain. Set a good example for the rest of the guys.”

“You can’t be serious,” Ronan says, his jaw hanging open.

I smirk at him. “You heard the woman. It’s bedtime for you, big guy.”

His eyes bounce between Florence and me. He’s waiting for either one of us to crack. It’s not happening.

Across the lobby, the coach is talking to the rest of the team, letting them know that tonight won’t be some wild and crazy post-win extravaganza. Looks like nobody’s partying hard tonight.

Finally, Ronan’s shoulders slump in acceptance. “Fine.”

Florence grins. She turns to me. “You have the key to your hotel room, Nicky?”

“I do.” I hold up my white plastic card in illustration.

“Good.” Then she looks to Ronan. “Good job tonight, Captain. You played really well.”

“And now I get to go sit in my hotel room and stare at a wall after tonight’s big win. Yay!” He frowns. “Feels like another punishment, Flo.”

“It’s called discipline. Get some rest. You’ll be grateful in the morning.” She shoos Ronan off toward the elevator. “You’re welcome, by the way.”

I bite back a giggle as we step onto the lift. Ronan slumps against one wall. I take the opposite corner, leaning a hip against the metal railing. “Good game tonight,” I say, my eyes following the numbers on the panel as we climb.

I don’t know if I can look at him with the way my body feels right now. Just sharing the same space as him has my skin prickling with awareness.

“Thanks,” he says, still all grumbly. “What are *you* doing tonight?” he asks.

I lift a shoulder. “Probably watching some TV. And ooh!—I’m only halfway through the novel I’m reading. It’s so good. Can’t wait to get back into it.”

In my periphery, I see him nod. “Okay. Not bad. That could be fun.”

When the elevator arrives on my floor, I take a step toward the exit. “Well, good night then.”

But before I can get off, Ronan pops off the elevator wall. He’s following me.

“Oh, your room is on this floor, too?” I ask him, peeking back.

“No,” he says simply, striding right along.

I narrow my eyes at him. “So where are you going?”

“To your room,” he says, matter-of-factly. Like it’s perfectly normal for us to hang out alone in a hotel room in the middle of the night.

Spinning to face him, I press a firm palm into his even firmer chest.

His fingers easily clasp around my wrist and now he’s casually leading me down the hallway. “Oh, you don’t get to just walk away after you gleefully fucked up my plans for the evening.”

“Excuse me?”

Ronan slips the key card from my hand, scoping out the room number scribbled on the back. “If I can’t hang out with the guys, then you’re stuck with me. It’s your job to keep me entertained tonight.”

Panic clenches my belly. I chase after him, struggling to keep up with his easy saunter. “Who made up that rule? You can’t just make up that rule!”

He swipes the card over the reader at the room entrance. He easily shoves the door open and turns to me with a smirk. “After you, madam.”

Shit. It’s a war inside my head. *I shouldn’t do this. Do I want to do this? Should I do this? Damn—I really want to do this.*

I throw a guilty peek up and down the hallway, looking for spectators. Then with a steely breath, I duck into the hotel room, hauling my rolling bag along with me.

NICKY

“**W**hat is Ronan Brighton doing in my hotel room...?” I softly bang my head against the wall, again and again and again.

I should have said no when he insisted that I have to keep him company tonight.

I should have marched him right back to the elevator when he followed me out on my floor.

I should have set a boundary. I’m all about boundaries after all.

But I didn’t. And now I’m in this small, sterile-smelling bathroom, trying to talk myself out of what might be a panic attack.

Here’s the thing—as frustrating as Ronan is, I know that he wouldn’t be sitting on my hotel bed right now if I’d seriously told him to get lost. He would have tucked tail and gone back to his own room. But the fact is, I didn’t make any real effort to send him away.

And now, I’m wondering what that decision means *about me*.

“Everything okay in there?” I hear his voice through the wall.

I quickly smooth my fingers down the fabric of my skirt and exit the bathroom. “Yeah. I’m great.” Lingering in the entryway, I force a smile.

Meanwhile Ronan is sitting on my bed, casual as can be. Forearm propped behind his head, pillow wedged behind his back, room service menu on his lap. He’s wearing a Saints T-shirt that clings to his shoulders and a pair of sweatpants. The essence of his cologne saturates the air of this tiny room.

“You sure? I heard you mumbling to yourself in there.” He tosses the room service menu onto the bedside table.

“I...I was making a phone call,” I lie.

His eyes shift to where my phone is charging on the bedside table. Then back to me. He raises an eyebrow, his gaze twinkling with amusement.

Caught in my lie, I fold my arms under my boobs. “Shut up.”

“I didn’t say anything.” He chuckles.

Ronan shifts around on the mattress. His hoodie is discarded on the chair in the corner. In the dimly-lit room, the TV casts colorful lights across his features.

“Come sit down.” He pats the duvet beside him in invitation.

I hesitate, my eyes bouncing from his smirk to the bed to his muscular arms to the crotch of his pants. Everywhere.

Everything about this spells trouble.

He chuckles lightly, grabbing his blue Gatorade from the table. “Look at that. Nicky Westbrook is nervous.”

“I’m not nervous, okay?” I grouse.

“There’s no need to be. I’m a man with great self-control. I won’t bite. Not even if you beg me to.” His grin is uncontrollable.

“Ronan, I will not beg you to bite me.”

“You’d better not,” he warns. “Or else things’ll get really awkward when I turn you down.”

Determined to prove that I’m not affected by him, I march across the room and climb onto the corner of the mattress. “You are the most annoying human being ever.”

He picks up the remote, clicking around. “Ooh! Do I get a trophy for that? I’m still waiting for my trophy in the mail.”

“Shush! What are we watching?”

“New episode of *A Chance with Vance*.” He adjusts the pillow behind his back. “Get over here. You’re missing the good part.”

Curious, I inch a tiny bit closer to him, twisting my neck to see what’s playing on the TV screen. “Oh, cool. That’s the reality show we were watching at your brother’s bar. Right?”

He nods. “Yeah. I have this week’s episode to catch up on.”

When he shifts again, his arm brushes against mine. On instinct, I leap away from him, putting space between us.

Perfectly composed and relaxed, Ronan looks at me sideways. “Would you get comfortable? Please? We can hang out without it getting weird between us. You know that, right?”

“Right.” By now, I’m starting to realize that I’m probably more concerned about *my* self-control than I am about Ronan’s. Truth be told, I’m the one who might jump his bones at any given moment.

He’s a professional athlete. Those guys are good at that discipline stuff. Me, on the other hand? I have a tendency to get woozy off this man’s pheromones. I don’t know if I trust myself here.

Ronan pauses for a moment. And he searches my face. *Really* searches it. “Hey. I thought that we were joking around with each other when you acted like you didn’t want me here. But if I’m making you uncomfortable for real, I can leave.” He’s already twisting the cap back onto his drink and swinging his legs over the side of the bed. “I’m sorry that I overstepped your—”

“No.” The urgency in the way I say it makes us both freeze. I pause. “Stay. P-please stay.”

“You sure?” he asks me, looking serious for once in his life.

“I’m sure.”

He examines my face again. Then one corner of his mouth quirks into a brief smile. “Okay. But if you’re uncomforta—”

“I’m not uncomfortable.” I scoot a tiny bit toward the center of the mattress, trying to act normal while also being sure to leave adequate space between Ronan and me. I snatch the drink from his hand, uncap it and take a quick sip. Maybe that will hide how much I’m freaking out on the inside. I turn my attention to the TV, trying to ease the tension. “I’d bet people in Starlight Falls are really into this show.”

He settles back in and cautiously takes another sip of his drink, his eyes still assessing me. “Some people are holding weekly viewing parties,” he informs me, also carefully keeping his distance on his side of the bed. “My mom and grandmother are tuning in from Europe. Nolan is going crazy because his staff at the bar keep playing the old episodes on repeat.”

“Oh my gosh. Poor guy,” I laugh.

As I get cozy, my skirt rides up and Ronan’s eyes instantly travel to my legs. But he looks away just as quickly, focusing fully on the screen. I discreetly adjust my skirt, trying to maintain a sense of modesty about me. Not the easiest task since this fabric isn’t exactly stretchy.

In the scene that’s currently playing on the TV, Vance is on a date with Inez. She really is gorgeous. Geez. Her face is almost painful to watch.

Anyway, Vance cups her cheek and slowly leans in, like he’s going in for the kiss.

“Oh, he wants her,” I say, eyes riveted to the show.

“But she’s so not gonna let him.” Ronan predicts confidently, offering me some of the treats he’s snatched from the minibar.

I accept the box and pour myself a handful of chocolate-covered almonds. “You think?”

“I’m sure.” Ronan grabs the package back from me and tosses some chocolate almonds into his mouth.

And just as he predicted, Inez drops her forehead to her bachelor’s, subtly keeping him at bay instead of letting him take it ‘there’. She mumbles something about not wanting to take things to a physical level. Yet.

Ronan chuckles. “See?”

“How did you know that would happen?” I question him as I lean over and grab my paperback from my bag on the floor.

“Look at her body language.” He points at the screen. “She’s got her arms crossed over her boobs like she’s afraid he’ll attack them. And the closer he gets, the more she leans away from him.”

“You’re right,” I say, reanalyzing the scene with fresh eyes.

“To be fair, I know Inez in real life. I’ve seen her body language with Nolan. It’s not the same. That’s how I know that this guy is so not getting any. Not from Inez, at least.”

“I don’t blame her.” I narrow my eyes. “I know he’s a popular actor and all, but he’s giving pervy vibes. And I don’t blame the girl. Nolan’s way cuter.”

“Nolan’s cuter?” Ronan’s eyebrow goes up.

Ha! Ronan-The-Jealous-Bear is back. Time to poke at him. “Yah, Nolan is *really* cute. Like, cute for real.”

Ronan’s fingers clench around the remote. And did he just growl?

“Nicky and Nolan...Such a nice ring to it. Don’t you think?” I smile dreamily. “Is he single?”

Ronan tosses a pillow at me. “Over my dead body is that happening...” he declares.

I laugh and I laugh. “What’s your beef with your twin brother?”

He shrugs a shoulder. “I just...”

Thanks to the darkness in the room, I can’t tell for sure, but it definitely seems like he’s blushing again.

His mouth pulls into a flat line. “Growing up as a twin is awesome and awful at the same time. I love Nolan. We’re in sync in a way that makes our

other brothers jealous. But then again, we've just always had to share everything. Our bedroom. Clothes. Our birthday. Heck, at home, we were practically one person. It was always just Nolan-and-Ronan. So, sometimes, I just want my own identity. Sometimes, I just like having something that's 'mine'. Something I don't have to share."

My neck jerks back in offense. What kind of proprietary bullshit is this?! "Newsflash, sir. I am not 'yours'."

"That came out wrong. Sorry." He drags a hand through his hair and winces. "I didn't mean it in a weird caveman possessive way."

"I understand what you're trying to say." For once, I give him a break instead of busting his balls. I replay what he just said about having a twin. "Sheesh. I never thought of it that way."

"It's hard to say what it's really like, because I've never had it any different." He shrugs. "But look—can you imagine what it's like going through your whole life feeling...interchangeable? It's fucking annoying."

"Interchangeable?" I question.

He nods. "We grew up with everyone treating us like we're the same person. Sometimes, even our parents. Our teachers. Our crushes in high school. No one could tell us apart."

"I could tell you apart," I say with a simple shrug.

"You could?" He sounds surprised.

My head bobs. "Even before I realized you had a twin brother, the moment I saw Nolan, I just knew he wasn't...*you*." There's a breathiness in the way I say that. It's a little embarrassing. I clear my throat to hide it. But I think Ronan picks up on it.

In any case, he's now watching me like I just offered him a Philly cheesesteak, a back rub and a blowjob. Like I'm a genie who just popped out of a bottle.

"I hate feeling interchangeable," he says with a little chuckle. "Like I'm nothing special. Easily replaceable. Sometimes it feels like that in hockey. Like if I don't play good enough, if I'm not the best every single time, they could just pluck another eager clone off the assembly line and stick him in my skates and no one would even notice the difference." His voice goes quiet. He looks so young when he speaks again. "I hate that feeling."

I don't know what comes over me. I lay my hand on top of his. "I'd notice the difference. You're...you're unforgettable, Ronan. You make an impression when you walk into a room. You have star power."

His eyes twinkle when they flick to mine. He twines his fingers through my fingers and gives a little squeeze. “Fuck. I actually needed to hear someone say that.”

We share a smile.

“And just to clarify,” he says a moment later, “I love my brother to death. I’m so fucking proud of him, and but the truth is, Nolan has more natural talent than I do and I think he’s smarter, too. He’s better than me at so many things. It feels unfair that I get to live this life and he doesn’t.” Ronan sighs. “So every time I hit the ice, I’m reminded that Nolan didn’t get to live out his hockey dreams. So every game I play, I feel like I’m playing it for the both of us. I’m representing the both of us. It’s a lot of pressure. Every time I fuck up, I feel like I’m letting Nolan down, too.”

“I don’t think that Nolan’s holding you to that expectation,” I tell Ronan softly. “And if he is, that’s his problem. Not yours.”

He shakes his head. “I know that. My brother never put any pressure on me. It’s something I do to myself.” He absentmindedly twists the lid of his drink on and off as he speaks.

“Nolan wouldn’t want you putting that kind of weight on your shoulders, would he?”

“He absolutely wouldn’t. He’d say that he loves his life the way it turned out. He’d say that all the sacrifices he made were worth it for Stella. But still I...”

“You still feel a sense of duty.”

“Right.” He nods lightly.

“You’ve got to know how proud they are of you, right? I mean, Stella understands hockey better than half of those announcers on the *Sports Broadcast Network*. And Nolan was absolutely beaming when he watched you play that home game.”

“I know.” Ronan nods slowly. “I just want to be...special.”

“You are...” I hear myself whisper.

He smiles. “Thank you, Nicky.”

Silence falls over the room and we both bring our eyes back to the reality show. But as for me, I can’t hear a thing they’re saying. My mind is trying to work through all the layers of Captain Ronan Brighton. All I keep thinking about is how this complicated man just opened up to me.

Then out of nowhere, Ronan shifts on the bed, turning on his side to face me. My stomach dips and the hairs on the back of my neck stand at attention.

God—if he slipped his hand between my thighs right now, I wouldn't even stop him.

"I could so see you on one of those shows," he comments absently as his eyes bounce around my face.

"What? Me?!" I spit out.

"Yes, you," he insists.

"Do you even know what you're talking about?" I'm laughing now.

He nods. "Definitely. You're all feminine and graceful and shit."

I laugh. "Graceful is not something I get called very often."

"Of course you're graceful. Just one look at you and I can tell that you're a whole lot more girly than you let on to be. It's almost like you're trying to hide it under all that fierce badass-ness...But I see it."

When he looks at me like that, I feel exposed. Like he's staring directly at the hidden parts of me that he's not supposed to see.

On the one hand, I want to clam up and hide. Or make a snarky comment to throw him off-track. But the strange thing is, another part of me doesn't want to push him away. On some level, I know he won't use my weaknesses against me to hurt me. Like other guys have.

I set my book on my lap and flip through the pages to give my hands something to do. "My father always said that was my secret talent—hiding the real me under my harsh exterior," I confess. "Dad wasn't complaining, though. I think he liked that my prickly attitude kept a lot of the boys away."

Ronan spits out a laugh. "Ha! He wanted to keep the boys away? I'd bet that didn't work. I'd bet he had to chase the boys away from you with a stick. Pretty Peach."

I shake my head. "No stick-chasing was required. After sniffing around me for long enough, the boys would get intimidated all on their own. Then they'd run away." I bite my lip because it hurts to say this. "I haven't dated as much as people probably think I have."

Damn. I actually just said all that out loud. To him. Why did I say all that to him?!

This man is breaking down my tough girl persona, brick by brick.

"Okay. *That* I don't believe," Ronan challenges me.

"It's true," I insist. "Not many men know what to do with my big mouth and even bigger personality."

Oh my gosh, Nicky! What happened to not talking to him about my personal life? As we sit here on this bed in this dark room, all my armor is

down. The boundaries have been trampled to the ground.

“If they’re intimidated by you, that’s their problem. Not yours.” A crooked grin lifts one corner of his mouth as he repeats my words from just a moment ago. “A real man isn’t afraid of a challenge. If he’s smart enough to realize that the prize at the end is worth the fight, he’ll fight.”

His words hit me square in the chest.

“I want a man who thinks I’m worth it,” I whisper, a heavy weight pressing down on my heart. “I don’t want to have to apologize for who I am.” My shoulders deflate and I bite the tip of my nail. “It can be so exhausting at times, always feeling the need to prove to everyone how tough I am.”

“You don’t have to prove anything, Nicky.” He reaches out and intertwines our fingers again. “And you don’t have to be tough all the time.”

God—I like the way that feels. Comforting. Tender. Safe.

Not *safe* in an ‘I’m settling for you because I don’t see you as a threat’ way.’

Safe in an ‘I trust you’ way.

This is weird for me.

“You know what the most annoying part is?” I hear myself whisper.

“What?” He’s listening to me. Intently. Like everything else in the world has faded away.

“All I’ve ever had were situationships. Never the real thing. I’ve never had a soul-deep connection with a guy. Every connection has always felt surface-level. They all run away before things get raw. Real.” I sigh. “At this point, I truly don’t believe the kind of depth I want in a relationship even exists.”

A deep frown grooves into his forehead. He looks a bit upset. “That’s a real pessimistic way to think.”

“It’s realistic.” I shrug, staring down at the shirtless man on my book cover. All broad and muscled and alpha. He sort of looks like Ronan, if I’m being honest. “I wish I could just build a man from scratch. The perfect man. Just the way I want him.” I laugh ruefully at the ridiculousness of the thought. My amusement quickly slips away. “But I can’t. I’ve accepted that. And I refuse to settle anymore. That’s why I’m done with relationships.”

Ronan studies my face for a moment, and I’d pay good money to know what he’s thinking. And then he says, “Is that what you want, Peach? A deep connection?”

I inhale a shallow breath and whisper. “Of course. Isn’t that what

everybody wants?”

“On some level, I guess. Not everybody’s willing to admit it to themselves.” He squeezes my hand.

“Why are us humans like that, though?” I laugh wryly.

“Because when you admit that you want something more, you open yourself up to the possibility that you won’t get it. And that can be disappointing. Heartbreaking, even. And I don’t know about you, but I don’t like getting my heart broken.” He grins at me, clutching a hand protectively over his heart. “I guess that’s why I’m not doing relationships, either.”

I sigh, sinking into the pillows behind my back. “Well, I can tell you the relationships I’ve been in have been nothing but disappointment. Even when I set the bar really low.” Just saying that out loud makes me sad. “So, if I can’t find a guy who’s on my level, I’d rather be alone. I don’t want to have to roll around in the mud just so I can have someone to play with.”

Ronan laughs for a moment and then he grows serious. “I understand that, Peach.” He’s silent and then he huffs quietly. “Doesn’t it sort of make you wish there was a course you could take? Or a class you could go to three times a week? Some way you could learn how to do relationships right?”

“I think that’s what a life coach is for, no?”

“Hmm. A life coach. That’s something to look into.”

The more we talk, the more open and raw I feel. The more I ache for Ronan to be the man to put my pieces back together.

Ugh. This is why I hate feelings. Because the feelings I’m feeling right now are a perfect contradiction to everything my good sense is telling me.

I can’t let this guy melt me. I have to reestablish the concrete walls that keep me safe. “All I know is, I’m not handing my heart over to the next guy to flash me a pretty smile. From here on out, if a man wants my attention, he’d better be ready to battle for my affection.”

Ronan reaches across, and allows himself to trace the bridge of my nose. “A man who’s intimidated by you doesn’t even deserve a chance with you.”

“There you go, talking about what I deserve again.” I laugh ironically.

He nods. “Nicky Westbrook, you are a force of a woman. And if you’re with a man who can’t stand strong in the presence of the whirlwind you are, you will constantly be making yourself smaller so you don’t intimidate him.” His palm slides along my jaw, cupping it. “You don’t deserve to live like that. You deserve to show the world every bit of the powerhouse that you are. You deserve a partner who will celebrate you. Not some asshole who’s

constantly looking for the dimmer switch because he can't stand how brightly you shine."

Gosh—when he looks at me with all that genuine conviction on his face, I'd believe anything he says to me.

When Ronan speaks about me like that, when he puts me all the way up on that pedestal, when he paints me in those glittery colors, I become so overwhelmed.

I should probably respond to what he's saying but I'm afraid to open my mouth. Because if I do, I'll probably break out into ugly sobs.

I can't remember the last time I felt this seen. This valued. This appreciated.

So instead of trying to respond, I close my eyes. I lay my head on the pillow and attempt to absorb all the beautiful things this man just said about me.

A few quiet moments later, I feel a blanket settling around my shoulders. Now my mind is a little fuzzy, suspended in the space between sleep and wakefulness.

My eyes flutter open and I see Ronan hovering above the bed. "Hey..." he says tenderly. My heart squeezes at the gentleness in his voice.

"Hey..." My lips curve into an easy smile.

"I'm gonna go..." He reaches for his sweater where it's balled up on the chair.

Over his back, the TV is still on, the sound completely muted as another episode of the reality show plays.

In my groggy state, I stretch a hand out to him. "Don't go. I don't want to be alone right now. I just want you to stay."

These words don't feel familiar to me. I can't believe they're falling from my lips. Good thing I'm way too exhausted right now to overanalyze them to death.

"You want me to...?" he asks.

I nod against the pillow.

His doubtful eyes drift from my face to the outline of my body hidden beneath the thin sheet.

"Please..." I say softly.

He hesitates. Then his chest rises with a deep inhale. "Okay. Sure."

Ronan drops his sweater back on the chair. I watch his careful, tentative movements as he slowly climbs into the bed.

The voice in my mind taunts me. *Where are all those professional boundaries now, Nicky? Huh? Where are they? Where are they?*

That judgy bitch in my head can go suck on some rocks, for all I care. Ronan and I aren't doing anything wrong. We aren't kissing. We aren't touching. We're each laying on our own respective side of the bed.

Nothing bad going on. Nothing bad at all.

The room falls silent. Eventually, I'm drifting off to the sound of Ronan's own rhythmic breathing. I like this. It's companionable. Zero expectations. Zero pressure. It makes me feel safe.

Sometime just after midnight, my eyes flutter open again. My head eases off my pillow and I glance around. The bright colors of the TV dance across the darkened walls. It takes a moment for me to remember where I am.

Oh, shit. I'm in a hotel bed. With Ronan Brighton. This can't be real.

I turn on my side and smile at the sight of him.

There he is. The man himself. Eyes closed, long lashes fluttering as his wide chest rises and falls evenly. Limbs spread out, one massive hand splayed across his washboard abs where the hem of his T-shirt has ridden up. My god—he's beautiful.

As for me, I'm a mess. The blanket he draped over me a few hours ago is gone. My legs are exposed where my skirt has slid up my thighs. My blouse is untucked from my waistband. And every article of clothing I'm wearing is wrinkled to hell.

I sit up and get a glimpse of my hair in the dresser mirror across the room. Let's just say, the fly-aways have flown away. All of them. My head is a frizzy mess.

"For goodness sake, Nicky," I croak in my throat.

Needing to use the porcelain throne, I ease myself off the mattress, careful not to wake my bed buddy.

I'm taking quiet footsteps toward the bathroom when I hear Ronan say my name in a pained groan. "*Nicky...*"

I peek over my shoulder at him. "Shit. Sorry," I whisper, flinching. "Didn't mean to wake you."

He doesn't respond to my comment. Instead, he repeats my name. This time in a guttural rasp that sends visceral heat racing down my spine. "Fuck, Nicky. Yes."

Confusion sweeps into my mind and I squint my eyes at him in the dimly lit room. I watch his hand slide from his stomach, down under the waistband

of his shorts.

My eyeballs bulge out of my skull.

I leap a whole foot backward, palms clamped over my mouth to keep from screaming out loud.

Ronan is fast asleep. But now his hand is inside his pants. Working. Up and down. With my name falling from his lips again and again.

Hol-ee shit!

And now the space between my legs is pulsing like crazy. Why is the space between my legs pulsing like crazy?! Someone please explain it.

My groggy brain still hasn't fully processed exactly what I'm witnessing. All I know is, I need to move. Fast.

I take a step backward away from the bed. "Okay, okay..." I whisper to myself. "I just need to grab a sweater. And go for a walk. That sounds like a good idea. To clear my head. Or better yet, a jog. Or a run. A really, really fast run. Far away from here."

Instead, I trip over my bag strap.

My feet slip from beneath me. I'm going down like a sleep-drunk sack of potatoes. In the process, I try to grab onto the lampshade. Not a great idea. The whole damn lamp comes down with me.

Ronan and his superhero moves can't save me now. Because Ronan's too busy rubbing one out in his sleep and moaning my name.

Oh. My. God.

My ass hits the floor with a crack.

"Ow," I groan from where I'm now all tangled up in luggage and electrical wires on the floor. I'm lying on my back, arms wrapped around the lamp, legs up in the air.

Graceful as fuck.

The commotion rouses Ronan from his dream. He rolls onto his side, sleepy eyes finding me in the dark. "Nicky? Um, why are you humping the table lamp?"

RONAN

Moving in a fog, I squirm to the edge of the bed to try and scoop Nicky off the floor.

It's only then that I realize that my hand is stuck inside my pants. And wrapped around my cock.

No fucking way.

From her position on the floor, Nicky watches me. "You said my name..." she rushes out. Her eyes are wide. And I can't tell if that expression is horror. Or shock.

Or...arousal?

The jigsaw puzzle in my groggy mind starts piecing itself together as I try to retrace tonight's events.

We were watching TV and I fell asleep. I started having one of my vivid dreams. About Nicky. And I'm sure as fuck I started moaning her name.

"Shit..." I mutter.

"Shit?" Nicky repeats, setting the lamp upright on the carpet beside her. "That's all you're going to say?"

I rake my fingers through my hair. The strands flop over my face and I'm pretty sure I look crazy as hell right now.

"What do you want me to say, Nicky? It's not my fault. It was a dream. I don't have control over what I dream." I extend a hand to her. "Are you gonna let me help you off the floor?"

Her suspicious eyes dart to my hand.

Oh, right. That's the hand that was just inside my boxers, choking my dick. I wouldn't want to touch it either, if I were her.

Pressing her palms to the floor, she pushes herself up and rises on her own. Hovering over the bed, she eyeballs me. That honey brown gaze is on fire as it narrows on my eyes. “So, you were dreaming about me?”

“Yes. It happens sometimes.”

Her jaw drops open.

“Often, actually,” I throw in for whatever reason. I have a death wish, apparently.

Nicky’s nostrils flare with outrage.

“I’m sorry. It’s harmless. I swear.” I’m not making this any better. My hands shoot up in defense and internally, I say a silent prayer that she doesn’t throttle me.

“Often...?” she mutters, absolutely incensed.

Fuck. At this stage, there’s no point in lying. “Yes. Often.”

She goes silent. Standing before me, her gaze drops down to the carpet.

My heart ticks like a time bomb as I wait for her reaction. I expect violence. Lots of violence. Maybe some blood will be shed. My blood, just to be clear.

But instead, when Nicky’s eyes climb back to mine, they’re shy and curious. “What...what do you dream about?” she asks, her voice unmistakably breathy.

Okay, um. *That* I did not see coming.

I slide my fingers into my hair again, feeling like a perv. “Uh...um.”

“Don’t lie to me, Ronan.” Her honey brown irises bounce around my face. “I want to know.”

My palms are sweating. My pulse is pounding so hard. But she asked the question. So I’m going to tell her the truth. “Your mouth...”

Her breath hisses on a sharp inhale. “What...?”

My attention drops to those pretty peach lips. Wanna taste them so bad.

“I dream about your mouth, Nicky.”

Her tongue darts out. It slowly drags across her bottom lip. My eyes follow the movement.

In a trance, I rise off the bed and stand before her. My thumb comes up and traces a path across her mouth, softly pulling down her bottom lip. I lean down by her ear. “I dream about all the things I could do to these pretty lips.”

I expect her to tell me off. To push me away. To slap me across the face and go on one of her trademark diatribes about professional boundaries and all.

Rather, her lips fall open. She draws my finger into her mouth, gently biting into the calloused tip. I hiss with arousal at the sting.

“You shouldn’t be touching me like that...” she whispers, her voice cracking under the weight of her arousal. Her tongue circles my fingertip.

Her words lack her usual sass. They lack any conviction at all. In fact, her body language says the exact opposite of the words leaving her mouth.

“But you want me to...” I say, daring to loop my free arm around her waist.

I can’t lie. Nicky can be headstrong. Sassy. Intimidating. She’s the kind of woman who would rip off your balls, put them in a cardboard shipping box and leave them on your mother’s front porch, if you step out of line.

But I stand by what I said to her. She needs a man who’s brave enough to handle all that fire of hers. A man who won’t back down. A man who’s willing to battle.

Fuck. I’d do battle for her. Gladly. She’s worth it.

Body pressed against mine, she nods. “Tell me more...” she demands softly. “I want to know everything. Tell me what you dream about doing to me.”

“I dream about tasting your mouth. And your breasts. And that place between your legs.” I slide my thigh between hers and instantly, her hips grind down. “I dream about that *a lot*.”

I hear her breath catch in her throat.

The fruity scent of her shampoo surrounds me. I can smell her arousal in the air. My balls are aching. My dick is a steel rod.

I carry on. “I want to make you come so hard. I dream about sitting your pussy on my tongue. And licking you until you’re squeezing your thighs around my face. Until your body is shaking. Until you’re screaming so loud it ends up on the six o’clock news.”

“Oh yeah?” she whispers with a laugh. “On the news?”

“I can see the headlines now.” I lean in and sink my teeth into the lobe of her ear. “*Honey Hill woman’s orgasm mistaken for 6.5 magnitude earthquake...*”

She giggles. “You’re ridiculous.”

“*Young lady’s moans disrupt international telecommunications networks...*”

Her laughter grows.

“*Meet Nicky Westbrook—the woman whose sex screams could be heard*”

by astronauts all the way at the International Space Station..."

Her face tilts up, honey irises twinkling as she looks into my eyes. "You've got jokes, Hockey Guy. But can you even back any of that up?"

"I absolutely fucking guarantee it." I let my hand slip down to the curve of her ass. "When I flip you onto your stomach, with your face down in the pillows and your ass up in the air...when I spread your legs and lick every part of you without skipping one inch...I'm gonna blow your fucking mind, Peach."

My pulse throbs in my throat. My skin prickles with danger. We're in such an intimate position. If either of us moved an inch, our lips would touch.

Should I even be this close to her?

"If you don't want me to kiss you, you need to walk away. Now."

But she doesn't walk away. Instead, she inches closer, pressing her curves against me. Her words come out in a whisper. "Kiss me, Ronan. I don't care if it's wrong. Just kiss me."

NICKY

Ronan doesn't hesitate to give me what I want. His big hands capture my cheeks and his warm lips slide over mine. I cling to the front of his T-shirt as he walks me backward.

He tips me over the edge of the bed. I hit the mattress, eagerly pulling him down on top of me. He braces himself on his strong arms, careful not to crush me under his weight.

"Peach. You're fucking beautiful. It blows my mind. *You* blow my mind."

I feel my heart swelling from all the emotions rushing through it. I'm not supposed to feel this weak. "Goddammit. You sure know how to knock down a girl's defenses, Hockey Guy."

He pushes his hips into mine. Just enough to drown me in the heat and cinnamon-y musk of his body. Just enough to let me know how hard he is for me.

"I'm not the bad guy here." He traces a finger over my lips. "You're turning me into a man I don't even recognize."

Ronan leans down and kisses me some more. I wrap my arms around him, returning each lick of his tongue with a passion I haven't felt before.

Unsealing our lips, I drag my palms down the broad expanse of his back. "You know this can't go anywhere, right?"

Just saying the words out loud makes my soul ache. I'm so attracted to him. I really freaking am. But we don't fit. We're not compatible. We can't afford to delude ourselves.

"I know that," he says, and although I agree, hearing him confirm it deflates something inside me. "I'd probably get into even more shit with the

team if they found out about this.”

I nod, reaching up to rake my fingers through his hair. “And it would probably wreck my reputation. No one at the office would take me seriously if they found out you and I fooled around.”

He drops his lips to my collar, gently kissing a path along the bone. “Plus, all this is temporary,” he says into my neck. “Once the Saints’ season is over, we won’t even see each other anymore.”

I press my eyes shut against that reality. “Right.”

“So let’s just enjoy this. Right now. Let me make you come, Nicky. We don’t have to think about what happens next.”

My head bobs slightly. “Yeah. Let’s not think about what happens next.”

Kissing me again, he explores my mouth with the probing force of his tongue. His lips are warm and sweet like chocolate almonds. I melt deeper into this moment with each feverish swipe of his tongue.

Still bracing himself above me, one of his hands finds my breast. His palm kneads and caresses my globe through my blouse.

I want these clothes gone.

“Get me naked. Touch me,” I command him, my mouth pressed to his.

If this night together is nothing but a stolen moment, we might as well make the most of it.

He pulls his lips away from mine. “So you think you’re going to boss me around?” he says with an ironic chuckle, his lips barely grazing mine.

I’d like to believe that I’m bossing him around. The truth is, I’m begging. Shamelessly begging. I just want more of his skin on more of my skin.

“I’m giving directions. Like a tour guide. Think of it like that.”

His fingertips steal under the hem of my blouse, tracing up my ribs and making me shiver. *Skin on skin. Yeah. More of that.*

“I don’t want a fucking tour guide.” His fingers slip beneath one cup of my bra and his palm covers my tingling globe. “Let me get lost. I wanna get fucking lost in you, Nicky.”

The way he’s touching me with those big, strong hands makes my spine arch off the bed. How can his touch be so tender yet so powerful at the same time? It feels so ridiculously good.

“Your skin is so soft,” he whispers, a note of awe in his voice.

He absolutely takes his time, undoing every button of my blouse, kissing along the outline of my bra, slowly unfastening the clasp and slipping the straps down my arms.

“Fucking hell...” he mutters when my tits are exposed to him.

He cradles them in his hands, pushing them together and burying his face in the valley. His short stubble bruises my skin as he licks and kisses me there. His warm breaths make me tingle.

“Ronan...” I whisper, my legs locking around his lower back.

“Fuck, Peach. You’re perfect. Just like I knew you’d be.”

He proceeds to worship my tits. He kisses along the slope of each breast. Then he circles one tight nipple with his tongue while tweaking the other with his fingertips. When he’s good and satisfied, he switches sides. So patient. So unhurried.

Ronan is nothing like I’d expected him to be. I’d expected the testosterone-fueled hockey god to be aggressive and rushed in bed. But right now, he’s surpassing my every expectation.

I’m going crazy with need, squirming and whining beneath him as my panties soak through. I feel like I’ve wanted this for so long. Denied myself of this for so long. Now, I want it all. I can’t hold back any longer.

“Get me naked, Ronan,” I mutter, wrestling with my skirt. “I want to be naked.”

Ronan chuckles. “Slow down, greedy girl.” He brushes a kiss beneath my navel and my stomach contracts. “I want to savor you. I want to take all night to explore you. I don’t want to rush.” Reaching behind him, he rips his T-shirt over his head and flings it off into the weeds somewhere.

And now, Ronan Brighton is shirtless. Shirtless and immaculate and shirtless.

My tongue darts out, wanting to taste every toned, tanned, tattooed inch of his upper body. From his Adam’s apple, bobbing thick in his throat. To his tan shoulders, all corded in a network of bulging muscle. To the planes and ridges of his tight abdomen. I’ve never seen a more beautiful male specimen.

He’s way more patient than I am. I want him all over me. Right now. “God—you’re going to torture me, aren’t you?”

“If you’re not a good girl for me, you bet I will.” With a wicked half-grin, he drops to his knees, positioned between my spread thighs. His confident hands push up the hem of my skirt, causing all of the material to gather around my waist.

“Don’t be an asshole about this...” I warn, when he trails a solitary finger along the lace trim of my nude-colored panties.

“Only as much as absolutely necessary.” He dips his face between my

thighs in a way that makes me believe that he's only trying to conceal his big grin.

“What the hell does that mea—*ohhhh!*” My tune changes the moment his tongue swipes up the edge of my undies.

Ignoring my half-asked question, Ronan spreads my thighs further. “So pretty—you in those wet panties, all opened up for me...” He slips a finger under the fabric, pulling it away from my core. “And you smell so good,” he breathes out, running the tip of his nose along the seam of my groin. “And you're so goddamned wet.”

I throw my head back, letting my eyeballs roll up to the ceiling with pleasure. *Oh fuck. He is so going to torture me.*

“Please...” I whimper, arching my spine and dragging my heel up the center of his back. “Please...” My voice is reedy, high-pitched, desperate. And I'm too strung out with need to hide it.

“Fuck. I love hearing you beg, Nicky. I didn't expect this. But you sound so sweet, begging for me. Keep begging for me like a good girl.”

My fingers tangle in his hair and I pull. “Please, Ronan,” I whisper again and again. “Stop teasing me. You know what I want. Give it to me.”

For once in my life, I don't want to fight, I don't want to give sass. I want to be as agreeable as possible.

Maybe if I give Ronan what he wants, he'll give me what I need.

“What do you want?” he asks me, a devious tone in his voice. “Tell me. I want you to say it.”

“Your lips and your fingers and your tongue. Between my legs.”

A sharp hiss leaves his mouth. “Yes. Mmm. Fuck. I want that, too.”

He slowly pulls my underwear down my thighs, ridding me of that drenched scrap of silk. Then, I feel Ronan's palms slip beneath my bare ass, searching for the button at the back of my skirt.

My pussy clenches hard and I can feel the gush of wetness that spills out. When I moan, Ronan takes a moment to gently knead my ass cheeks, stimulating me even more.

His chest rumbles when I'm completely bared to him. “So beautiful, Nicky. So Damn, beautiful. Warm and pink and dripping for me. Do you know how lucky I feel right now?”

The way he's looking at me. The hunger in his eyes. Yes—I do feel beautiful right now. I feel wanted. Hell, I feel powerful. In a way I haven't felt in a long time. Maybe ever.

Smoothing his palms up to my knees, Ronan pushes me wider apart and then finally—finally—he slides his hand into the warm, wet space between my thighs.

He starts with a single soft caress, his fingers slipping through my slickness. Then his thumb focuses on my bud.

“Oh my god,” I gasp, holding onto his hair as he makes circles on my clit. “You like that, Peach?”

I nod. And I nod. And I nod some more as an electric storm takes form between my legs.

From where he’s kneeling, the warmth of his heavy breaths washes over my pelvis. And when he splits my folds apart with two fingers, my eyes flutter into my skull. One long digit penetrates me, sliding in and out before effortlessly curling and brushing against my G-Spot.

Hell. Fucking. Yes.

I grind against his hand as he adds another finger, moving in and out.

“I’m gonna taste you now, Nicky,” he announces, half a second before the wetness of his mouth covers my clit. He swirls his tongue around the packet of nerves before sliding his lips against my nether lips.

His guttural sound mixes with my reedy cry as he savors his first taste of me.

“Yes,” I cry out, sounding broken and desperate. “Yes, Ronan.”

“Fuck. The way you say my name, Nicky...” He’s swiping his tongue back and forth, through my center, making my hips buck against his face. “You make me feel like the most important man in town.”

In this moment, he is. Nothing else matters in this world. Nothing aside from the magic this man is working between my legs.

The swirls. The circles. The flicking back and forth. Oh god.

I’m vaguely reminded that this is forbidden. That what we’re doing could create a world of problems for us. But those thoughts melt away when his lips close around my clit and his fingers probe deep inside my hole.

“I think I’m going to...I think I’m going to come.”

My words shock me. I’m about to come? Really? So fast? So easily?

Ronan takes me off-guard when he flips me over, onto my stomach. He’s pulling my ass up in the air. And he’s burying his face at my core.

I moan and I whine and I grunt with pleasure, my sounds lost in the pillows and the blankets and the comforter. I rock my hips against his mouth, losing myself completely.

The orgasm that hits me is reckless. Intense. Out-of-control. My limbs shake and my hair stands on end and sweat pours down my skin.

Ronan doesn't stop. He eats me until my knees can no longer hold me up. Until I'm a puddle. Facedown in the bedding, shaking and swearing and shivering at what this man just did to me.

I collapse, demolished. I find myself searching my muddled thoughts for the last time any former lover ever made me come with his mouth. Has any man ever been this patient? This thorough? This determined to give me pleasure?

My mind comes up with a blank.

I can't remember ever being this thoroughly wrecked.

As I recover from the aftershocks, I feel the mattress dip under the weight of his body. Ronan drops onto his side and tugs me up against his chest.

"Fuck. You're incredible, Nicky," he mutters into my neck. "You were such a good girl, letting me eat your pussy all up like that." He kisses a path along my shoulder blade, whispering soft words into the air. "You did so fucking well. I loved the way you rocked your ass on my face. And you tasted so fucking good."

And all I keep thinking is, *We shouldn't have done that. We shouldn't have done that. We shouldn't have done that.*

But now it's too late for woulda, coulda, shoulda's, isn't it?

RONAN

Head propped against a mountain of pillows, I take a huge gulp of my blue sports drink and run a hand down my sweaty chest. I'm still struggling to catch my breath.

Fuck. I just ate Nicky Westbrook's pussy and it was incredible. Peaches have nothing on her. She tastes like heaven and she smells like a perfume and the way she moans my name is now an anthem replaying in my brain.

She sits at the foot of the bed, hooking the clasp of her bra. She hasn't said much since she came all over my face a few moments ago, and right now, she seems to be lost in deep thought. I'm desperate to gauge how she's feeling in the aftermath of what we just did.

I lazily trail a finger along the waistline of her panties. "You should come back to bed."

She peeks at me over her shoulder, an ironic smile on her lips. "Aww. Look at you. You had one little taste and now you're addicted."

I crawl across the mattress, hooking an arm around her waist and yanking her into my lap. I sweep her hair over her shoulder, placing a kiss at the curve of her neck.

"Peach, I was addicted long before I ever had the honor of tasting you."

When I say that, the smile falls from her face. She squirms out of my lap, leaving my arms empty without her. "Ronan—we both agreed that we can't make this a...a 'thing'."

"Um, what? When did we agree to *that*?"

Her hands falter where they're busy sliding into the sleeves of her blouse. "Two seconds before you..." Her words disappear in her throat.

“...Devoured your cat?” I grin, finishing her sentence for her.

“You’re not funny.” She frowns at me. Then she lays down the law. “No more hooking up.”

“Hell no,” I protest. “I totally vote for more hooking up.” Not sure I’m helping my case. But it’s worth the effort.

At that, Nicky hops up to her feet and shimmies back into her skirt. “Oh really? You vote for more hookups? What a surprise.” She huffs with sarcasm.

She shakes her head, growling and muttering and mumbling under her breath.

My frustration at this situation is growing. Why is she making this so hard? I don’t like that she keeps me at arm’s length. It’s bullshit. I want to be close to her. “Can we stop fighting now?”

She gets all defensive. “Fighting? We’re not fighting. You may be fighting but I’m not fighting. I’m just saying—”

“Let’s stop fighting this attraction between us.” I touch her hand, flitting my fingertips over her knuckles. “This is a losing battle. We’re stuck with each other for the foreseeable future. Let’s just give in.”

Her head tilts to one side. Her eyes go narrow. “Ronan, what are you suggesting?”

“I’m suggesting that we make the most of the circumstances.” I inch closer to the foot of the bed where she’s standing. “Come on, Nicky. We could spin this situation into a mutually beneficial arrangement.”

Her arms fold protectively over her chest. “I don’t like the way that sounds...”

I push through my nerves. “This chemistry between us isn’t going away any time soon. And I don’t know about you, but I’ve been wasting a whole lot of unnecessary energy fighting it. Instead, let’s spin this into a good thing.”

“How do you mean?” There’s a deep, adorable crinkle between her brows.

“We could use this time to...practice.”

“Practice?”

I take a breath and explain myself. “I hate hearing you say that relationships have been disappointing for you. I hate that you think you can’t find the kind of man you really want. All I keep thinking is, what can I do to change that for you, to change your experience?”

She slowly rolls a palm over her forehead, looking stressed the fuck out. “Oh my god, Ronan. What are you saying?”

“Earlier, you said you wish you could build your ideal man from scratch.” I fling my arms out at my sides. “Well, I’m here. I volunteer. Build me from scratch.”

Her eyes are absolutely bulging now. “Do you realize how insane you sound?! I’m not your...your plaything. I’m not your toy.”

My head wags dismissively. I’m trying to make her understand me. “I’m not asking you to be my plaything. More like a ‘study buddy’, if you will. That’s far less sleazy.”

She scoffs. “Still sleazy, Ronan. Still sleazy.”

“Put your judgments aside for a minute and hear me out, Nicky.” I sigh. “When you were saying that you’ve given up on ever finding that kind of connection you want, I just kept thinking that the problem is, you don’t even know how to ask for what you want.”

She’s hustling to finish buttoning up her shirt. “Yup. You’re crazy. I’m half-naked in a hotel room with a crazy man. Oh god.”

I keep going, speaking quickly before she can cut me off. “One thing is clear to me, Nicky. If you’re ever going to find the kind of relationship you want, you’re going to need practice asking for what you need.” I dare to reach out and hold her hand. “That’s where I come in. You get to practice on me. You get to tell me how to be your boyfriend. You get to give me directions. And I’ll follow them. With a fucking smile on my face.”

She gently pries her fingers from mine. “Ronan, the sentiment is sweet. But I’m not going to order you around like some...some...robot?... Animal?...Computer program...? I can’t even find the word I’m looking for.”

“Are you forgetting that I’m an athlete? I’m used to getting ordered around.” I grin. “Consider yourself my coach. You’ll coach me into how to be a boyfriend.”

She’s slowly shaking her head like none of what I’m saying makes sense. “Okay, I see what’s the benefit for me. But what’s in it for you?”

“You’re going to teach me to be a good boyfriend,” I declare simply. “You clearly think that I’m a fuckboy. And maybe I am. But I genuinely want to be a better man. I do. So you’re going to teach me exactly what a girl like you wants in a partner.”

She gives me an incredulous look. “Why do you even care what a girl like

me wants in a partner?”

“Well, *you* may not be willing to give me a shot. But I’m hoping to score a woman like you one day. A woman who’s gorgeous and ambitious, strong and confident, fun and smart and fucking *hot*. How could I not want a woman like you?”

To be clear, I don’t want a woman ‘like’ her. I want *her*. Nobody else.

There’s only one Nicky Westbrook in this world. I don’t see how any other woman could possibly compete.

I continue. “I’ll never have access to the kind of woman I want if I don’t have the right...skillset, the right...toolkit.”

For a moment, she seems to consider my perspective. But then that cloud of doubt rolls back in. “This is stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid. And it’s going to end badly. How do you know one of us won’t get our hearts broken in all of this?”

“Because we both know that this is an experiment. We know that we’re just testing things out, like relationship training. Look at it as a way to practice for a relationship all while knowing that what we’re doing is not real, it’s not permanent.”

Nicky’s still not sold on the idea. “This sounds dangerous.”

“It’s not. I promise. All I see is benefits.” I start listing out the perks on my fingers. “We get to work out the sexual tension between us, guilt-free. You get to practice your emotions in a safe environment. I get a feel for what it’s like to have a girlfriend. And the best part is when the hockey season is over and we don’t have to see each other any more, we’ll have all this practice and experience under our belts to go out into the dating world.”

I recognize the look on her face. She knows that I’m right. Yet she continues resisting. “You don’t know what you’re saying.”

“Nicky, I watched some douchebag break up with you and you acted like you were above it all. Like it was no big deal.”

“Because it wasn’t.”

“He hurt your feelings. And you were afraid that saying so would make you look weak. That was bullshit. You just need practice speaking up for what you want. You need practice being vulnerable. In a safe space. I can be that safe space.”

“A practice relationship?” she’s whispering to herself. “That sounds crazy.”

“Is it though?” I challenge her. “I want to be good at hockey. I want to be

the best. So what do I do?”

She fumbles. “Well, you practice...”

“Right. I wake up every day and I practice. I don’t just jump out on the ice on game night and hope for the best. I practice. So why would it be any different with a relationship?”

“It’s not the same. Be real.”

“It’s rough out there. If you want to be confident when you step back into the dating pool, you’re going to need to have a plan. I can help you. Let me help you.”

I reach for her hand but she’s too busy stuffing her paperback into her bag and hiking the strap up her shoulder. *Who the hell is that shirtless dude on the cover of that romance novel? Does Nicky think he’s hot? And why am I randomly jealous of some stranger on the cover of a romance novel?*

What has Nicky Westbrook done to me?

“This conversation is over,” she announces, frantically shaking her head. “This is too much crazy talk for this time of night. I need...I need a bed. I need sleep.” She grabs the handle of her rolling bag.

Her blouse is half-tucked and I’m pretty sure her skirt is inside out. And there’s a big wet spot on the bum.

Frowning, I watch her march for the exit. “Where are you going?” I call out to her.

“To my own roo—” At the door, she smacks her forehead. “Wait. This is my own room.”

And I’m the unwanted guest.

Okay. Fine.

“I’m guessing you want me to leave?”

Nicky doesn’t look at me. She lets her eyes linger on the floor. “I think that would be a good idea.”

My chest collapses in a rough exhale. I can’t get ahead with this girl. Two steps forward. Two hundred steps back. Fuck. I made a mess out of this night.

Grabbing my drink and my sweater, I fling my legs over the side of the bed. I pass by her, reaching for the doorknob. “Look, I’m sor—”

She stops me with a hand on my bicep. Immediately, electricity sparks on my skin. So much power in that simple touch. “Don’t apologize.” She brushes her lips over my cheek, surrounding me the her fruity shampoo. “This is how it’s got to be.”

I want to tell her that's bullshit. Instead, I clench my jaw. "Right."
And with that, I'm out the door.

RONAN

After a series of road games, it's good to be back home. Win or lose, away games always seem to kick my ass, and this time was no different. I'm feeling a little drained, I can't lie.

At least this time, the Saints managed to sneak away with a couple decent wins—three of our four games. So at the end of the day, it doesn't feel like the whole trip was a wash.

In any case, here I am at the crack of dawn, outside practicing on my ice rink.

Trying to get better.

Trying to make up for every missed shot.

Trying to improve my every play, so that the sports commentators don't call me a goddamned pigeon.

In my periphery, I see that the downstairs lamp flicks on at the guesthouse. But I refuse to even glance in that direction. I choose to stay focused.

Things are even worse between Nicky and me lately. No surprise after everything that went down that night in her hotel room.

Despite everything, she hasn't quit her job. She's been at every game. She travels along with the team, tagging along on the flights. On the team bus.

But we've rarely had a moment alone, and she seems content to stay in the shadows. Hanging with members of the team's support staff. Vigilantly keeping an eye on me, but always from a distance.

I'm so fucking frustrated. At first, this whole ordeal was amusing. A pretty girl hanging around me twenty-four seven? Sounded like a treat.

But now being viewed like I'm a petulant child who can't look out for myself? It's not quite so much fun anymore.

Especially when I just want her to see me as *a man*. A man that she'd consider. A man that she'd be interested in. But as of right now, we're so far from that possibility.

In any case, I know boundaries are important to Nicky, and I'm trying—*more like struggling*—to respect that.

I'm on the ice, working on my slapshot when out of the corner of my eye, I see Nicky struggling to pull her favorite armchair right up to the large picture window. I pause and look her way in time to see her curling up in the chair with a book.

A grin teases my mouth.

For some reason, having Nicky close by makes me feel good. Maybe she's not completely repulsed by the sight of me.

I haven't asked her to come outside on her days off again, not since that day when I beat down her door and all but forced her to go to breakfast with me. Asking her to do that feels like overkill, and to be frank, sort of a jackass move for me to pull her out of the warm house so ungodly early, for no good reason.

I'm not *that* mean.

I quickly give up the shooting practice in favor of focusing on my speed skating. I bask in the cold air on my face as I skate across the ice. I breathe in deeply, loving that icy burn in my lungs.

Knowing Nicky's watching while I practice gives me a sense of motivation that pushes me to work even harder. It makes me train harder. Faster.

At some point during my session, she disappears from her window-front seat though. My chest falls with disappointment. But it doesn't take long before she's back in her armchair again. This time, taking sips from the big ceramic cup in her hands. And just like that, the world is spinning on its axis again.

Shit—my world really does revolve around that woman these days. It's kind of tragic. Because she doesn't want the things I want. She doesn't want me in the way I want her.

When I've pushed myself past my limits and hung up my gear in the shed, I'm ready to head back to the main house. I take the path that passes by the cabin.

I peer through the window, hoping to catch another glimpse of her. I meet her eyes through the glass. My heart twirls around like an itty bitty drunk ballerina. I wave.

She lifts her hand, giving me a hesitant wave back.

Shit. The rift between us is real.

I really fucked everything up. It's what I always do, right?

I went too far inside that hotel room in New Jersey. Making her wrap her legs around my head and explode on my tongue with my name on her lips? That was one thing. But suggesting that we make a habit of it? That we make a practice out of it? I should have known she wouldn't go for that.

It's painfully obvious that Nicky wants me—sexually, I mean—maybe even as much as I want her. But the woman is stubborn and determined not to like me. I know that. So I should have known better than to make her that offer to be her practice boyfriend. Even though I know that it would be so *much. fun.*

Nicky can be a persnickety little character. She spooks easily. Especially whenever things start going well between us. I've got to tread carefully with her.

With a forlorn nod goodbye, I turn up the path toward my house. Then behind me, I hear a door slam and quick footsteps running out to meet me.

I turn over my shoulder to find Nicky wrapped up in a blanket and slippers frantically chasing across the snow-covered yard behind me.

"Hey," she calls out.

Is something wrong? Is there an emergency?

Alarmed, I take a few hurried steps to meet her. "Hey."

But then her hand peeks out from beneath her blanket-cape. "I, uh...I wasn't sure if you like hot chocolate."

I blink down at the insulated travel mug she holds out to me. "Hot chocolate?"

"Yeah," she replies, wrapping her blanket tighter with her other hand. "And I accidentally made an extra breakfast sandwich. I didn't know if you'd want it."

Accidentally? How do you accidentally make an extra sandwich?

I can't help the way my eyebrows shoot up. I hardly understand what's happening here.

Nicky doesn't offer an explanation. She just stands there, blushing.

I feel a smile slowly curving across my face. "Yes, actually." Damn. That

sandwich she made the last time was so good.

Peeking at me from under her lashes, she places the cup and the foil packet into my hands. The way my dick tingles when our hands brush is downright embarrassing. The center of my chest tingles, too.

She totally wants me.

I take the breakfast offering from her. “Thanks.” My smile widens. Centimeter by centimeter by centimeter.

Nicky’s blush only grows brighter. It’s fluorescent pink now. “What?”

“Nothing.” I whip my head left to right, trying to shake my smile loose.

“Stop that,” she scolds me, getting all defensive. “This means nothing. Making sure you don’t starve to death on my watch is part of my job description.”

I nod agreeably even though I keep grinning. “Of course it is.”

“Look, I need to go. It’s freezing.” She stomps a foot, and I get a feeling she’s more angry with herself than with me.

“Yeah. Go get warmed up.” I bite on my bottom lip. I don’t want her to think my smile is mocking her.

In a snit, she turns back to the cabin.

Her movements are a little shaky, if you ask me, and when she slips on the ice, I call out, ready to swoop in to the rescue. “Hey. Do you need some hel—?”

“Don’t!” she shouts, one hand shooting out in my direction.

Chuckling to myself, I stand and watch, making sure she gets up the steps safely.

As she’s pushing the door open, I call her name. “Nicky?”

She peers at me over her shoulder. “What?”

“Thank you.” I hold up my breakfast in illustration.

Her shoulders fall, that armor of hers crumbling around her feet when our eyes hold. “Yeah.”

Then she disappears inside the house.

NICKY

Phone clutched in my palm, I'm stomping back and forth in front of the massive floor-length windows of the guesthouse.

"And then he was like, 'You can build me from scratch', 'You can give me instructions', 'You can tell me how to be your boyfriend', 'We'll be like study buddies' and blah-blah-blah."

My slippers slap loudly at the wooden floors as I pace. My over-sized T-shirt swallows me up and my hair is a horrendous bird's nest cinched together by the ponytail holder at the top of my head.

On my screen, I see Emma open her mouth to get a word in. But I'm not done ranting.

"Like, is he insane? Is he a crazy man?! This is not build-a-boyfriend. I'm not Nicky-the-boyfriend-builder. I'm not...not...I'm not..." Winded, I drop to the couch like a rock. "He's the crazy one. Right? Not me?" I ask my best friend.

Emma's got a little smile dancing on the edge of her smug mouth. It's driving me nuts. "He's totally crazy, hun," she says supportively. "The nerve of him to offer you an unlimited supply of orgasms *and* the opportunity to play with him like a toy. The nerve!"

"You're mocking me..." I pout at my phone.

She releases a breath. "Okay. Fine. His offer is a little...unconventional. I'll give you that. But it might just work for you."

"What?! I can't believe you're saying this." I feel betrayed. She's supposed to be on my side.

"Nicky—you've got the tough girl act down pat. You have a sassy mouth

and you go around running it all over town. But I'll be honest, you could use some work being vulnerable, exploring the softer sides of your personality, being more emotional. Look at it as learning to be safe with your emotions. That's essential to being in a successful romantic relationship, being able to speak up with your partner without fear of rejection. It's about communication."

"I feel perfectly safe with my emotions," I say disagreeably.

"If you're so perfectly safe with your emotions, why don't you tell me how you *really* feel about Ronan's offer?" my bestie challenges me. "Be honest, Nicky."

"I feel...I feel...I feel like his offer is bullshit. Absolute bullshit."

"Do you really? I'm just going to come right out and say this, as your best friend for half of your life. To me, it looks like you're interested, but you don't want to admit it to yourself."

"What?!" I scoff, completely offended. "You've got this all wrong!"

"Okay, do you find him attractive?"

My first instinct is to lie, to flat out deny it. But the look on Emma's face tells me she already knows the truth. "I...yes...fine. He's attractive," I confess.

"And how about the orgasm he gave you?" she prods further.

"It was good..." Emma keeps pinning me with that knowing look. "It was better than..." I try again. Then my shoulders collapse in defeat. "It-was-the-single-best-orgasm-of-my-entire-life." I pick at my nail polish. "Okay? Are you happy now?"

Emma just giggles.

"Orgasm-giving powers are irrelevant," I insist. "This job is important to me. And getting orgasms from Ronan isn't part of my job description. I want to keep things professional. And Cash would blow a gasket if he found out I was messing around with the star player of his hockey team. He invested a lot of money into that franchise."

"Totally. I get all that," she says, "But be real—you and Ronan are alone together around the clock. If you *really* want to do this practice relationship thing, you can find a way to squeeze it in without getting caught. You two can teach each other new things, learn new things together," she reasons. "And then when the hockey season is over, you'll be confident to go after what you want in relationships. We both know that the dating pool is a swamp. If you want to be safe out there, you're going to need to know how to

navigate the murky waters in your little canoe with your little paddle. This opportunity with Ronan might be good practice.”

I guess that is true.

“Look Nicks, I love you so much. And I want to see you *truly* happy and to do that, you’re going to have to learn to take risks where it matters. Because as a woman who had to take risks to get with the love of my life, I’m telling you that the payoff could be so rewarding.”

I sigh, ruminating over her words. “I guess...I guess I’ll think about it.”

“Good. Think about it.” She smiles kindly. “And speaking of risks, are you still looking at real estate? Nadia found this amazing property listing on Elm Street.”

“Yeah. She sent it to me.” I grin thinking about the tiny house tucked away from the main road. “I know it’s a fixer-upper, but I still think it’s cute.” It had a big front porch that was calling my name. “It might be fun to put my own touch on it.”

“Yeah, I agree. But when would you have any free time for that?”

I press my lips together. “Good question. Anyway, I definitely want to look into it some more.”

Right then, I hear my niece crying in the background. “Ooh! Sparkle’s up from her nap. I’ve gotta go,” Emma says in a rush.

“Okay. Give her kisses for me.” Then I narrow my eyes. “And you better not include this conversation in any of your future books,” I threaten.

Emma grins. “Names will be changed to protect the innocent. That’s the most I can promise you.”

“Ugh! Fair enough. I need a new best friend.”

She shrugs a shoulder. “Maybe Ronan.”

I roll my eyes. “Bye, bitch.”

“Bye. Love you.” She hangs up, laughing.

When Emma is gone, I’m left with my thoughts. I make another attempt to convince myself that I want no part of Ronan’s offer. But the glaring truth is that...I’m curious...and I’m tempted...and I’m horny as hell.

Every time I close my eyes, I feel the caress of his tongue moving against me. And I want to do it again. Hell, I want to return the favor. I have a treasure trove of new blowjob tricks that are collecting dust in the back of my mind. Those blowjob tricks I was describing in the text messages Ronan read. I know those tricks would rock his socks off.

But of course I won’t act on any of that. I’d never.

I shake myself out of my crazy, crazy thoughts. I'm trying to build a future here. I'm not willing to throw my whole life into turmoil just for the sake of a few orgasms.

And what the hell does a 'practice relationship' entail anyway? Sheesh. Some guys are so creative in their efforts to get into your pants. It's mind-blowing.

Anyway, Ronan's offer is not an option. I'm putting it out of my head.

Now that I'm off the phone with Emma, I have the entire rest of the evening to fill. But my bum is too lazy to get off this couch. I throw my feet up on the coffee table and scroll aimlessly on social media, brazenly minding the business of everybody on the internet and comparing my life to theirs. Definitely not the healthiest way to pass the time. But at least it helps keep my mind off Ronan and his washboard abs and his magic tongue.

About an hour later, my brain is in a blissfully numb social media-induced coma when there's a knock at the door. I crane my neck and catch sight of Ronan's sister standing on the front porch with her friends.

Leaving my phone on the coffee table, I hop up from the couch, silently cursing my messy hairdo as I go.

When I swing open the door, Karli gives me a once-over and quirks a brow.

Daphne grins and offers a little wave. "Hey! Beer festival in town tonight. Wanna come?"

"You can't say no," Layla hedges. "I'm paying a babysitter tonight and everything. We have to make the most of it."

"Um, I...I'm not really in a beer festival kind of mood," I mutter, running a palm over my tangled hair.

Karli blatantly rolls her eyes. I mean, a full three hundred and sixty degrees. "Girl—go throw on a cute outfit. We're going out tonight."

RONAN

“I thought you’d be happy to be getting a breather tonight.” Darius sets down a beer flight as he comes to join me at the table where I’m sitting alone.

I give him the stink-eye. “Happy? You’re an even worse babysitter than Nicky.”

For one, he doesn’t have Nicky’s killer tits or her bum that’s shaped like a peach or her sassy comebacks.

Darius is my chaperone tonight here at The North Node. My older brother thought he was doing everyone a favor when he showed up at my place and gave Nicky the night off from supervising me. Then he dragged me here to the Starlit Beer Hop.

My twin brother’s bar is even busier than it’s been in a while. A lot of tourists are in town for this festival, traveling from one Starlight Falls bar to the next to indulge in the different brews from our town and the surrounding areas.

This festival was loads of fun last year. I’m definitely not having a good time tonight, though. I just feel grouchy without Nicky around.

Usually, this is my favorite table here at the back of the North Node. But tonight, it just feels like something’s missing.

Darius sits across from me, observing me keenly. “You know, I can already see a difference in you.” He takes a sip of one of his beer samples.

I quirk an eyebrow, waiting for him to explain.

“You’re...I don’t know...calmer. Grumpy tonight, for sure, but overall, you’re calmer. You don’t fly off the handle with the press as much. In the

locker room, you've been better with the players, too. A better team captain. And you sure as hell have been playing better on the ice these past few games." He claps my shoulder. "I'm proud of you, little brother."

"Yay, me!" I shoot ironically.

Outwardly, I may not be willing to revel in Darius' praise. But on the inside, I'm definitely basking in it just a little. Not too long ago, when this whole thing started, my brother couldn't stand the sight of my face. It's nice that he's proud of me for a change.

The door to the bar swings open and my eyes happen to travel in that direction. Karli steps inside, laughing with Daphne and Layla as usual. But when I see a third face in their little crew, I feel something inside me shift.

Nicky is with the girls and she looks so damn good. Her hair is pulled back from her immaculate face. She's wearing a short wool jacket and leather pants that hug her delicious curves like plastic wrap.

She's the prettiest woman in this whole town. And all the men here tonight know it. I see how their eyes all trail after her as she and the girls sit at the bar.

When she looks my way, she sees me. For one heated moment, our eyes meet. Then she quickly glances away, like I'm nothing at all to her. That stings.

Darius is still yammering on. "All I'm saying is, Nicky is already rubbing off on you," he's saying now.

"Not as much as I *wish* she'd rub off on me..." I mutter absently.

And then I want to bang my head on the table because I realize that I actually said it out loud.

My brother's gaze goes sharp and suspicious. "Wait..." he pauses and I can see the gears turning in his head. His focus bounces from me to Nicky and back again. Then it settles on my forehead like a bull's eye. "You're not messing around with Nicky Westbrook, are you?"

"What?" I'm stalling.

"Ronan! Tell me you're not messing around with Nicky Westbrook!" he semi-shrieks. "Your personal assistant?...The hockey team's newest employee?...*My business partner's freaking sister?!!*"

He's gripping my shoulder and shaking. I don't think I've ever seen him this outwardly worked up.

I shrug him off me. "No. Of course not. I'd never."

Darius' face tells me he doesn't believe me one bit. "Not anymore, you're

not,” he threatens me. “Whatever is going on with you and that girl, it stops right now.”

“There’s nothing to stop,” I grumble miserably. Nicky already put an end to anything between us before it really got started.

“Ronan, she is my business partner’s little sister. My partnerships with Cash Westbrook are some of the most lucrative in my portfolio. If you mess this up for me, I will hurt you. Physically.”

I exhale roughly. “Darius—there’s nothing going on with me and Nicky,” I insist, suddenly exhausted.

And it’s definitely not for my lack of trying.

Some guy approaches Nicky at the bar. Looks like he’s offering to buy her a drink. I don’t even know the guy. But instantly, my palm is scratching to slap him across the face like a little bitch. What the hell is wrong with me?

I find myself rising from my seat. I don’t want to sit here and watch these losers hit on Nicky all night. That’s some additional torture I don’t need. I’d rather just go home and sulk in peace. “You know what? I’m ready to leave.”

Darius rises from his seat, grabbing his car keys. “Fine. I’m ready to call it a night, too. You just gave me a fucking headache.”

I put a hand out to stop him. I’m not in the mood for company right now. “I’ll get a taxi.”

RONAN

Parker sighs dreamily as he glides onto the ice and twirls around. “Love is in the air...”

I clomp out behind him, disgust filling my chest as my eyeballs roam over the happy-faced couples in the stands. “And it’s stinking up this arena like a rotten fart.”

It’s Valentine’s Day.

February 14th.

International Face-Sucking-and-Uglies-Bumping Day.

Well, at least that’s how I view this day every year.

Can’t lie—I’m a little bummed that I don’t have anybody to suck face with today. I can think of one certain feisty someone I’d very much like to kiss. But I’m fairly sure she hates my guts most days. So that’s out of the question.

Sinks to be me.

Any other year, I’d be out, hitting up the bars today, eagerly searching for a good time and an even better night. But this year, any random woman just won’t do.

Today marks exactly fifty-two days since I met Nicky Westbrook. And she has singlehandedly flipped my identity upside down. Now, I’m completely out of sorts. Who even am I these days?

The things that mattered before Nicky just don’t matter anymore. She’s become my brain’s favorite subject, and my dick’s too.

I could sit for hours reminiscing about the way she tasted that night back in New Jersey and conjuring up the sound of her moaning my name and the

way her soft curves felt beneath my palms.

But she doesn't want to hook up again and it's making me absolutely miserable.

Told ya. Stinks to be me.

Well, for better or worse, Face-Sucking Day also happens to be *game day* this year. So at least that's a worthwhile distraction from feeling sad and lonely all day.

The Saints are about to hit the ice. This time, we're out of town, playing an away game against North Carolina.

Even still, it's been hard to get in the right headspace when there's just lovey dovey couples all around. Everywhere I turn, I see lovers giving each other those sickly sweet, starry eyes. In the airport. At the hotel. At the arena. Around every corner, I see people making out, carrying roses, giving each other balloons and chocolates, and gushing about love.

Hell, even the arena's security guard is dressed up in a giant red heart Valentine costume. I am highly-offended on behalf of all single people out there.

So I focus on what's important today. Playing hockey.

Our opponents tonight have been having a pretty good season so far. If we could come out on top in this game against North Carolina, it would be a big win for the Saints.

But I'm not sure my guys have much faith that things will go our way. Considering our rocky start to the season, it's going to be a tough match. I'm trying to be optimistic, though. Because things have been on the up and up for us lately.

It was just moments ago as I was lacing up my skates in the locker room that our coach came in and began his pre-game pep talk. It started off all motivational, but as usual, the guys were being idiots. It wasn't long before Coach got all fired up and started yelling at us.

"I get it. It's Valentine's Day. But keep your heads out of your chocolate-covered asses, boys. We've got a game to win. I don't need to tell you how important this division match-up is." He fisted his hands on his hips. "We're getting way too damn comfortable letting our offense pull the weight of the team. Our defense is fourth in the league. Wake up and act like it!"

After Coach put the fear of god in us all, the team huddled around me and I finished things up with my own pre-game speech. I tried to remind the guys why we're here in the first place. I gave it my all, encouraging them to get out

there and kick ass at the game we love.

Now, we're all out on the ice, warming up before the game. Easton skates up to my side, sneering at a homemade sign in the crowd. I take a look in that direction, chuckling when I see some woman in a red bikini under her open parka. She's holding a sign, asking one of the North Carolina players to be her Valentine.

"Dude, why'd we have to play an away game on Valentine's Day?" Easton complains. "If we were playing in Sin Valley tonight, the ladies would be throwing themselves at us, too."

We continue with our warm-ups, as we talk. "Dude, how come I never noticed how much it sucks to be single on Valentine's Day?"

I sound like a whiney baby. I don't care.

I want love, dammit.

Tipton skates into the middle of our conversation. "Shit, normally I don't mind being single. But I'd celebrate this holiday just to get my balls sucked."

Parker groans. "Come on. I did not need to hear that."

"He's not wrong, though," Easton says, skating closer as we work through a passing drill. "Love is a lie. Anyone who says otherwise, is just trying to get laid."

Tipton nods emphatically. "True facts, bro."

Parker gives Tipton a shove, moving him out of the way. "Ignore them, Captain. Let me answer your question. This Valentine's Day sucks because I think you've got yourself a crush." He grins like he's all smart or some shit.

"Nicky. Oh, Nicky-y-y-y. Don't stop. Hell yes." Easton grabs at his chest and moans.

I clap a hand over his dumb, stupid mouth. He chortles, pushing away from me and gliding across the ice.

Tipton turns toward me, skating backward. "You gonna try and hook up with your hot babysitter or what?"

"Hell yeah, you should," Easton says, taunting me. "She's a babe."

"Don't call her that," I say, already feeling defensive.

"It's true though," Tipton insists. "I wish I had a shot with her."

"Shit. Me, too," Easton mumbles.

My eyes fly to Parker. The good boy gives me a terrified shrug. "Sorry, Captain. I'd hook up with her, too. I mean, she's really, *really* hot." He flinches like he's bracing for a hit.

My eyes shift up toward the stands, searching the arena and looking

around for Nicky. I haven't seen her since this afternoon, when she hung around the back of the hotel restaurant, eating alone, while the team ate lunch together. I felt bad, seeing her all alone on Valentine's Day, because of me.

Yet still, a teensy part of me is glad that she's not wasting her time hanging around with some fool who doesn't deserve her. Like that idiot who dumped her on her birthday. That crap still grates on my nerves.

I finally find Nicky sitting in the stands with Florence and some of the team's support staff. When my eyes land on her, I see her looking back at me, giving me all sorts of worried looks.

A small smile teases my mouth. Nicky gives me a nervous smile back.

She's really starting to get invested in this hockey thing. She's always super concerned about the outcome of every game. I even caught her watching hockey videos on her phone on the drive this morning. And I think the best part? Tonight, she's not wearing one of her power suits that she usually wears to the games.

Nah. She's wearing tight jeans with a waist-length leather jacket. Rather than her usual peach lipstick, today her lips are painted the color of licorice. Out of nowhere, I'm really, really craving licorice. In the place of her usual slicked back bun, her mahogany curls cascade from beneath the Saints beanie she stole from me the other day.

Nicky's hair is pretty no matter how she wears it—straight or curly. But seeing her at *my* hockey game, wearing *my* toque on her head with the Saints logo displayed for the world to see—that's a proud moment for me. That's my favorite part of her look.

Until she shrugs out of her leather jacket and I realize that she's wearing a Saints jersey. I squint in the low light and I can hardly believe my eyes. She's wearing number seventeen. Seventeen. *I'm* number seventeen.

She's boldly representing my team in a sea of North Carolina fans. I fucking like it.

Something squeezes inside my chest. This girl is ruining me and she doesn't even know it. She isn't even trying.

Meanwhile, Tipton is still nodding like a perverted bobble head. "Yeah, she's smokin'. What are you waiting for?"

My three teammates wait for my response, staring solemnly at me like the Three Wise Men. Except they're dumb. Really dumb.

"It's not like that," I mumble, just to get the guys off my back.

But it could be like that, my subconscious shouts at me.

Now's not the time to think about Nicky, though. When the puck drops, I play my frozen little heart out. I skate my quickest. I record my fastest shots on goal. I'd have to check the stats sheet to confirm, but I'm pretty certain that tonight was my best damn game in all of my career.

The Saints win, 6-1, and I finish with two shots and two assists.

It's the biggest Saints' win of the season, and I'm amped about it. As a bonus, those post-game interviews go a whole lot smoother since we kicked ass on the ice tonight.

"Fuck yeah, we needed this!" Tipton exclaims, smacking the door as a small group of us exit the arena after everyone's finished with showers and press interviews.

"Yeah, we did. Let's all go out. We need to celebrate," Easton suggests.

"You know what? I happen to agree with him." Tipton is already looking up and down the street for a taxi.

A few of the married players shoot down the idea.

"I'm just going to run back to my hotel room to video-chat with my wife," one of our enforcers announces, heading down the street in the opposite direction.

I don't have one of those—a wife, I mean—and right now that's making me unreasonably cranky. "Video chat' is code for phone sex and we all know it," I spit out.

"And what, bro? It is what it is," another one of the married guys says as he leaves us single guys standing in the dust.

I huff.

I don't want to go party with a bunch of single knuckleheads. I'd rather have my dream girl cuddled in my arms instead. But since I can't get what I want tonight, I guess I'll go to the bar. It'll take my mind off of everything else I'm missing out on at the moment.

Tipton is searching for a bar for us on his phone app, when out of nowhere, Nicky pops out of some back door, stepping into my path. "Where do you think you're going, Hockey Guy?" She gives me a stern school teacher look.

I open my mouth to admit that I'd rather hang out with her than with my teammates. At the sight of her, I want to open up and spill my feelings all over this sidewalk like a can of cream of mushroom soup. I know that wouldn't work with Nicky, though.

But then a lightbulb goes off in my head.

I turn my puppy eyes on her. “Come on, Nicky. I want to go out with my friends. Pretty please? I promise to be good.”

Her manicured eyebrow jerks up her forehead. “No, not a good idea, Ronan.”

My teammates all snicker at me.

“Shut up,” I say to them.

“Later, sucker!” I hear Tipton call out as the lot of them start strolling off without me.

“This can’t be real,” I grouse. I turn a faux-angry glare on Nicky. “Y’know what? I’m getting kind of sick and tired of a five-foot-two woman bossing me around all day and night. Look. I’m going for a drink tonight!”

She seems a bit taken aback by my disagreeable attitude. After all, in our dynamic, *she’s* usually the one always mouthing off.

She takes a breath and tries to patiently reason with me. “You guys did so great tonight. Don’t you want the morning headlines to be about your performance on the ice? About your two huge shots? And not overshadowed by some drunken video of you guys in a bar? Because you know that’s the story the press is itching to print.”

I pinch my lips together, faking disappointment. “Dammit. You have a point. I hate when you’re right.”

“Good. You’re making the right decision, Ronan.” Looking relieved, she presses her palms together and gives me a weird little curtsy. Then she starts to walk away.

Not so fast, Peach.

“I really do want that drink, though. And I’m nowhere near ready to call it a night,” I say after her.

She spins to me, a suspicious eyebrow raised.

“How about a compromise?” I stroll up, towering over her. “You don’t want me going out with the team? Fine, then. Let’s meet in the middle.”

Hiking her heavy bag up her shoulder, she folds her arms and taps her foot on the pavement. “I’m listening...”

“You and me. Private celebration.”

Her eyes grow round. “What? No way. Absolutely not.”

I see my teammates growing smaller and smaller in the distance as they stroll the downtown sidewalk.

“Why not?” I ask her.

“My job is keeping you out of trouble, Ronan. Not entertaining you on

Valentine's Day.” She tries to do her usual tough girl thing, but I hear the wobble in her voice.

I scoff. “So what if today’s Valentine’s Day? Who the heck cares? Two people can go out for a drink on Valentine’s Day and not have it be all romantic.”

“Ronan, I am not going out for a drink with you,” she deadpans.

“Fine, then, party pooper. I’m going out with the guys.” On that note, I turn to walk away, acting like I’m eager to catch up with the team before they disappear out of sight.

I don’t make it one step before Nicky is grabbing onto my arm. I stop in my tracks, instantly distracted by how amazing her touch feels.

Good grief. Why does her touch do that to me?

“Okay, okay,” Nicky spits out. “You and me. Quiet bar. Away from the crowds. *One* drink,” she emphasizes, holding up a single finger in my face.

My pulse revs with excitement. “Awesome. Let’s do this.” I reach for her hand. At the very last second, I catch myself.

Nicky looks at my hand like it’s infectious. “And this is *not* a date,” she lays down the law.

Grinning sheepishly, I give her a salute. “Whatever you say, Captain.”

NICKY

“After you...” Flashing a charming grin, Ronan gallantly opens the door for me.

I get all tangled up in his pretty eyes, only to be smacked in the face by a bouquet of pink and red balloons the second I step inside the bar.

“Oh my—what the—” I try to beat the balloons off me.

Laughing, Ronan extends a long arm, clearing a path for us through the latex-rubber balloon jungle.

We’re at a quiet bar not too far from our hotel. Ronan picked this place out, making good on our compromise to choose something low-key. I’m satisfied that this place is not nearly as crazy as the one he and the guys would have ended up at near the arena.

From behind the bar, a portly man with a thick red mustache welcomes us and invites us to pick whichever table we’d like. We slip into a quiet, private booth near the back, and I can finally breathe a sigh of relief.

No bar fights or arrests in this guy’s near future.

And as a bonus, I’m glad to no longer be around all those lovebirds stumbling through the streets. All that Valentine’s Day hoopla and glee was torturous for me.

But now Ronan is torturing me all on his own.

I glance across the table at him. He’s wearing one of his suits again. It’s so rare to see him in anything but sweats, workout clothes, or a hockey uniform. Ronan is always huge. He’s just this massive wall of muscle. But somehow the man looks even bigger in this suit.

I feel underdressed in the jeans and leather jacket I’m wearing. But Ronan

is gawking at me like I'm wearing a Miss Universe pageant gown.

That look on his face spells T-R-O-U-B-L-E.

Fine. In a moment of weakness, I agreed to come out with him tonight. But not on a date—obviously. I'm here solely for the purpose of keeping him out of mischief and out of the sports tabloids. I'm determined to keep a tight grip on that mission, maintaining it in the front of my mind the whole time.

The waitress comes by, and we each order a drink.

“You sure we shouldn't get a tray of shots?” Ronan asks me with a teasing grin. “A dozen or so tequilas will really hit the spot.” He nudges my hand with his.

I glare at him. He thinks this is funny. I'm so not laughing with him.

“I'll have a cranberry juice, please,” I politely address the waitress.

Ronan's big shoulders deflate when he sees that I mean business. “Okay, fine. I'll have a cranberry juice, too. But with vodka in mine. And a squeeze of lime.” He shrugs out of his suit jacket, throwing an arm around the empty chair beside him.

The waitress very obviously steals a peak at Ronan's muscles. She promptly goes bright pink, turns around, walks right into a nearby table, apologizes into the air and then heads off to grab our drinks.

Yup. That's the kind of effect Captain Brighton has on women.

While I expected the conversation between us to be quiet and awkward, Ronan seems to be in good spirits. We people watch and we talk, an easy, laidback vibe hovering over the table.

At first, we stick to uncontroversial topics of conversation. I listen to him telling me about his path from college into the professional hockey league. Then I tell him about my own college experience and my days working at my father's company in Chicago.

I'd stepped in here, wanting to grab a quick drink and head back to my hotel room. But now, I find myself sipping my drink slowly and trying to make this night last longer.

We continue chatting, and I realize it's getting harder and harder *not* to stare at his lips. His jaw. Those tattoo-covered forearms.

Ugh. I'm just extra horned up, and it's starting to mess with my head. Maybe it's Valentine's Day messing with my head, too.

I'm assuming that Ronan might be feeling a little horny himself, with the way he keeps eyeballing my chest and then adjusting his pants.

Which I can't read too much into.

I've been celibate for too fucking long at this point. Add to that the fact that everyone around us is coupled up and in love and dry-humping in the corner tonight, I'm feeling a little...frustrated.

Then, like always, our conversation turns more intimate.

Ronan leans back in his seat, spreading his legs wider under the table. His knee momentarily brushes mine and I struggle to ignore the spark. "How did you spend last Valentine's Day?"

I shrug a shoulder. "Working."

He frowns slightly. "Working? Really?"

"What do you mean?" I laugh a little. "It's how I always spend Valentine's Day."

His tongue trails along the seam of his mouth, his gaze on me intense. "I just figured you'd be the type of girl who always has a Valentine's Day date lined up. Maybe more than one."

I twirl my straw through the ice in my cranberry juice. "I told you—I haven't dated all that much."

"That still doesn't make sense to me." He shakes his head, his eyes poring into my soul like he's trying to understand me down to the atomic level.

"I don't know what to tell you," I say, attempting to sound nonchalant. But when I shift in my seat, my knee bumps his under the table and I don't feel nonchalant at all.

After a quiet moment of him staring deeply at me, I can't take it anymore. "What the hell is going through your mind right now, Hockey Guy?"

"I'm trying to write you a poem in my head."

I bust out laughing. "What?"

"Yeah. I'm writing you a poem," he says matter-of-factly. "It's Valentine's Day, for christ's sake. You deserve a poem, Nicky Westbrook."

I cover my face with my hands. "It's okay. I'm not the kind of girl that men write poetry about."

"Well, if I were your boyfriend, I'd write poetry about you. All the damn time."

"Stop." I giggle from behind my hands. This man's charm is getting the best of me. I know I should know better. But the reality is, I'm drowning in it.

"This is serious, Nicky." He pulls my hands from my face. "Here goes. Here's my poem." He clears his throat. "Roses are red. Violets are blue. Peaches are...well, peach—"

“I’m going to kick you.” I deliberately bang my knee into his.

Cracking up, Ronan slips a hand beneath the table, grabbing my mid thigh. His fingers sink into my flesh and it turns me the fuck on. *Holy shit.* My eyes flutter shut when a rush of heat bounds to my core, killing the laughter in my throat.

He holds my gaze. He leans across the table, playfully tugging my hat down over my ears. Well, it’s *his* hat technically. I just have zero intentions of ever returning it to him.

“What I’m trying to say is, if I were your boyfriend, I’d spoil the fuck out of you on Valentine’s Day. You deserve it.”

If I were your boyfriend...

Shit—I’ve been entertaining that idea lately. Far more than I’d ever admit.

Ever since Ronan suggested us being in a ‘practice’ relationship, it’s all I can seem to think about. The idea is ridiculous.

Absurd.

Childish.

Inappropriate.

So incredibly tempting...

I mean—the option to kiss those lips whenever I want. The chance to explore that body in the most intimate of ways. The privilege to feel that tongue on my pussy again.

In truth, it’s not just the sexual benefits of doing this with Ronan that are enticing to me. The truth is I like talking to him. We talk about things I’ve never talked to anyone about before. And he makes me laugh harder than anyone else even though half the time, I’m fighting not to laugh at all. And when I’m with him, I feel comfortable, like I can trust him.

But a practice relationship? Seriously? Who does that? And with Ronan? The man is my work assignment. Doing that with him would be unprofessional. Maybe even unethical. Granted, I don’t know a lot about ethics so don’t quote me on that. But c’mon. I can’t do this with Ronan. I just...can’t.

So I accept that the whole practice relationship idea is a categorical ‘no’.

Our waitress pops by then, and I realize that our drinks are almost empty. The distraction is welcome because I’m two seconds away from orgasming against these squeaky vinyl seats.

“Would you like to order a meal?” She holds up two laminated menus.

“Oh, no thank you.” My words come rushing out as I shift my legs away from Ronan, pressing them tightly together. “We’re not...this is not a date.” I say it as a reminder to myself, to Ronan.

I look across the booth for him to back me up, but instead the man is frowning at me. “It doesn’t have to be a date for us to order dinner. We have to eat.” His annoying half-grin appears. “Y’know, for nourishment, basic survival, and stuff.”

I can’t take my eyes off him. “You are always so dramatic,” I rasp out, searching for my voice in my tied-up throat.

Without breaking the eye contact, he holds out his hand to accept the menus from the waitress. The energy between us is so hot. It’s alive and it’s vibrating.

The waitress stands on the sidelines, a third-party observer, watching uncomfortably and discretely fanning her cheeks.

“I don’t keep up my manly figure by starving myself.” He tries pushing out his stomach like he doesn’t have washboard abs under his button-down shirt. “Have dinner with me, Nicky.”

A breath shudders out of my chest. “Fine.”

We order dinner and the waitress promises to be back soon. I won’t admit it to Ronan, but I’m kind of relieved that food is on the way. I didn’t realize how hungry I was until I browsed the menu. Some of that stuff sounds really good and now, I’m looking forward to the cherry pie I ordered for dessert.

Needing a second to get myself together, I excuse myself to the ladies’ room. I use the toilet and wash my hands, taking a second to stare at myself in the mirror.

To be honest, I look downright horny. My curls are wild and tussled, peeking out at the bottom of Ronan’s toque, my pupils are dilated, my red lipstick has faded to nothing and I straight-up look like I *need* sex. Oh, dammit.

Not stopping to ask myself what the hell I’m thinking, I pop a few quarters into one of those wall-mounted dispensers and a handful of condoms fall out. I shove my guilt aside, stuffing the condoms down at the bottom of my purse. Just in case.

I’m trying to be smart here. And sex with the subject of my work assignment doesn’t feel like the smartest. But nothing good can come of deluding myself about my ability to resist Ronan. Especially with the way my whole body is screaming out his name. I need to be realistic. I need to be

prepared.

I march out of the washrooms with my head held high.

“Can I ask you a question?” Ronan asks when it’s just the two of us sitting at the table again.

“Knowing you, I don’t really have a choice, do I?” I smirk.

He blatantly rolls his eyes. “Are you still torn up over that loser who dumped you on Christmas?”

“No, I’m not still torn up over Simon. Not that it’s any of your business,” I mumble. “And Simon’s not a loser. He’s actually a nice guy.” I really don’t feel the need to play the role of the bitter ex.

Ronan levels me with a look that says he disagrees. “Come on. A nice guy? That bum dumped you on your birthday.”

I let out a sigh, knowing how bad this all looks. But it’s hard to explain. I guess in Ronan’s eyes, I should be running around town, burning Simon’s underwear and keying his pickup truck. But despite the letdown, I was never all that fired up about things ending between the two of us.

“Things aren’t all black and white, “ I begin. “Simon is going through a lot of stuff. His ex-fiancée left him at the altar and all that. He’s still dealing with it. So I guess I respect that he was actually honest with me instead of continuing to string me along or making me promises he couldn’t keep. Does it suck that it all played out on my birthday? Of course. But that doesn’t make him some monster.”

“I’d say he’s a monster,” Ronan mutters, all pissed off on my behalf.

I shrug one shoulder. “The older I get, the more I’m able to be honest with myself. Simon wasn’t right for me and our situationship ended. Thank god. It is what it is. I won’t hold a grudge for the sake of holding a grudge.”

“Is it okay if I hold a grudge on your behalf?” Across the table from me, Hockey Guy is all puffed up with righteous indignation.

That makes me smile. “My mom once said something that stuck with me. ‘Not every ex-lover is a villain. Sometimes he’s just a placeholder who’s temporarily in your life. When the real hero shows up on the scene, you’ll be grateful that there is not some side character hogging his spot.’”

Right then, our plates arrive, steaming hot and smelling delicious.

While waiting for the server to disappear again, Ronan seems to take in what I said, digesting it. “I guess I see what you mean. When you look at it that way, I guess that guy actually did you a favor by ending things.”

I smile softly. “Exactly.”

“And now you’re free to wait for Mr. Right.”

“That’s the thing,” I say, shaking my head and unrolling my silverware. “I’m not actually waiting for anybody. I’ve seriously decided that I’m focusing on me right now. And I’m starting to discover that I like myself a whole lot.”

He dips his head. “I’m discovering that I like you, too.”

My fork slips from my fingers.

Did he just say—what—surely he just means as friends. He likes me as a friend.

But the way Ronan’s eyes are eating me up, I’m not so sure about that.

Ugh. It’s just Valentine’s Day messing with his head, too.

“Thank you,” I croak out eventually, really unsure how to respond to that.

The air turns electric all over again, with this awkward sort of buzz hanging over us. It’s too much. So I turn my attention on finishing my meal.

When we eventually push our empty plates away, I let my focus linger on the band who’s performing on the small stage off to the side under an arch of red and pink balloons. They’re pretty good, now that I listen to them. I tap my foot and I nod my head along. But then the lead singer notices us and points in our direction.

“Hey, you, couple in the back!”

I stupidly look around, hoping to get lucky enough that he’s referring to some other couple in the back.

Problem is, there is no other couple in the back.

“Yes, you two!” The man insists. “Come dance! Get up here and get this party started.”

I cringe. Nobody—and I mean nobody—is dancing right now. I do feel bad for the band, but, no. Unfortunately, I do not in fact volunteer to ‘get this party started’.

“Sorry,” I say with a wave. “We’re not...This is not a date.”

Ronan scoffs. “Doesn’t have to be a date for us to dance, Nicky. Geez.”

The few people here inside the bar are all watching us now. They want to see what will happen next. Ronan and I are the center of attention.

I want to argue. I want to tell Ronan that dancing totally violates the bargain we made tonight. We agreed to keep things low key. But he’s already on his feet and holding out his palm to me. “Let me show you off, Peach. You’re so pretty. I want everybody to see you.”

He smiles at me, all pearly white and wickedly devilish. I instantly feel

my panties heating up. That smile is a fire hazard.

“Ugh. Fine.” I slip my hand into his.

He pulls me across the room, right in front of the band. And of course, the musicians decide to start playing a slower tune. Of course, they do.

So we dance, and we sway, and we find ourselves way too close for two people who aren't a couple.

Ronan twirls me around. Even though I'd been doing a stellar job at avoiding his blue gaze this whole time, he somehow catches me off guard.

We lock eyes. The whole room gets ten degrees hotter.

Just when I'm trying to figure out how to untangle my gaze from his, something takes over me. And I kiss him.

I reach up, lock a hand behind his neck and I kiss him.

I'm shocked. I'm appalled. I'm so, so into it.

He kisses me back and I quickly get lost in the feel of his mouth moving hungrily against mine. I'm delirious for more. More lips. More tongue. More Ronan.

I pull him closer, tangling my arms around him. It's not until I rub up against his boner that I slightly pull away, feeling dazed. Like I just woke up from a fever dream.

“Keep kissing me, Peach,” he rasps, jerking me right back against his body so I can feel every rock hard inch of him.

“But this is not a date...” I whimper.

“I know...” Ronan answers, his voice gravelly. “Doesn't have to be a date for us to makeout...” His mouth lands on my cheek, kissing down the side of my neck and getting me all hot and bothered again. “You don't have to be my main character, Nicky Westbrook. Tonight, I'll be your placeholder if you'll be mine.”

I swallow. “Yeah. Placeholder. Okay.”

I refuse to think too hard about it, yanking him back in. The band plays on, and the rest of the bar fades away as I kiss Ronan Brighton again and again and again.

When the front entrance door bangs open, and a group of rowdy hockey fans stream inside, the room quickly comes back into focus. We startle apart at the noise, just in time to see a group of Saints fans rushing at Ronan.

“Brighton!”

“It's Brighton!”

“Number seventeen. Can we get your autograph?”

“Yeah, man. Will you sign my girl’s boobs?!”

“Stop being a weirdo, Steve!”

A marker is shoved into Ronan’s hand.

I slink back into the shadows, snapping back to my senses. What the hell was I thinking? Kissing Ronan Brighton in public? Not only was it unprofessional of me, it was also foolish. Someone might have gotten it on camera.

That was sloppy of me. Even though it’s Valentine’s Day. Even though Ronan is a darned good kisser.

Frustrated with my stupid horny self, I wait by our booth until he’s done signing autographs. Ronan keeps glancing at me over his shoulder, like he’s trying to make sure I haven’t left. I give him encouraging nods, motivating him to keep signing autographs. The Saints need moments like this with their budding fanbase after all.

When he’s finished, Ronan stalks over. He backs me up against a wall with a dark grin on his face. It’s like he expects us to pick right up where we left off.

I swerve and walk right past him. No more. No more of those sexy looks and those hot kisses. I can’t let this man melt my brain to a pile of horny mush tonight.

“Nicky...” he calls after me.

I grab my purse from the booth. “I’m ready to go back to my hotel room. Alone,” I tell him. “Which means you are, too.”

RONAN

I'm a fast walker. I've always been a fast walker.

But the way Nicky is speed-walking down the sidewalk, I can barely keep up with her. I'm six-foot-three. A whole foot taller than this woman. Yet I'm jogging just so she doesn't leave me in the dust. She's on a mission. A mission to get away from me.

The elevator ride is awkwardly silent. I dare not get close to her. The way she's gripping her purse, I'm assuming she's got her finger on the trigger of a bottle of holy water. And she'd gladly douse me in the face if I get too close.

Safe to say that whatever moment we had back at the bar when she grabbed a fistful of my hair and put her tongue in my mouth? It's over now.

When I get off on her floor, Nicky gives me a cautious look. She opens her mouth but I shut her right up.

"I'm walking you to your door, Nicky. And that's that."

Her lips press into a firm line and she marches to her room, leaving me to trail behind. With a quick swipe of her card, she's safely inside, peeking one eye at me from behind the door, that knitted Saints hat pulled low on her forehead.

Geez, woman.

"Thank you, Ronan. Good night."

"Good ni—" The door slams in my face.

Sweet.

I feel like shit as I drag my feet back to my own room on one floor up. Off to bed it is.

The moment I unlock the door and step into my room, I hear giggling.

My feet stall at the threshold. I take in the scene in front of me. Tipton, who happens to be my roommate on this road trip, is laying in the queen-sized bed next to mine. Except, judging by the giant lump moving around under the covers, I don't think he's alone.

I clear my throat and take a backwards step. "Sorry."

More giggles.

Then not one, but *two* heads poke out the top of the covers, peering over at me with wide eyes and messy hair.

Wow.

I spent the past couple hours trying to be on my best behavior to stay on Nicky's good side. Meanwhile, Tipton ends up the star of his own threesome.

My teammate looks horned up and quite buzzed. "Hey, bro. See? I brought you a girl." He grins. "But since you never came back to the room, I ended up having to sleep with both girls. Just to keep them happy, y'know." He turns and beams at each of his new friends.

More giggles.

"Oh, shucks. Poor you," I mumble.

"He has all his teeth," the redhead announces, sounding disappointed.

"What? Yes. I am still in possession of all my teeth." And I'm quite proud of it. I run my tongue over my set of pearly whites to make sure they're still in tact.

"Bummer," she mutters, turning her back on me.

Well, I'm not interested, either, lady.

"You could join us, stud," the blonde one says, propping herself up and patting the bed beside her. She doesn't seem to care that the sheet has fallen and her boobs are flopping out. "There's plenty of room for another hockey star. Especially one as cute as you."

"No, thank you." I start backing up. "I'll just let you guys carry on."

I stumble out of the room, and I find myself wandering aimlessly through the hotel. Up and down the halls. Riding the elevator. Checking out the different vending machine options.

And then somehow, I come to a stop outside of Nicky's room.

I lean an arm on the doorframe, fighting with myself. Trying to talk myself out of this. This is a bad idea, no matter how I look at it. I know I should turn around and walk away. Go back and sit in my hallway until Tipton's puck bunnies do their walk of shame in a couple hours.

But I can't stop thinking about how Nicky's lips tasted at the bar. About

how her body felt in my arms.

This is right. I don't care what she says. I need to make her see it.

My fist draws up before I can stop it, knocking quietly on her door.

It's only a few seconds before Nicky opens the door. She stands there, barefoot in her tiny cotton pajama set, looking up at me from under her lashes. Damn, those eyes get to me every time.

"You're not supposed to be here."

I lean in closer. "But do you want me here?"

"It's Valentine's Day," she argues. But her argument is weak, and she didn't answer my question. "You can't come back to my room on Valentine's Day."

"I don't give a fuck what the day is. I want you, Nicky. I've wanted you every fucking moment of the past fifty-two days since we met on that train."

Her fingertips brush over her lips in surprise. "fifty-two...? You counted...?"

"I counted..." I echo her.

Nicky takes a shaky step backward.

I take a careful step forward into her room.

I read her face, gauging her expression. Raw lust vibrates like a forcefield around her. She doesn't move away. She doesn't tell me to leave. She just bites down on that lip, staring up at me.

"Be my placeholder tonight, Nicky." I beg in a rasp. "Let me be yours."

She grabs my shirt by the collar, pulling me down.

She utters one single word that changes everything. "Yes."

NICKY

The impact of Ronan's kiss crashes me into the doorframe with an *oomph!*

He captures me against the cool beam of metal. I moan into his mouth and his tongue surges powerfully against my own. Our lips are instantly at war. Our hands battle with buttons and zippers and fabrics that are annoyingly getting in the way.

"The door..." I whisper against his jaw.

"What...?" he whispers back, sounding more than a little dazed.

"We didn't close the door," I laugh breathlessly.

Ronan looks around drunkenly, finally realizing the position we're in, with our bodies halfway between the privacy of my dimly-lit room and the very bright, very public hotel hallway.

"Right. Sorry," he mumbles, not sounding sorry at all.

Ronan spins me off the doorframe and we stumble into my hotel room, the door clicking shut behind us. Our breaths are harsh and jagged as we make out in the dark, cluttered space.

Sometime between kisses, Ronan sifts his fingers through the curls to fall into my face.

He slides his hand along my cheek, angling my face up to his. "You want this?"

I nod into his palm. "Yes."

His fingers tighten in my hair as he diligently searches my eyes. "You sure?"

"Yes, Ronan," I breathe out.

Do I know this is wrong? Absolutely. Do I want it anyway? Hell fucking yes. I'm done fighting the attraction I feel toward this man.

Before he can keep interrogating me, I'm back to kissing him, yanking at his belt, trying to shimmy his pants down his hips.

The fabric effortlessly falls around his ankles and he steps out of them. Then, he's going after my poor tank top with a vengeance and I'm plucking at the buttons on his shirt like they've personally offended me. Then, I'm melting under his hands, trying to figure out where my shorts went.

Damn. This guy for sure knows what he's doing.

At the first brush of his naked torso against mine, Ronan growls. "Fuck, baby. Your body already feels so good and I'm not even inside you yet. I feel like I'm gonna lose my mind tonight."

We tangle and trip all over each other as we move in a blind quest to find the bed. I fall backward onto the mattress and Ronan is right there, pressing his body into mine.

Even through his boxers, I can feel the weight of his erection. When I wrap my thighs around his hips, it nuzzles against my clit, making me shiver.

"You were right..." I say in a gasp as his warm mouth opens against the sensitive spot behind my ear.

"You're gonna have to be a little more specific, darling. I've been right about a lot of things lately."

I crack up quietly, slipping my hand beneath his shirt and tickling along his ribs. *Annoying man.* "You were right about the chemistry between us. The more I fight it, the bigger it gets. I can't fight it anymore. We need to explore it and see what comes next."

He pulls back so our eyes can meet. "I could not agree more, Peach." His fingertips dust along my jawbone. "I don't know where this is going, but I can promise you one thing."

"What's that?" I ask, feeling the drumbeat of my pulse in my throat.

"I swear on my life that I won't hurt you."

My heart shudders. "That's one hell of a promise, Brighton."

He doesn't falter. "And I stand by it."

Overwhelmed by so much emotion, I just pull him into me for more kissing. Ronan's lips separate from mine and he takes his time, kissing my cheekbones and my jaw and the length of my throat. He bites and he sucks and I don't tell him to stop, can't tell him to stop, won't tell him to stop.

Because he's so patient and he makes sure to find every little sensitive

spot, bringing me pleasure in places I never realized had the capacity to feel so acutely aroused.

But there's one place, I urgently need his attention. Between my legs.

I hook my fingers into the waistline of my panties and work on shimmying the elastic strings over my hips as Ronan licks and sucks and pinches my breasts. I'm flooded between the thighs by the time his tongue is dancing around my belly button.

"God. I can smell you already," he groans, dragging his fingertips over the crotch of my panties. "So fucking sweet. Been wanting to taste you again since that first night." He slips his hand into my panties and touches me where I need it.

"Taste me..." I say. I'm so excited, I'm shamelessly rubbing my ass against the mattress, needing to feel.

I expect him to draw this out like the last time, but he doesn't. In fact, he doesn't even bother sliding off my panties. He just grabs the flimsy fabric in his fists and pulls. A tearing sound fills the air and my pussy rejoices like she just got freed from prison.

With zero regard for my meager underwear budget, Ronan flings the scrap to the floor and strokes his fingers through my wet, throbbing slit like it belongs to him.

"Fuck!" He growls from where he's now kneeling between my thighs. "You have no idea how pretty your pussy is." He touches me slow and reverent. He flicks my nub back and forth in slow rubs.

Then two fingers ease inside me, filling me nice and tight. My walls pulse and throb around his knuckles. He pumps in and out of me, his rhythm smooth, his thrusts deep.

My eyes roll back into my head before fluttering shut. "Yes."

When I open my eyes, Ronan's fingers are in his mouth, thoroughly licking them clean. Then, in a heartbeat, he's pushed me onto my back and he's greedily licking *me*.

He leans forward. His tongue drives a path up my center, splitting my folds apart, swirling the tip around my pearl, making me cry out with reckless abandon. Then he does it again, rubbing the flat of his tongue from the pucker of my rear hole to the tip of my clit.

So fucking hot.

He repeats the reverent motion of his tongue again and again and again until I feel like I'm losing my mind.

Moans fight against the back of my throat. But I'm vaguely aware of where we are. Of who might be on the other side of these four walls. One of my bosses. Or Ronan's teammates. Who the hell knows?

Ronan doesn't seem to have the hangups I do. He doesn't hold back at all. He covers my pussy with his mouth, sucking and lightly pulling at my folds and doing things to my body and mind I've never felt before.

I don't last long. Mere minutes later, I'm tugging on his hair as my spine arches up off the bed. I try to buck my hips but his strong hands keep me in place, holding me down.

With his groan, seismic vibrations roll into my pussy. "Come for me, baby. Come on my tongue, Nicky. Scream my name."

I slap a palm over my mouth, shouting into my hand. I orgasm with the force of a train slamming into the side of a mountain. And a landslide of sensations comes crumbling down onto me.

Wetness gushes from my core, ruining the sheets. Even as I drown him in my release, Ronan's mouth keeps working on me. Taking and taking and taking everything my body has to give.

His face is a drenched mess when his head finally pops up from between my legs an eternity later. He crawls up onto the bed beside me, gently raking sweaty strands of hair from my forehead. "How do you feel?"

"I...I...you..." I give up on finding words.

I just grab his cheeks and kiss him, breathless and gasping but still wanting more.

"I want to return the favor," I whisper when I can finally get my mouth to work again.

He buries his face in my neck. "Fuck. I swear I want to feel your mouth on my cock so bad. But Peach, I can't wait another second to be inside your pussy."

RONAN

I feel the way Nicky's sexy frame shakes under me. Her shiver of anticipation moves through her body and into mine.

"Can I fuck you, beautiful girl?" I trace a finger between her luscious breasts, down to the hollow of her belly. I feel her abdominal muscles jump right before I cup her mound with my palm. "Do you want to feel my cock inside this gorgeous pussy?"

My dream girl moans, spreading her shapely legs wider. "Yes. Fuck me, Ronan."

I'm grinning like a lottery winner when I shuck off my boxers and toss them to the floor.

"Oh my god..." I hear Nicky whisper.

I turn back in her direction to find her gaping at my erection, fingers clamped over her mouth. That's a reaction I've seen before. On many occasions. Still, I fight back my smirk and try to play innocent.

"Is there a problem, Peach?"

She motions to my crotch. "Your hockey stick is a *literal* hockey stick. That thing is huge. It's dangling halfway to the floor."

"Three-quarters of the way. Don't be disrespectful."

My dick is hard, bobbing all on its own, precum dripping from the crown. I'm loving Nicky's reaction to my manhood. A little too much. I stroke a hand down my shaft, willing the poor eager guy to calm down.

She slaps my arm. "Ronan! That thing is gonna split me like a piñata. I'm new at the office. I can't get hospitalized right now. I'm not sure my health insurance coverage has kicked in yet."

I clench the back of her neck, giving it a little squeeze as I steal a quick, hot kiss that leaves her bug-eyed and speechless. “It’s true, baby. My hockey stick might split you apart. In the best possible way. If that happens, I’ll cover the hospital bill. It’s the least I can do.”

Nicky’s amused laughter fills the air. It’s practically the best sound ever. I want to hear it again and again.

But I want to hear her moans even more.

“Let me take you to bed, Peach. And I guarantee I’ll give you the night of your life.”

A puff of air gushes from her lungs. “That’s what I want.”

Holding myself up on one elbow, I lean over the side of the bed and grab my pants from off the floor. I’m feeling pretty damn good about what’s about to happen until I flip open my wallet and I realize...

“*Fu-u-u-ck!*”

“What is it?” Nicky asks, smoothing her warm palms over my shoulders and down my biceps. There are no words to describe how good that feels.

But now my big plan to ravage her pussy is about to go down the drain. And I’m two seconds away from violently banging my skull into the headboard. Because I *really* fucked this up.

“I don’t have condoms,” I tell her.

Why would I? I had no idea tonight would turn out the way it did. Merely a few hours ago, Nicky was barely speaking to me. And since Nicky is the only thing I think of, going home with any other woman was completely out of the question. So protection was the furthest thing from my mind.

Nicky scoots out from beneath me and I’m certain it’s all over now. But then she stumbles across to the chair in the corner, digs her hand into her big big purse and emerges with two small foil packets clenched between her fingers.

She grins like the champion she is. “Don’t worry. I bought condoms earlier.”

I’m so relieved, I nearly drop on my hands and knees at her feet to worship her.

But something about the way she just said that catches my attention. “You bought condoms? *Earlier?*”

Round breasts, wide hips, soft tummy, she saunters across the room to where I’m sitting. Not an insecurity in the world. She comes to stand between my spread thighs, towering over me. *Damn. She’s beautiful.*

“In the restroom at the bar,” she says matter-of-factly. “I bought them from that dispenser thing on the wall.”

Now I’m the one grinning uncontrollably.

Fuck. I love that she prepared for this. It makes my cock even harder.

“Don’t look at me like that,” she chastises me. “Protection is important. Do I seem like a woman who would leave my entire fate in the hands of some man? Even a man like you?”

A man like me? I don’t know what she means by that, and now is definitely not the time to ask. I don’t want to risk things going sour here.

“What? Why are you grinning like that, Hockey Guy?” She looks genuinely confused by my amusement.

I smooth my hands up and down her luscious thighs. “You knew…”

“Knew what?” Her head angles to the side, the tips of her curly hair grazing her pointed nipples.

I trail a kiss over her ribs, letting my stubble bruise her skin. I weigh the globes of her ass in my palms. “You knew we were going to fuck.”

She shudders under my hands, her head tilting back in pleasure. “I did,” she confesses softly. “On some level, I knew that no matter how hard I tried to fight, eventually I’d give into this…this…”

“Yeah,” I say, my voice gritty as I pucker my mouth against her sternum and squeeze her ass. “I don’t know how to label this, either.” I kiss a line across her chest, just beneath the underside of her breasts. I could die with my face against her boobs like this. So soft. Smells so good.

“I don’t need labels,” she leans down to whisper by my ear. “I just need your cock inside me.” She closes her fingers around my length, slowly stroking me up and down.

I feel a grin slide across my lips. “I couldn’t agree more. For fifty-two days, I’ve been imagining what your pussy would feel like, wrapped around my cock. I’ve wondered how tight you’d be. How wet. Whether you’d like it fast or if you’d want me to take my time. Now I’m about to find out.”

I quickly tear open the condom wrapper and unroll the latex down my length. Then I brace Nicky’s hips. She positions both arms on my shoulders and one knee on the mattress, looking beautiful and lusty and the tiniest bit nervous as our eyes connect.

I line up the head of my cock, notching it against her opening. And I wait. “You ready?” I ask softly, all joking gone from my voice.

I’m a lucky guy. I’ve lived a fun life. I’ve had a lot of great experiences.

But I just know this is about to be one of the very best moments of my life so far.

When Nicky Westbrook begins lowering her hips, the walls of her tight pussy stretching to accommodate the head of my dick, every other accomplishment in this lifetime instantly fades.

Holy-fucking-damn-shit-fuck.

Fuck.

“Ronan...” Her voice cracks around my name.

My arms wrap around her, holding her tight to my chest. “Nicky...” I croak out.

The way her breasts crush against my abs, the way she clings to my neck, the way her pussy carefully swallows my dick one inch after the next after the next. There’s no convincing me that this woman’s body wasn’t made for me.

“That’s it, baby. Fill yourself up,” I croak into her hair. “Fill yourself up with my dick. Goddammit, Nicky.”

She makes jagged sounds in her throat, clinging to me tighter. She throws her head back and sinks down all the way. “Holy...fuck...Ronan...” When she’s fully seated in my lap, she blows air through her lips. “I need a second to catch my breath.”

“Take your time, Peach.” I rub my hands up and down her back, trying to act cool and supportive.

On the inside, I’m losing my shit.

Her pussy is so fuck-damn tight. The walls are pulsing and squeezing and undulating in an erratic rhythm that’s driving me mad. Being enclosed in all this heat feels like enough to push me over the edge.

But I clench my jaw. I grit my teeth. And I wait until she’s ready to move.

And when she’s ready to move, fuck, does she go wild.

She starts rolling her hips in quick, tight motions, bouncing heavily on my lap. Her curves press against me, her nipples brushing back and forth on my chest. She’s so wet, it’s extreme. She’s completely drenched the lap, dripping down onto the sheets.

“Ronan, yes.” She purrs my name, her eyes fluttering up to the ceiling. When she starts building speed, riding me harder, taking me deeper, I want to look into those honey brown eyes. I need to.

I cup her cheek, forcing her eyes to stay on mine. I start fucking her from below and her pelvis meets mine, thrust for thrust. I can’t even catalogue all

the emotions pouring through me right now. I don't know how to keep a rein on them.

All I know is I want this to mean something to her. When it's all over, I want her to tell me that she felt something too. Because right now, I feel *everything*.

Grinning in that mischief-loving way of hers, Nicky pushes me back on the mattress. She climbs over me and she rides. It's the sight of a lifetime, this beautiful woman with her head thrown back, hands in her mahogany curls. And her tits bouncing. And the mind-melting smile on her face. I can't look away.

"You're staring, Hockey Guy. So rude." A breathless grin dances on her face.

"You're gorgeous, Peach. So distracting."

And because her grin is a little too smug for my liking, I grab her hips and abruptly flip her onto her back.

She yelps in surprise.

Now, I'm hovering above her. "Lock your legs around my back, like a good girl. Let me fuck that smile off your face."

"Give it your best shot, babe," she taunts me.

"Oh, I was trying to be nice. But now, you're gonna pay, my little brat." I flip her again, this time so she's facedown on the mattress. I grab onto her hips, pulling her ass up in the air.

"What are you gonna do? Spank me?" She wiggles her butt at me.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Maybe." She wiggles that perfect ass again.

I grin to myself as my open palm comes down hard on the flesh of her ass. I watch the way her curves wobble.

"Ohh, mmm," Nicky groans, arching her spine, pushing her breasts into the mattress, giving me a view of everything. I watch, my dick about to explode as even more wetness spills from her opening.

"Fuck. I need to be inside you. Right now."

I align my cock with her entrance, wondering just how hard I can take her. Nicky answers the question by throwing her ass back and swallowing half of my cock into her pussy in just one movement.

I roar like an animal. And then I go in.

I pound her mercilessly. I fuck her pussy like it's mine. Like it belongs to me. Like *she* belongs to me.

Hunching over her, I plant one arm on the bed and reach around the front of her body. I rub and stroke her clit as I fill her opening to the hilt. Over and over again.

“Love the way your body responds to me,” I murmur.

“Love the way your cock fills me up,” she shoots breathlessly over her shoulder, working her ass back against me.

This feels too damn good. My body can't take anymore. I may be a world class athlete but suddenly, I don't trust that my own body is strong enough. My arms wobble. My knees shake.

I'm not going to last long. Shit. I'm going to blow in no time.

I give her clit one last tug between my fingers and Nicky starts to unravel beneath me.

Her pussy heats up like lava and her walls begin to clench and release. I hear her cries, muffled when she buries her face into the bedding as she rocks recklessly against my dick. “Come for me, Peach.”

“I'm coming I'm coming I'm coming...” she yells, followed by a long string of moans.

My body goes deadly still and my seed shoots out like a rocket. I empty-empty-empty inside her, afraid this stream of release will never stop.

When Nicky tumbles into the bed, she falls onto her side, shaking and flushed, a light sheen of sweat on her forehead. From where she's panting and struggling to catch her breath, her eyes meet mine.

And the look she gives me makes me want to run. She regrets this. She regrets doing this with me. It's written all over her face. And I don't want to hear her say that.

Her mouth opens tentatively. I cut her off before she can utter a word.

“Bathroom!” I yelp. “I've gotta use the bathroom!”

I hobble off the bed, my legs shaking beneath me like pogo sticks as I hightail it to the bathroom. I deal with the condom and splash some water on my face, taking stock of what just happened.

I fucked Nicky Westbrook, and now she's about to list a bunch of reasons why it shouldn't have happened. She's going to tell me why it won't happen again. And I'm going to be devastated.

Dammit.

“You got yourself into this mess, asshole,” I mutter to my reflection in the mirror. “Don't hide in here. Go face it. Go face the music.”

Grabbing one of those tiny complimentary towels folded on the edge of

the hotel sink, I drench it in warm water and head back into the bedroom.

Nicky is propped up against the headboard. She has a pillow clutched protectively over her naked body and a nervous look on her face.

“Hey...” she says shyly in a voice that doesn’t even sound like hers.

I take her in. Pretty and messy and about to stab me in the fucking heart.
“Hey...”

Sitting on the edge of the bed beside her, I smile softly, running the rag over her sweaty forehead. I gently pry the pillow from her hands, and to my surprise, she lets me. I blot the terrycloth between her breasts. Then hesitantly, Nicky widens her legs and lets me clean her there, too.

I turn to start grabbing my clothes because I’m sure that’s what she wants. She’s about to kick me out, so I might as well get a head start.

She surprises me though, grabbing my wrist. I glance in her direction and find her nervously licking her lips.

I sit back on the edge of the bed with a sigh, resigned to the incoming disappointment. “What’s up, Peach?”

She lets her suddenly shy eyes meet mine. “Remember how you said that we could...practice. Being in a relationship. Like study buddies or whatever?”

My body stills. That one fragmented question ignites my chest like a pilot light. “Yes?”

She pulls in a deep breath. “I was wondering...is that offer still on the table?”

Shock smacks me upside the head. An instant grin splashes across my face. “Hell yeah, Peach!”

NICKY

“Right...right there, mmm...”

Ronan grasps my ass cheeks in his big, rough hands and plunges his tongue deeper into my pulsing channel.

“Oh my god, yes.” I claw at the headboard of his bed and roll my hips. “Like that.”

He responds to my encouragement, sliding his tongue back and forth between the lips of my pussy. From where I’m sitting on his mouth, I look down and our eyes connect.

Actually, his eyes are the only part of his face I can see. My mound presses firmly on his mouth. His nose is tucked beneath my clit. My thighs are clamped around his ears. The position is so intimate.

“Fuck. I feel like I’m suffocating you.” I laugh nervously, easing some of my weight off him.

His fingers grab at my thighs, holding me securely in place. “Do I look like I’m struggling to you?” His words are muffled, lashing my pussy with warm breaths. His eyes twinkle happily. “I’m having the time of my life down here, Nicky.” He gives my ass a solid slap and the sting of it resonates throughout my body.

“Ah!” My head jolts backward as my spine arches. *Mmm. Feels so good.*

Ronan’s palm rolls over the achy spot, soothing the burn of the slap. “Don’t worry about a thing. Sit on my face, tell me how you want me to eat your pussy and I’ll take care of all the rest.”

Holy fuck.

I love it when he talks to me like that.

I slide my fingertips into his hair, lightly scratching my nails against his scalp. “My clit...” I hear myself rasp out when his mouth makes contact with my lower lips. “Play with my clit.”

Ronan doesn't disappoint, capturing my little bud into his mouth. Sucking and swirling and sending me mad.

We're back in Starlight Falls now. Through the huge windows of the main house, all I can see is snowflakes flickering all around, landing on the barren tree branches. There's not a soul around for miles. In fact, it feels like Ronan and I are the only people in this town. Like everyone else has packed up and left Starlight Falls to us. I'm pretty sure it's all our loud and unending sex noises that scared the neighbors away. What a shame.

The Saints have a much-needed rest period for the next few days. So we're back at Ronan's secluded Starlight Falls hideaway. Instead of doing something productive, Ronan has been spending his time, letting me boss him around in the bedroom.

I've got to say, I was very skeptical about the whole 'practice boyfriend and girlfriend' thing. But so far, it's been five stars. Ten-on-ten. One-hundred-percent-would-recommend.

I've lost count of how many orgasms I've had in the past twelve hours. I've barely left this bedroom for anything other than using the bathroom. Ronan has been incredibly attentive and responsive to my body, working diligently to get me to my climax every single time. And each time I hit my orgasm, he diligently cleans me with a warm cloth then he offers me a water bottle and a snack.

And I'm struggling to figure out why I even turned this offer down in the first place.

When Ronan initially suggested this practice relationship thing, I was skeptical and I think that's understandable. At first glance, his suggestion just seemed like the sneaky attempts of a serial fuckboy looking for a brand new plaything.

But the more I thought about it, the more I could see the benefits for both of us. I clearly need to get better at expressing my feelings in a relationship context. I know that I've sworn off men for the moment but if I ever plan on getting back into the dating market, I'd like to be armed with the right tools. Communication is one of them.

As for Ronan, he says he wants practice being a boyfriend. I can see where he's coming from. Being in a successful relationship takes skills.

Maybe we could work together to cultivate those skills.

We'll be stuck together till the end of the hockey season. We might as well make it a learning experience. And I'm all about continuing education. Higher learning, if you will. Yes.

As long as we stick to our agreed upon rules—keeping this thing between us a secret and making sure we don't start confusing our practice relationship for the real deal—this unique arrangement between us could be mutually beneficial.

And fun. So fun.

Ronan squeezes my ass again, spreading the cheeks apart on his mouth. "Do you like when I do this?" he asks, his voice a bucket of gravel.

When I feel his fingertips brush over the contracted muscles of my anus, I feel my inner walls contract hard.

I hiss and grind down on his mouth, plastering my pussy against his tongue. "More...More, Ronan..." I tighten my fingers in his hair.

He absolutely loves it, groaning with delight, sending the vibrations spiking through me.

His free arm loops around my waist, gripping me tightly. At the same time, he applies more pressure, the tip of his finger breaching my rear hole.

My voice cracks on a moan. "Oh god...More..."

I'm crying. I'm whimpering. I'm about to come.

His finger continues to penetrate me. My inhibitions are falling like dominoes with every progressive millimeter. He slides in deeper. Knuckle deep.

And then I explode.

"Ronan!" I cry hoarsely. The walls of my pussy clench and release in an arrhythmic pattern that makes no sense.

I let out a scream that echoes across the house, across the yard, into the mountains beyond the trees. I lose control of my hips, erratically riding out my orgasm.

Ronan doesn't take his eyes off me, blissfully watching me from his prison between my thighs. And he licks me tirelessly until I've worked through every last wave of my climax.

My forehead falls to the headboard and the rest of my body goes limp. I'm boneless and sagging above him.

His hands gently capture my waist and he lifts me off of him, carefully depositing my body on the mattress.

Ronan grabs his T-shirt off the bedside table where it somehow ended up earlier. He wipes his face with it. He's wearing a smile as he turns on his side, facing me. "You okay, Peach?"

I'm still shivering when I drape an arm around his neck and kiss his lips. "That was...indefinable." I whisper, taking deep, slow breaths as my body gradually regulates.

Looking pleased, he turns and grabs the water bottle from the bedside table. He passes it to me and I smile at him before taking a few hearty gulps. He empties the rest of the water in a few big swallows of his own.

He delicately brushes my tangled curls away from my face. "Want me to get you a snack? There's cookies in the kitchen. Or I could make you some eggs. Or we could have some food delivered. We don't have many delivery options around Starlight Falls but we could get some Chinese—"

I give him a push, grinning when he collapses on his back. "The only snack I want right now is you."

"Shit..." he mutters when I climb on top of him and bury my face in the curve of his neck.

I inhale him, filling my lungs with the scent of his skin. Instantly, I'm intoxicated. I trail a path down his torso, kissing and biting and licking at his salty flesh.

When I grasp his bobbing erection in both of my hands, Ronan's head eases up from his pillow and he watches me. "You gonna suck my cock, Peach?" His voice is rougher and deeper than it was just a moment ago.

"If that's what you want..." I say playfully, gently stroking my closed fist up and down the long, rigid shaft. The skin of his dick is silky, tight and warm. Its prominent veins throb and pulse with arousal, making my mouth water.

His fingers dive down into my hair, tightening in the curls. "You know that I do." He rises partially, propped up on one elbow. "Put your mouth on me. Take my cock between those pretty lips."

"Wow. I'm getting turned on again, just hearing you say that." I glide my tongue from the base all the way up to the tip. I swirl around the soft cap, lapping at the drop of precum that lingers there.

Then I seal my lips over the head, using the tip of my tongue to tenderly flick the underside of his crown.

Ronan's body freezes. His growl is downright animalistic. "Do that again."

I follow the command. Ronan watches the whole time, his eyes narrowed on me with focus. His fingers dive down into my hair, tightening in the curls. “More, Nicky.”

I flick my tongue side to side before drawing a circle along the edge of his crown. Then I try letting my teeth gently graze the underside. And the way he responds to it all sends a thrill shooting down my spine.

“That’s the trick from the text message...” he grits out.

My mouth is full of him now. “Mm-hmm.”

“Fuck, baby. So good. You’re so fucking hot right now with my cock in your mouth. You’re doing such a great job. I’m so lucky to be here with you. So lucky to have your mouth on me. My good girl, I’m so fucking lucky.”

My body lights up at the praise. I want to please him. I need it. His acknowledgement builds me up.

As good as this feels, I could easily get addicted. That’s why I need to keep reminding myself that it isn’t real. We’re just role-playing. We’re just rehearsing. We’re just practicing. This is not the real thing.

I glance up and find his hazy eyes on me. He looks weak, dazed, almost vulnerable. I get an incredible sense of power knowing that I’m the one doing this to him.

I fill my mouth with his shaft, bobbing up and down. Twisting my hands at the base. Taking him all the way into my throat until I’m gagging.

His body starts tensing up, like he’s about to come.

“Baby, stop.” He gently yanks on my hair, sending fireworks through my nipples.

I drag my nails down the side of his hip. “Don’t pull out. I want to taste you.” I moan and whine.

But Ronan is already ripping open a condom packet. “Get on me,” he orders me once he’s sheathed. “Climb on my dick and ride me till we’re both seeing stars.”

Without hesitating, I straddle him and sink down his length, letting his cock fill me from below. I can feel him in my belly and my brain can’t figure out how my body is able to accommodate all that length.

I start to ride him and his arms come around my lower back, pulling me closer. His lips close around my nipple, sucking and biting as I work my hips up and down.

I’m saying his name and he’s saying mine. Our bodies rub together, sweaty, heated, electric.

It's a heady mix of sensations, and neither of us lasts long. In just a few moments, we're both clinging to each other and spilling over the edge.

I collapse onto the mattress beside Ronan, arms and legs spread out as I recover. After a moment to catch his breath, he gets up and goes to the bathroom to deal with the condom. When he returns, he's carrying a wet rag. I smile up at him as he diligently cleans me off. He always does that. Every single time.

He gets rid of the rag and then climbs back in bed.

My eyes flutter closed but my attention perks up at the sound of his voice. "If I were your boyfriend, what would you need from me right now?"

Opening my eyes, I look at him. I hesitate.

"Nicky, tell me what you want," he says softly. "What would you need from me right now if this were really a relationship?"

"I'd need you to hold me..." I say, my voice incredibly soft and almost ashamed to ask for his affection.

But Ronan nods simply. "Okay."

His strong arms loop around my body and he drags me on top of him, letting me drape and twist my limbs around his. I'm amazed at the way we fit. Our bodies align so seamlessly together. As the aftershocks of yet another wither away, Ronan has me wrapped up against his chest like he'll never let me go.

His hold is so possessive, so certain that I find myself silently aching for him to keep me forever.

Nicky, girl—what are you doing?

I know it's not real. I know it's not meant to last. But right now? In this moment? It's exactly what I need.

I lay my head in the crook of his neck, right where his pulse is throbbing crazily. "Ronan?"

"Yes," he croaks out into the dark room.

My lungs expand on an inhale and I pull his arms tighter around me. I burrow further into his neck. "Thank you for being so good to me."

RONAN

“We should probably make dinner...” Nicky’s warm breath flutters against the side of my neck. Even as she says it, her arm that’s bracketed around my torso hugs me tighter.

Fuck. I like this.

For the past five minutes, her stomach has been growling like a bear waking from hibernation. Still neither of us have made any moves to get out from our blanket cocoon.

I lean over the side of the bed and grab my phone. “Let’s get takeout. Pizza? Or are you in the mood for Chinese?”

I feel her head shake left to right. “No, we should cook.” She pushes herself up to a sitting position and I’m quick to capture her into my arms, pulling her against my chest again.

“Why do we need to cook?”

The last thing I want to do is leave this bed. Ever.

With the head space I’m in, I’d even pay the delivery guy extra to tiptoe inside the house and leave the takeout bags outside this bedroom door.

Nicky giggles, shimmying around as she tries to get away from me. In the process, she rubs her naked curves all over my body, only making me hard all over again.

Now she’s standing at the foot of the bed, in all her nude perfection, fists planted on her wide hips. “Ronan—real couples cook themselves dinner. They don’t just lie around in bed, having sex and eating takeout for days on end. And besides, we’re after learning experiences, remember?”

I emit a rough sigh. “Fine,” I say when I see that she’s really not backing

down. “But I have a condition.”

“What’s your condition?” she asks, sounding a tiny bit afraid.

It almost makes me grin. “You have to wear this.”

“Oh god...” I hear her grumbling behind me as I dig through my dresser drawers.

Nicky comes up beside me. When she notices the paperback I have stashed in here, she snatches the book out of my drawer. “Um, what’s this?” She holds up the novel in my face. A big, hairy man-chest mocks me from the front cover.

I flinch. “*My Blazing Bedsheets* by Emma Stanley-Westbrook...”

“My best friend wrote that book. Since when do you read romance novels?” She titters incredulously.

“Your best friend? That’s cool.” I sigh, not thrilled about having to confess to this. “Since I noticed that you carry this one around with you everywhere you go,” I blurt out. “I see that smile on your face when you sit in your little armchair, getting lost in the pages. I just wanted to know what all the grinning was about.”

She’s standing there, blinking at me in confusion. “You bought a romance novel just to know what I’ve been reading about?”

My shoulder pops up casually. “I want to be able to make you smile like that. If this thing is the instruction manual on how to be the kind of boyfriend you want, I’ll be reading it cover to cover, upside down and right side up.”

“Wow, Ronan.” Nicky presses up against my side, wrapping her arms around my waist. “We’re only a few days in, but you’re already doing a pretty fantastic job at being a practice boyfriend. Best study buddy I’ve ever had.”

“That’s what I want to hear.”

She furrows her brows skeptically. “But make sure to run it by me before you ever try that sex thing that happens in chapter twenty-three.”

I flinch, knowing exactly what scene she’s talking about. “Yeah. That shit was pretty extreme. I already decided I’m skipping chapter twenty-three altogether.”

Nicky laughs and releases me from her hold. She extends a palm to me. “Deal.”

I gently shake her hand. “Deal.”

I go back to digging around in the drawer. I pivot to face her when I find what I’m looking for. I shake out a fleecy button-down sleep shirt and hold it

up for her to see. “I want to see you wearing this.”

“Mmm. Saints pajamas? Cute,” she says, a grin curling her lips as she trails her fingers along the pattern of Saints logos decorating every inch of the fabric. “I like this. Cozy.” Her eyes shoot to mine, twinkling with excitement. “But you’ve got to wear the matching pants.”

“Of course I’m wearing the matching pants.” I’m offended that she’d expect anything less from me.

I watch Nicky button up the front of her pajama shirt. She watches me step into the matching pajama pants. Then we stand in front of each other, grinning.

“Look how hot we are.” I look in the mirror and all I can see is Nicky. With her messy curls and bare legs and her perky tits and her unstoppable grin. She’s the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.

Her eyes flit over our reflection. She presses four fingers to her lips, her pinky finger sticking up in the air, then she makes a smacking sound with her lips. “Chef’s kiss!”

I crack up. “Come on. Let’s see what we’ve got in the kitchen.” I crouch down, patting my back, inviting her to climb on.

Nicky doesn’t hesitate. In fact, in the mirror, I see how her smile goes even wider as she hops onto my back.

I grip her sexy bare legs and merrily carry her down the stairs. The whole way, she’s sniffing my neck and kissing my cheek.

In the kitchen, I fling open my poorly-organized fridge and we analyze the contents.

“What’s that?” Nicky slides off my back and points to a big cardboard box packed behind the egg cartons and the yogurt containers.

“Oh, this?” I wiggle the box to the forefront and set it on the counter, pointing to the bright pink label that reads *Karli’s Kitchen*. “My sister comes over and stuffs these boxes into my fridge every week. She’s in the middle of launching one of those meal prep services. You know those companies where you pay a subscription fee and you get a bunch of groceries and recipes delivered to your house every week?”

Nicky’s face lights up with interest. “Mason did mention that. I think that is so cool.” She softly nudges me out of the way, prying open the flaps of the box.

“We’re all really excited about it,” I say, beaming with pride over my little sister. “Darius is even investing in the company.”

“Well, he’d better. This business is going to blow up. All of it looks amazing.” She’s pulling out ingredients and cooing over recipe cards. She spins to face me, holding up two mouthwatering options. “Cheesy Chicken tenders with chili-garlic potatoes? Or spinach tortellini in rosé pasta sauce?”

“Nuh-uh. No garlic.” I shake my head, looping an arm around her hip and pulling her to me. “We’ve still got a lot of making out to do tonight, madam. No garlic.”

She laughs and kisses the side of my neck. Her teeth nip lightly. “Point taken. Tortellini, it is.”

Nicky and I work together, chopping veggies and making sauces and turning the kitchen into a disaster. But about half an hour later, we’re seated side by side at the kitchen island, grinning at each other over plates of pasta.

She pours red wine into long-stemmed glasses. “What should we toast to?”

“To you, still being able to walk straight after that pounding you got earlier,” I suggest.

She’s not impressed. “Whether I’ll be able to walk when I wake up in the morning remains to be seen, mister.”

I laugh and try again. “To you, sucking my cock like an absolute gold medalist.”

Her eyes roll up in their sockets. “Is that all you’ve got, Brighton?”

Just for a little while, I go serious. I grasp her chin in the palm of my hand. “To you, being an even better practice girlfriend than I ever dreamed of. And for the record, I dreamed of you *a lot*.”

Now, she cracks that pretty smile.

I take her hand, kissing her knuckles. “You are absolutely incredible, Nicky. Not just beautiful but smart and witty and creative, too. You’re a blessing to anyone who gets to be near you. And I’ll keep saying it over and over until you believe me—I’m so fucking lucky that you agreed to share yourself with me this way.”

She shrugs, dismissing my praise almost like it’s a reflex. “Well, all of this is only practice. I think I’m in dire need of that.”

“No,” I say softly but firmly, stopping her in her tracks. “New rule. When I compliment you, you’re supposed to take a moment to absorb it. Don’t just brush it off and minimize it.”

She nods slightly. “Right.” Then she closes her eyelids for a drawn-out moment. She breathes in deeply, marinating in my words. Then she opens her

eyes and smiles.

“How did that feel?” I ask her.

“Really good, actually. Thank you.” Nicky falls into my gaze, her smile genuine. “I’m glad we decided to try this. It’s fun. And it’s liberating. And it’s giving me a sort of confidence I didn’t realize I was lacking before.”

“Yeah?”

She nods. “Yeah. It already feels so easy asking you for what I want. Like, I don’t have to be ashamed.”

I kiss her knuckles. “It gives me great pleasure, giving you everything you want.”

“Oh my god...” she whispers, grinning and fanning her cheek. “Such a charmer you are.”

When we finally manage to pull our gazes apart, we dive into our meals. We’re silent for a while and it feels like we’re both tangled in our own thoughts.

Then Nicky speaks without looking at me, her eyes lingering on her plate. “Ronan?”

I peer over at her. “Yeah?”

She pokes aimlessly at her pasta with her fork. “When the hockey season is over, we stop this, right?” Her eyes finally come to mine.

There’s a long beat of silence as we just stare at each other.

I clear my throat. “Yes. When the season is over we...stop.” These words are a complete contradiction to what I’m feeling inside.

She bites on her lower lip. “Right.”

And for one moment, I question whether Nicky’s feelings have changed. Whether she might want more. Whether she might want this practice thing between us to be real.

“That’s what you want?” I ask her finally.

I’ve seen her taste in men. I absolutely loathe the idea that I’m putting in this work, only for some other asshole to benefit from it down the line.

She’s quick to nod her head. “Yeah. Totally. That’s what I want.”

I clear my throat, looking away. “Yeah. That’s what I want, too.”

But there’s a thin line between this lie and the truth. And I’m already struggling to pick a side.

NICKY

I'm sitting on the edge of the couch at the guesthouse, taking meticulous notes during the PR team's weekly conference call.

"It's been a busy time for all of us, especially being on the road for this last series of away games," Florence is saying. "But now that the team is back home, our department is trying to come up with good press opportunities for the hockey team."

There's a bit of mumbling over the line for a while. But no one really comes up with any actionable ideas. Eventually, the line goes completely dead and I hear Ronan in my head.

"You are absolutely incredible, Nicky. Not just beautiful, but smart and witty and creative, too. You're a blessing to anyone who gets to be near you." I wonder if he's right. I feel the sudden urge to put his words to the test.

I've been quiet for most of the call, but now, during this lull, I come off mute and speak up confidently.

"My sister-in-law, Meghan, recently started organizing pet adoption drives in the Honey Hill elementary school gymnasium," I say. "It's not very big yet, but I think it could be. Maybe the hockey players could get involved, volunteer their time at one of the weekend drives. That could help bring awareness to the initiative."

"I like that."

"That's perfect."

"Good idea."

My chest swells a tiny bit at the encouragement.

"Yes, good idea, Nicky," Florence chimes in. "Not only could that bring

in good press for the team, but it's also for a good cause. I mean, *kittens*. Who doesn't love kittens?"

"Hockey players and kittens. Just imagine the photo opps," one of the guys muses.

"Let's bump this idea up to the top of the list," Florence says and the other team members murmur their approval.

We spend the rest of the hour making plans to get the activity in motion. Florence wants to coordinate everything with the team to get this done quickly.

I put myself on mute, punching the air and kicking my feet with excitement. Then I get off the couch, bouncing to my feet and dancing the jig right there in the middle of the living room.

Okay, I may be getting a little carried away. And I'm definitely glad that no one can see my little celebratory party. But I'm proud that the department likes my idea enough to pursue it. I'm proud of myself.

All I keep thinking is, *I can't wait for this meeting to be over...so I can tell Ronan*. I need someone to share my exciting news with. And who better than my practice boyfriend?

I'm still deep in my celebrations, doing my best to replicate some new dance I saw on TikTok. I'm really into it. I mean, hands on my knees, butt pop-pop-popping in the air.

That's when there's a knock at the guesthouse door.

I freeze mid-twerk, my blood running icy cold.

Slowly, ever so slowly, I peer over my shoulder. And there's Ronan. Standing on the guesthouse front porch. Staring at me through the window, his grin so wide.

Instant mortification.

Good going, Nicky. My superpowers are superpower-ing today. It looks like my twerking summoned the sex devil himself.

When we make eye contact, Ronan starts twerking, too. I burst out laughing.

Looking proud of himself, he waves then he gestures for me to open the door. *Do I have to?* I'm so embarrassed right now.

On my conference call, people are saying their goodbyes as the meeting wraps up. I fight the urge to check my hair, and instead immediately go to answer the door.

"Hey," he says cheerfully.

“Hey.” I frown. We have a weird stare-off before I speak up. “How much of that did you see?”

His nostrils are twitching and his eyes are glittering with amusement. “Every delightful bit of it.”

“Oh gosh!” I smack a palm over my face.

“It was completely hot,” he tells me, seizing my wrist and pulling my hand away. “It got me hard as fuck. Wanna touch?”

Cracking up, I yank my hand back. “No, thank you.”

“What are we celebrating?” He leans a shoulder against the doorframe, effortlessly looking all big and tall and delicious.

“Nothing. Just some work stuff.” I shrug it off. It’s really not a big deal.

He gently touches my elbow. “Tell me.”

I shiver at the electric spark. “During my meeting, I...I had some ideas for a charity event. Looks like...looks like the PR team will be implementing them.”

His eyebrows hike up his forehead, then he holds up his hand for a high-five. “Nice job, Peach,” he says when our palms connect. Then he braces my shoulders and drops a kiss on my forehead.

I blink at him, my cheeks feeling warm.

Ronan cups a hand around his mouth and whispers. “That’s what I’d do if I were your boyfriend.” He winks.

I shake myself out of my daze. “Right.” We’re practicing. After I’ve composed myself, I look at him. “What can I do for you, Ronan?” I say, attempting to act all business.

Not sure why I keep trying to act professional with him. It never seems to work.

“What are you up to?” He asks me.

“Just finished a work meeting. Now, I’m trying to figure out how to spend the rest of my Saturday.”

“Perfect.” His big palms clap together. “Today’s my niece’s sixth birthday. Nolan’s daughter. I’m actually hosting the party at my place today. I should have mentioned it earlier, but Nolan’s original plans fell through and this new idea kind of came together at the last minute.”

I nod. “Okay, that’s neat. Have fun, and tell her happy birthday.” I reach for the door to shut it.

His brows pinch together as his forearm pops up, keeping the door open. “What do you mean *have fun*? You’re coming, too.”

“Oh, no. You can go without me.” I turn and head for my reading nook. “I’m sure there won’t be any photographers or press hiding behind your couch.” Plus, I imagine his other brother Darius will be there, so I know Ronan will be on his best behavior.

I get cozy in the armchair, opening Emma’s book on my lap. “This book was sooo good,” I mutter. “Five stars. More than five stars. All the stars! I think I’ll re-read it today.”

Ronan folds his impressive arms over his equally impressive chest. “Girl, get your sexy butt over here. I need help with decorating.”

“That’s your family thing. I shouldn’t…”

His stern expression doesn’t budge.

When I hesitate some more, he grabs my jacket off the hook and my boots off the floor. And before I can figure out what the heck he’s doing, he comes and kneels in front of my chair.

I sit there, stunned, as he puts on each of my boots and wraps me inside my jacket.

“What are you—?” My words are cut off by my own squeal as Ronan scoops me off my ass and tosses me over his shoulder.

He smacks my behind. “It’s party time, Peach.”

NICKY

Ronan stomps up the path to his house with me draped over his shoulder. Like I'm a bath towel or something. I kick and wiggle the whole way.

"Put me down, Ronan," I beg between my uncontrollable giggles.

"As your practice boyfriend, I can't do that."

"Why not?"

I can hear the mirth in his voice. "Because I don't want to." He casually caresses my butt. "Also, my sister is on her way and she already started texting, asking about you."

Ronan elbows open his front door and toes out of his shoes on the mat.

Three women decorating the hallway stop to stare at Ronan and me.

"Oh, hey, ladies," I awkwardly—and upside down-ly—say to Karli, Daphne and Layla. I give them an embarrassed wave.

"Um, hey," Daphne says, eyebrows raised as Layla chuckles.

Ronan finally puts me down on my feet. "Package delivered. My work here is done."

I punch the giant of a man in the shoulder as he strolls off toward the kitchen, very pleased with himself. "Look at all the help you already have. You don't really need my assistance." Breathlessly, I look around, smoothing down my hair and clothes.

"Just want you here, Nicky. Everything's better when you're around." He flashes me a lethal wink one second before he disappears around the corner.

The three women exchange some knowing grins. Layla is literally fanning herself. "Phew!" And I can tell they're all wondering what the hell is going on between Ronan and me.

Before they start asking questions, I eagerly jump in. “Anything I can help with?”

These girls are angels, though. Because whatever questions they have in their eyes about me and Ronan, they don’t ask.

Karli grins handing me a packet of balloons in various shades of pink and a small pump. “Balloons. So many balloons.”

A short while later, the rest of the Brighton family arrives.

I love seeing them all together, and my chest aches with how much they remind me of the Westbrook crew. They’re a bunch of rowdy, obnoxious shit-raisers. All of them. And I love every minute of it.

Then there is Ronan.

Who doesn’t shy away from wearing a tutu and a tiara when his niece begs him to. Who jumps in to sing a whole Selena Gomez album on his karaoke machine when the main speakers go out. Who spends an hour giving piggyback rides to each and every party attendee under ten.

Even though Ronan is playing host to more than a dozen family members and a whole slew of six-year-olds, he’s still constantly making sure my drink is full and my belly is fed. Each time I’m pulled away by one of his family members, Ronan always seems to find me and check on me.

I catch Mason watching us knowingly on more than one occasion then whispering together with Karli. And Darius, especially, keeps giving me suspicious looks all night, like he’s trying to figure out what’s going on with my assignment and me. But I’m having way too much fun to be uptight and self-conscious the whole time. Eventually, I just let my hair down and go with the flow of the day.

Although I won’t admit it to Ronan, I’m glad he dragged me—kicking and screaming—to this party. It’s truly the first time I’ve truly felt at home since coming here to Starlight Falls.

I know our relationship is pretend. It’s only practice. But more than that, it feels...*dangerous*.

Dangerous because I clearly see how I could so easily slip and fall right in love with him.

The party is a great time. There’s an elaborate unicorn cake, piñatas, games, and snack food galore.

At the end of the night when everybody is gone, and I’m still at the main house, helping Ronan clean up. He takes the half-full trash bag from my hand. His fingers brush across my skin, and I sizzle.

“See, today wasn’t so bad after all,” he says with a sexy grin.

“No, it wasn’t bad at all.” Not even a little bit.

Watching him interact with his family and all those kids today... Somehow, my eyes now see him in a whole new light.

“Seriously, thanks for helping me today. And thanks for coming. You being here really helped make the day special for my niece. And for me, too.” He smiles.

I shrug. “It’s what a good girlfriend would do.”

“Right.”

A comfortable silence settles in around us. The only sounds I hear are the fireplace crackling and my now heavy breathing.

I don’t know how a single, innocent touch has the ability to affect me so strongly. The air heats up between us. I try to fight it. I do.

Girl power! Boss babe! Ugh. Independent woman, who? I need to ride that dick.

“What...?” I eyeball Ronan, my stomach tingling.

His thumb hooks in the hem of my sweatshirt. “You’re pretty...”

I bite down on my lip. “Wanna practice—in the bedroom—tonight?”

“Fuck yes,” he breathes excitedly.

Barely waiting for his answer, I grab his face and kiss him senseless, capturing his words as they leave his mouth.

NICKY

“**H**ere we are, sleepy head.” I feel Ronan gently squeeze my thigh as the car eases to a stop.

I blink my heavy eyelids and see that we’re pulling up to the main office for the Saints in Sin Valley. We’re on our way back from a string of successful away game. Before we landed, I told Ronan that I need to make a quick stop at my desk for some supplies I need to have at the guesthouse, since I’ll be working remotely for the rest of the week.

I shuffle out of the SUV, turning back around to point at Ronan. “You. Stay here. Don’t move a muscle.”

He rolls his eyes at me. “Thanks for saying that, Captain. I was actually planning on running away if you hadn’t mentioned it. But now, I’m totally staying put.”

Ugh. “Smart ass.”

Keycard in hand, I turn and dart inside the building. Things are really coming together in here. No more moving boxes line the hallways and there’s a massive embossed replica of the Saints’ logo affixed to the wall behind the reception desk.

Before I make it to my cubicle, I run into the head of PR.

She greets me with a smile.

“Nicky! How were things with Ronan Brighton on this away stretch?”

For a half a second, a surge of apprehension hits me.

Does she know that he ordered me to reenact the dirty parts of the romance book I was reading in his hotel room last night? Does she know that I liked it?

Does she know that he had me handcuffed to his guesthouse bed two nights before that?

No, Nicky. No. Again, Florence only cares about Ronan's public perception. She's not interested in what he does behind closed doors. With or without the handcuffs.

"Things are going well with Ronan," I tell her truthfully. *If you don't count him being a total pain in my butt.* "We're actually headed back to his property right now. We just made a pit stop so I could grab some things from my desk."

"Sorry I couldn't make it to last night's game. How was he at the post-game conference?"

"He was great. We've been working on it."

She nods. "And it shows. The bosses have been talking. They see a huge change in him since you came onboard." She squeezes my arm. "Great job, Nicky."

We say our quick goodbyes, and I make my way over to my desk, absolutely grinning. It's really nice to be recognized, especially as a junior in the organization. I can't get the smile off my face as I'm digging around in my top desk drawer for some sticky notes.

I glance out the window on my right. Then I do a double take.

Are you kidding me?

Outside my window, I see Ronan and he's certainly not inside his car, waiting for me like he promised. He's skating around and shooting pucks with some kids on the ice rink at the park across the street from the office. Which probably wouldn't be so bad, but people are taking pictures. His presence is drawing a crowd. A crowd that is growing by the second.

"Goddammit, Ronan Brighton," I mumble. "I can't turn my back for one minute."

Supplies in hand, I rush back out of the building and back to the car. I wave my arms until I catch Ronan's attention, and he quickly slips out of his skates and jogs back across the street.

He's wearing a big ass, cheesy grin. I feel a grin coming on, too. But I hide it from him. Instead, I shake my head. "Troublemaker."

The truth is, Ronan is great with children and I like that.

We climb back into the car. We only make it around the block when I realize that I forgot my external flash drive where I downloaded the documents that I'll be needing. Ronan doesn't complain. He only turns the

SUV around and takes me back to the building.

“Come on,” I say to him.

“Huh?” He gives me an innocent look.

“You just showed me I can’t trust you by yourself. So you’re coming with me.”

The corner of his lips swings into a grin. “Fine. Now, I get to show all those uptight paper pushers what a hot babysitter I’ve got.” He leads the way, holding the door open for me and I just shake my head.

I try to make it a quick stop but as usual, Ronan is an attention-grabber. The Saints staff treat him like a celebrity, everyone congratulating him on his performance in last night’s game. I linger on the sidelines, pride stirring in my chest. Ronan may drive me up the wall sometimes. But other times, I just stand back in awe of this man and the towering presence that he is.

When we finally make it to the elevator, Ronan presses the button for the ground floor. The doors slide closed, trapping us alone in the tiny space.

He glances at me. “What are you over there smiling to yourself about?”

My first instinct is to brush it off or to change the topic of conversation. But then I think about this practice relationship between Ronan and me. The whole point is for me to get more comfortable sharing what I’m feeling and to let him know when he’s being a good practice boyfriend. So I do just that.

I hold Ronan’s gaze when I speak. “I just find you...impressive. That’s all.”

The man’s eyebrows jump. He takes a step toward me. “Impressive?”

I nod. “Impressive. And talented. And passionate. And exciting. And goddamned sexy.”

By now, Ronan has me cornered against one wall of the elevator. Staring into those mesmerizing eyes, I basically forget where we are. The ravenous look he’s giving me has my toes curling in anticipation inside my winter boots.

Ronan’s hand falls to my hip, curling into my flesh. Lust fogs up his eyes. His lips fall open as he’s lowering his mouth to mine. Right as he’s about to yank me up against his body, the elevator doors fly open.

We both snap toward that gaping hole in the wall and come face to face with a group of grim-faced billionaires. There’s no time to pull apart.

Darius side-eyes Cash.

Cash stink-eyes me.

Somewhere in the distance, I can almost hear dollar bills circling the

drain.

“Ronan, can I have a word?” Darius’ voice cracks like a whip lashing off the elevator wall.

I jump in front of Ronan like his human bullet-proof vest. “Oh, sorry. Look at the time. We really have to go.” I nudge Ronan forward, shoving him toward the exit. “We just got off a flight. Jet lag. Jet lag so bad.” I force a wide yawn. “And we need to beat the traffic. Have you seen the weather forecast? They’re forecasting a mess. Gotta go. Buy.”

By the time we make it out to the sidewalk, Ronan is cracking up, fist over his mouth.

I sneer at him as he leans around me and opens my door. “Just get in the car.”

Don’t panic, Nicky. Don’t panic.

That was a close call but I think I can smooth this over. All I’ll have to do is make my cute, innocent kitten face and bat my lashes at Cash and all will be forgiven.

I’m a PR girlie now, I can figure this out.

But if our brothers find out what’s *really* going on between us, Ronan will be as good as dead meat.

RONAN

The spot beside me is empty and cold as I slowly come awake in Nicky's bed.

But I hear footsteps on the wooden floors and instantly, I smile.

I sit up and watch Nicky climb the stairs to the loft-style bedroom, a tray of breakfast in her hands. "Good morning, Hockey Guy."

She approaches the side of the bed, barefoot and wearing nothing but that Saints pajama shirt, her curls wet out of the shower. She looks so goddamned hot.

"Shit. Get over here." I stretch my arms out to her.

She hands me the tray but I slide it onto the bedside table and pull her into my arms. "You made me breakfast? What did I do to get so lucky today?"

She snuggles against me, grinning. "Well, you worked hard last night. Giving me three orgasms must have burned a lot of energy."

I shrug it off. "Ugh! Just doing my job."

She buries her face in my neck, breathing me in and chuckling. "Well, your efforts are appreciated, sir."

We perch against the pillows and I grab the tray. Talking and laughing, we dive into breakfast and I can't get enough of Nicky's special sandwich. No matter how many times she makes it, I feel like I can eat it every day.

Through the large windows, I catch sight of a guy in a postal service uniform approaching the guesthouse with a large box in his hands.

Nicky frowns. "Are you expecting a package here?"

I shove bread in my mouth to hide my smile. "Me? Why would I be

expecting a package here?”

Before the doorbell can even ring, Nicky is tugging on some pants and rushing down the stairs. I swing my legs out of bed and follow her.

“Delivery for Nicky Westbrook,” the postal guy says when she opens the door.

“Thank you.” She accepts the box, thoroughly inspecting the shipping label.

Meanwhile, the delivery guy thoroughly inspects her legs.

I clear my throat loudly from where I’m standing on the bottom step, watching it all go down.

The guy jumps backwards, hand held up in surrender. “Sorry, man.”

He’d better be. Nicky is my pretend girlfriend. Mine. I’m not sharing.

Then he glances down at his tablet, looking confused. “I know this is not standard protocol but someone must have paid a big tip because it says here that I’m...supposed to read...a poem?”

I watch the back of Nicky’s head as it angles to the side. “A poem?”

He begins. “Roses are red. Violets are blue. Your bum is a peach. And I like you.”

Nicky’s neck spins around violently like in one of those exorcism movies. “Ronan...what did you do?” She starts laughing.

The postal guy laughs, too.

I glare at him as I walk across the room and grip the door, ready to shut it. “Okay, thanks. Your services are no longer needed, buddy.”

“Sheesh,” he says to me before smiling at Nicky. “Have a nice day.”

“Have a nice day.” She thanks him and then he’s gone.

I close the door and follow Nicky to the kitchen island where she sets down the box. Like an excited kid, she tears through the packaging and lifts the flaps. When she moves the delicate tissue paper aside, her hands cover her gaping mouth.

My heart dances.

Her eyes flick to mine, blurry and heavy with tears. “Ronan...” she whispers.

I come up beside her, unreasonably proud of myself. “Come on. Open it.”

With shaking hands, Nicky carefully lifts the lacy wine-colored dress from the box. The flowy fabric unfurls with a magical flourish and Nicky’s eyes absolutely glitter. “You...How did you...I can’t believe...”

I just shrug. “I saw you fall in love with it the day you tried it on at

Wisteria and Grace. I just couldn't forget the look on your face. I wanted to see that look again." I pinch her chin between my fingers, letting my gaze touch each corner of her face. "Yeah. That's the look. Right here."

Nicky loops an arm around my neck to pull me closer. And then she kisses me. "Thank you..."

I go over and flip the switch, closing the motorized blinds and shutting out the world. "Try it on. I wanna see your hot little body in it again."

Without hesitating, Nicky drops her pants. She pulls the pajama shirt over her head and tosses it, letting her glorious breasts bounce free, round and perky and the perfect fit for my palms.

Just that quick flash of her sweet body in nothing but her itty bitty black boy shorts nearly knocks my feet from under me. I prop myself against the back of the couch and watch her carefully shimmy the dress up her luscious curves. I feel like I'm going to come in my pants watching that delicate lace dragging and flowing against her pale, smooth skin.

"What do you think?" she asks me, doing a little spin, her arms held out at her sides.

The neckline of the dress dips low to her waist, showing off the swell of her breasts. The flowy lace hugs her waist tight and a long slit reaches dangerously high up her thigh. Nicky in this dress could bring me to my knees.

I approach her, putting my hands on her hips. "I think you're the most beautiful woman I've ever seen. If you're the last sight I ever lay eyes on for the rest of my life, I'd die a happy man."

Nicky fans her cheeks. "Ooh! Casanova, go easy on my panties. It's laundry day. I'm wearing my last clean pair."

Laughing, I cover her lips in a kiss. "Then I think we should probably take the panties off."

She nods. "I think you're right."

I help her out of the dress. My eyes stay on her asscheeks peeking out the bottom of her panties as she turns and lays it back in the box.

Then she spins to me, her small hands kneading my shoulders. "You're the best practice boyfriend a girl could hope for. You're setting the bar so high, it's starting to worry me."

"Worry you?" I hike a brow.

She smiles. It's a little bit sad. "I might just end up staying single for the rest of my life if no one can live up to you."

Or you could just be mine.

“I told you. You shouldn’t settle, Nicky. In any area of your life. You deserve the best of everything, Nicky. If you were my girlfriend, I’d make sure you always remember that.”

She stands on her tiptoes and kisses the base of my neck. Her bare curves squish against my torso. “Well, thank you. I love the dress.”

“I’m happy,” I say, going willingly as she gently pushes me backwards.

The flutter of her breath causes tingles at my groin. “And you’re about to get even happier.” She pushes me down on the couch cushions.

“Really?” I chuckle low in my throat.

Her head bobs as she drops to her knees, peeling my pants and boxers to the floor. “If you were my boyfriend, this is *exactly* how I’d thank you.”

Nicky takes my hard shaft in one hand while her other hand cups and tickles my balls. Legs spread wide, I drop my head along the back of the couch, gripping the rough fabric in my hands. Nicky’s mouth wraps around me. She uses her lips and her tongue and the back of her throat to appreciate me.

And boy, do I feel appreciated. I feel lucky. I feel touched by a freaking angel.

Not only to be the man she’s blowing on her knees. But simply to be the man she spends time with, the man she smiles at, the man she yells at when I’m being an idiot. The man she makes breakfast for and puts on private fashion shows for.

Will I be okay when our time together is over? Will I ever recover from Nicky Westbrook?

I don’t quite get an answer to that question. Because now, Nicky’s mouth pops off my cock. “I want you inside me...” she whispers, her eyes hazy with need.

“Yeah, baby. Come here.” I grab her waist, helping her straddle me.

One second before she slides down, I halt. “Fuck. Condom.”

Nicky bites her lip. “I don’t have any over here.”

“I’m pretty sure we ran out back at the main house, too.” My eyes search her face. “But I’m clean. I haven’t been with anyone since I met you.”

“I’m clean, too,” she says, her eyes still clouded with worry. “But I haven’t been great about taking the pill everyday. Our schedule has been so crazy.”

I stroke her lower back. “It’s okay. I’ll be careful. I’ll pull out.”

“You promise?” she asks, vulnerable. She knows she’s placing something precious in my hands.

My palm cups her cheek and I look into her eyes, earnest and sincere. “I promise you, Nicky.”

Leaning forward, she kisses my lips. “I trust you. Fuck me, Ronan.”

Clenching her hips, I guide Nicky down my bare shaft, until she’s fully seated on me and her walls are squeezing and shuddering.

My forehead falls her her collarbone. “My god. You feel so fucking good, Nicky.” I’m struggling to breathe. Her warmth, her slickness.

“Yes...yes, fuck.” Holding my head to her chest, she slides her fingers into my hair and she starts to move.

I lock my arms around her, pumping my hips from below. I find myself growing more frantic with each wet slap of my pelvis against hers. I feel the way her clit rubs against me as we move. She meets every thrust with her own and I’ve never felt more in sync with another person in my life. How could this be practice for something better? Something better doesn’t exist. All that exists is Nicky.

Nicky throws her head back. “I’m going to come, Ronan.”

I fondle her breast and dip my head, sucking her nipple into my mouth. “Come for me, Nicky. Come all over my cock,” I command her as I lightly pull her bud between my teeth.

She doesn’t just come. She explodes, going stiff in my arms as a hot wave of her wetness blasts down the length of my shaft.

I act quick, lifting her off of me and grabbing the base of my cock as my release spurts out like a geyser. I watch helplessly as that shit sprays all over my chest and abs.

Startled, Nicky tumbles off my legs and lands on the carpet, yelping.

Our eyes meet.

And we burst into laughter.

We laugh and we laugh and we laugh. And I know there’s no one in this world I’d rather share this moment with.

“Up.” I reach a hand out to help her off the floor. “Shower time.”

“Agreed.” She nods.

Nicky goes to the kitchen island and reverently takes her new dress from the box. I smile at the happy glitter in her eyes. We head for the stairs, her perky butt jiggling ahead of me as she jogs up each step. I trail behind, trying not to make a disgusting mess all over the floor.

“Can you get the water started?” Nicky asks over her shoulder as she goes to the closet and retrieves a hanger for her dress.

“Sure thing, Peach. Don’t keep me waiting.”

I make sure the water is the exact temperature she likes. Way warmer than I prefer it, personally. But if it makes Nicky happy, I’m happy.

I step under the spray, letting the water wash down over me. Minutes go by and now I’m wondering what’s taking Nicky so long.

Just as I’m about to call out to her, I spot her through the foggy shower door.

Instantly, I know that something’s wrong.

Alarmed, I hit the faucet to cut the water.

“Uh, hey.” She lingers in the doorway, grabbing onto the frame as if to hold herself up.

“Nicky?”

Her brows pinch together as she stares at the floor.

“What’s up?” I step out of the shower, not bothering to reach for a towel, not caring that I’m drenching the floor.

She takes an uncertain step backward. “You think I could trust you to be on your own for about twenty-four hours? I need to make a quick visit back to Honey Hill to see my family.”

I scowl. That’s the last thing I’m expecting her to ask me.

“Talk to me, Nicky...”

She shakes her head, not looking at me. “I just need...my family.”

Feeling so very confused, I reach for her hand. “What’s going on, Peach? Please. As your practice boyfriend, I just want—”

She pulls away from my grasp. “Real life, Ronan.” Her voice shakes. “Real life is what’s going on. Not whatever game it is that we’re playing. I... I have to go.”

Her words cut like a butcher’s knife, splitting my chest right open.

Her cold words remind me of what we really are. We’re not just lovers enjoying each other’s bodies on a quiet winter morning. We’re not partners who confide in each other, who are building something real together.

Nicky is here to do a job. I’m nothing but a responsibility. It’s so starkly clear in this moment.

She repeats her question. “Can I trust you on your own?”

I take a step back. “Of course I’ll be fine on my own,” I say gruffly.

Nicky turns and hurries out of the bathroom. I linger behind, a pain

blooming in my chest when I see that her overnight bag is already packed on the floor.

What the fuck, Peach?!

She barely glances at me when she says goodbye. She just grabs her shit and hustles out.

I'm left there staring at the dress hanging from the closet door, wondering what I did to make her pull away.

Did I come on too strong? Was the dress too much? Or was it the sex with no protection? I'm digging through my brain for how I fucked up this time.

I mean—I fucked up, right?

I always do.

NICKY

I pull into my grandmother's gravel yard, that ominous text message from Emma still lighting up the screen of my mind.

Emma: Nicks, we need you at home. You've got to come now. It's about Grammy.

Those are words no granddaughter ever wants to read. Especially a girl who is as shamelessly codependent with her grandma as I am.

I hardly trust myself to park between the cars that are already stationed off to the side of the walkway. I'm too shaky.

So I cut my engine right in the middle of the yard and I jump out, running up the icy walkway. When I slip, it flashes through my mind that Ronan isn't here to catch me.

I wish Ronan were here to catch me.

I wish he were here to hold me. Because I'm scared and everything always feels better when I'm in his arms.

It wasn't great the way I handled things with him. I probably shouldn't have left him the way I did. I should have told him that there's been an emergency in my family. But when I got Emma's message, something inside me froze over. The part of me that's been so open with him these past few days, it shut down.

I'm not used to being vulnerable. I'm not used to saying I'm afraid. At least, not out loud.

So I did what I always do, and I acted like I've got it all together. And now here I am, with a clammy hand on Grammy's front door.

When I step inside, kick off my boots and barrel into the living room, I

see something I wasn't expecting.

"Nicky!"

"Hey Nicks..."

"Sweetie, you're here."

Grammy sits on the couch, and she's smushed between all the women in the family. I mean, everybody's here.

My mom and all four of my brothers' wives. Mason's mother and his four younger sisters. Even Sparkle is toddling around the room.

"What happened?" I ask, crumbling to the floor at Grammy's feet, my hands on her knees. "What's going on? Why is everyone here?"

"Grammy fell again," my cousin, Ruby, says in a whisper. "Last night. In the dark."

Instant tears spring to my eyes as I rub her knees. "Oh, Grammy..."

She's been struggling so much with her failing vision. There was that time when she almost burned down her house during family dinner, thinking she had turned off her oven when she hadn't. And this isn't the first time she's fallen in the dark. How long until she seriously hurts herself?"

Her eyesight has been deteriorating for a while now. But by this point, it's worryingly bad.

My mom speaks up, addressing her mother-in-law. "Maud, we love you very, very much. That's why we're laying down the law. You can't go on like this."

"You can move in with Harry and me," Nadia says without hesitation.

"Too many stairs," Grammy retorts in a huff. "And you two are always working anyway."

Alana speaks up. "Davis and I can clear out the office on the ground floor and turn it into a bedroom for you."

Everybody chimes in offering potential solutions.

My grandmother holds up a hand to silence us all. "No. I don't want any of you turning your lives upside down for me. I've made a decision."

The room collectively holds its breath.

"I'm doing the eye surgery. In fact, I called this week to book an appointment. I already have the date."

This news is a shock to us all. Mason has been trying for months to convince Grammy to do this. He explained that the risks greatly outweighed the benefits and that he'd be with her every step of the way. But she has stubbornly refused the whole time. She said she was too old. She said she

was afraid. She said she preferred to enjoy what little eyesight she had left instead of risking it all with a surgery.

And now she's decided to take the leap.

I don't think there's a dry eye in the room. We're all crying and hugging and asking questions and expressing our relief.

Above the noise, Grammy speaks up. "Stop with all the crying. It's too gloomy in here. We need to lift the mood. This isn't a funeral."

Mason's sister, Corri, offers a suggestion. "You know what I think we need? Female bonding time. A girls day. Manicures, face masks, and I'm not pointing fingers but some of you really need to get your eyebrows plucked." She's the esthetician of the family so she knows what she's talking about.

"Don't call me out like that, girl," Nadia says with a laugh, touching her eyebrows.

Meghan claps her hands together. "This could be fun."

Corri and her sisters hop up, heading for the kitchen and splitting the spa preparation tasks among themselves. The rest of the ladies follow after them, leaving Grammy and me behind.

I climb onto the couch and scoot close, leaning my head on my grandmother's shoulder. "I'm really proud of you, Grammy. I know this was a difficult decision to make."

She tenderly strokes my hair. "It was." She exhales heavily. "But I don't want to spend my life feeling afraid anymore. Mason is getting married, Sparkle is growing up and I miss seeing your sweet face in vivid color. If this surgery might give me the chance to improve my eyesight, I'm willing to take the risk."

I squeeze her hand, feeling so inspired by her. "What gave you the courage to change your mind?" I ask her.

She grasps me by the shoulders and levels me with an excited smile. "Dearie, I...I'm in love."

NICKY

“I feel like these photos should have come with a ratings warning,” I mumble as I flip through the pictures Nadia just texted to me.

Emma laughs, flakes of the dried egg mask on her face cracking off and falling into her mocktail. “I know, right?”

I’m still in shock. Grammy really dropped a bombshell on me, announcing that she has a new boyfriend. She gushed on and on about him for half an hour. As we all lounge around at our in-home spa, my girls are spilling the tea. And it’s piping hot.

Nadia organizes seniors activities at the community center nearby. “Some new guy recently started attending the seniors’ events,” she says, comfortably reclined with a sheet mask on her face. “He and Grammy hit it off immediately and now they’re virtually inseparable. These spicy pics are photographic evidence of the dirty deeds.”

Sparkle sits on my lap as Meghan applies glittery nail polish to her tiny fingernails. I analyze a picture of Grammy’s new man. “Oh, wow. How does that guy bend like that?” I mumble to myself, tilting my head to watch a video of the group of seniors lined up to play limbo.

Nadia peels a cucumber slice off her eye to peek at us. “The last activity of the week was yoga,” she whispers back.

Meghan nods in understanding as she applies little rhinestones to the toddler’s fingernails. “Ah. That does make sense.”

“Things got really spicy at the community center that day. I’m glad I’d left Sparkle home.” Emma chuckles under her breath, recalling the memory.

Grammy’s been on her own for as long as I can remember. It makes my

heart swell to see her happily coupled up now. Watching these pictures of the two of them I have to admit that they do look sweet together.

I don't know why, but it makes me think of Ronan.

Today is the first time in forever that I haven't been by his side. I left his place in a rush and it's been nice to be back home for the day, but now that I'm here, it's weird being away from him.

This isn't the first time I've wondered what he's doing today. Is he at the farmer's market without me? Is he at home practicing on his ice rink? Did he decide that I'm not worth the trouble and download some new dating app?

Argh! Insecurity is an ugly bitch.

Phone still in hand, I give in to my urge to text Ronan.

Me: Hey. Everything okay there?

There's no moment of hesitation. No little dots bouncing around at the bottom of my screen. His response is almost instant.

Ronan: Yes.

The dry one-liner surprises me. Ronan is usually a chatty guy. *Shit—I must have hurt his feelings.* I never intended to do that.

I frown down at my phone, trying to figure out how to respond. I don't want him to think I don't trust him to behave on his own. I think being under constant watch is starting to wear on him. I tell myself that this is just my job. It's my job to know what he's up to at all times. But the truth is, I kind of just want to know how he's spending his day without me.

I miss him.

I type and delete and type again. But somehow, while I was stressing over what to say, I accidentally send a picture of Grammy and her new beau to Ronan.

Ah, crap.

I'm trying to figure out how to delete it, when a 'read' receipt pops up.

Goddamn it, Ronan.

This man wasn't joking when he said he'd always respond to my text messages.

A new photo from him pops up immediately. I squint, opening an image of a pair of people I don't recognize hugging in the back of a bar. *Huh?*

Me: What is that? Why are you sending me a picture of strangers hugging?

Ronan: I thought we were sharing some light porn pics?

Me: That's my Grammy, you pervert! And I didn't mean to send you

that photo. I just accidentally forwarded it to you.

Ronan: Well, your Grammy has a nice butt.

I growl and Emma glances in my direction.

“You good?” she asks.

“I’m just remembering why I swore off men forever.”

Ronan: I’m kidding, Peach. But I see where you get it now.

Me: Get what?

Ronan: Your butt. Obviously.

Me: Relationship tip—never comment on your girlfriend’s grandma’s butt.

Ronan: Oopsie!

Me: If you text everyone like this, The Saints are going to make me start monitoring your phone soon, too.

Ronan: Guess I’d better start stepping up my porn stash then.

With another exasperated sigh, I slam my phone down on the table. And here I was, thinking that I missed the man.

I shake my damn head.

RONAN

I flip the channel, frowning.

Another medicare commercial? Is that the only thing on TV when you're stuck home during the day?

With a sigh, I toss the remote back onto the coffee table, ready to throw in the towel on my plan to watch trashy TV all day. I've watched each episode of *A Chance with Lance* twice.

Now, there's nothing on. Not even good trash.

I'm on my own today for the first time in, well, forever. Nicky is out of town, doing whatever it is she didn't want to tell me about. And I'm trying to ignore the voice whispering that she's probably somewhere having the time of her life while I'm sitting here, miserable and alone. Can't say I blame her for wanting to get away. All I know is that I'm worried about her.

I may have gone too far in my text messages to her. She left the last one unread.

Fine. Be like that, Nicky.

I start my day off right, taking the time to jerk off in a long, hot shower. Then I'm getting dressed and once again wondering what my pseudo-girlfriend is doing while she's out of town.

All that ruminating wears me out, so I spend the rest of the morning, lazing around on the couch, watching reruns of *The View*, eating my favorite ice cream straight out of the carton.

So, in all, it's been a perfectly miserable day so far.

I'm supposed to be some hot shot hockey playboy who lives an exciting life. But I don't know what happened to me. Because now, without my

babysitter, my life is...boring.

Well, since Nicky is out having a good time, I decide I should be, too. I throw on my shoes and my winter hat and venture into Starlight Falls to Nolan's bar. A little day-drinking might be fun on a Tuesday.

I arrive to a mostly empty bar and drop at the counter, so ready to have a drink and watch the game on the big screen. As soon as I order a beer from the bartender, my twin pops out from the back.

"Whoa, what are you doing here?" he asks, looking surprised to see me.

"Hello to you, too." I'm a grumbly bear.

Nolan scans the room, brows pulled together. "Where's Nicky? Are you here alone?"

I hold my arms outward. "Nicky took the day off. I get to be a big boy today. I even wore my big boy pants."

Except he doesn't laugh at my jokes.

"Oh, no, no, no," Nolan mumbles, stepping forward and snatching up the bottle of beer that was just set on the counter in front of me. "You're not hanging out here."

"What?" I spit out, indignant.

"You heard me. Go home. Play some video games. Watch an action movie. Order a pizza."

"I don't want to go home. I'm bored," I mope. "I just want to see my favorite brother, have a cold drink, and watch the basketball game. What's wrong with that?"

"Sorry, man. You really can't stay here. Darius is scarier than you are, and I'm afraid of what he'll do if he finds out I've been entertaining my unchaperoned twin who's still supposed to be in timeout." He gives an apologetic shrug.

"Are you kidding me?" I ask, and Nolan shakes his head. "Well, can I at least finish my beer?"

He takes a swig of my drink, and then he tosses it directly into the garbage bin behind the bar.

Well, I guess that answers that. I roll my eyes.

"Come back with Nicky another time, and then you can have as many drinks as she'll let you. Until then, scoot." He motions toward the door, staring at me expectantly, until I drag myself to my feet.

I can't believe this shit.

"You are *not* my favorite anymore. My favorite brother wouldn't kick me

out,” I say, pouting on my way out of the bar.

“I’ll be telling mom about this!” I yell out, but Nolan only gives me a wave.

Butthead.

Still sulking in the car, I decide Nolan doesn’t get to tell me what to do. Neither does Darius. I’m my own man, and just because my babysitter is off duty doesn’t mean I’m going to get arrested or beat anyone up the minute I step outside my house.

Instead of going home like a lame, lonely loser, I pick another brother to go pester. *Good thing I have so many to choose from.*

As I drive way out into the woods, I decide that Archer is my new favorite brother.

When I pull up in his front yard, I see him talking with his neighbor, Layla. From the shy grins on their faces and their awkward body language, I almost turn my car around and go to Felix’s house.

Those two are like the weird high school kids that obviously have a crush on each other, except neither of them knows how to make a move. It’s been like that for a while now. So annoying.

Layla catches sight of my car, then she gives me a wave. Her son, Sky, waves too from where he’s sitting in his stroller. I cut my engine and Layla mumbles something about taking Sky on an afternoon walk. Then she’s gone, propelling the stroller ahead of her.

When I step up to Archer’s porch, he doesn’t turn me away or boss me around or treat me like a baby.

He just opens the door, and lays down one simple rule. “No questions about Layla,” he orders me, looking all tense and frown-y.

I don’t hesitate. “Agreed.” I have enough problems of my own to keep me preoccupied today. I don’t need to mind my brother’s business.

Satisfied with our truce, Archer lets me inside and tosses me a beer.

“Want to chop wood?” he asks after a while of sitting around and staring blankly at a wall together. Archer is not a man of many words, but it works for him.

“Let’s do it,” I say, and I follow him out to the wooded backyard before picking out an extra ax in Archer’s shed. It’s not hard to do. He has plenty of axes out there, hanging up like he’s starting a store.

Between the two of us, we make quick work of chopping firewood. Next thing I know—and I couldn’t even tell you whose idea it is—we’re putting

together a large makeshift target in the yard. Then, we're taking turns, flinging our axes at the bullseye and making a game out of it.

It's the most fun I've had all day. Even if my lumberjack brother is totally kicking my ass at ax throwing.

"Woah, watch out!" he calls out after we've been throwing for a while.

"Wha—! Ow! Fuck!"

I grab at my shoulder, where it was just struck by the brunt end of my ax after bouncing off my target and flying back at me.

Archer frowns, walking toward me. "Shit. That got you good."

"Yeah," I cringe, rotating my shoulder a bit and trying to test it out. "That fucking hurts."

"Can you move it? Is it bad?"

I shake my head. "It hurts like hell. But I think I'll live."

"Good thing it wasn't your face," Archer mutters, and then he looks longingly at our makeshift target. "I guess we'd better get inside. Darius would kill me if anything happened and you couldn't play at your next game."

"You're right," I grouse, hating how everyone pretty much sees me as just another investment in Darius' portfolio.

And then, back to sitting around and staring blankly at a wall. Except now, I'm holding an icepack to my achy arm.

My attention jumps to the window when a car pulls up. I see Karli racing up with one of her meal kit boxes in her hands.

After a quick knock, she opens the door and lets herself inside.

"Special deliv—" Standing on the front mat, her eyes bounce from Archer to me to my ice pack. She frowns. "I *would* ask what the hell is going on here, but I frankly don't have the time." She steps in and sets the *Karli's Kitchen* box on the nearest table. "Gotta go."

"Where are you rushing off to?" I ask her.

"Honey Hill," she says without looking back. "Westbrook family emergency."

When she says that, I bounce off the couch. "What happened?" I ask.

"Grammy got hurt," she tells me. "The girls are all together, taking care of her. I'm on my way to join them."

"Shit...Grammy's hurt? How serious is it? And Nicky. How's Nicky?"
Fuck!

I can't describe the sense of urgency I feel in my bones.

“I don’t have much information,” Karli shoots over her shoulder.

“Wait up. I’m coming with you.” Me and my trusty ice pack jog down the stairs after her.

NICKY

Us, girls chatter all around Grammy's living room, basking in the homemade beauty treatments. I dip my feet into a large basin of warm, bubbly water and try to relax.

The fact that we're all here today is beautiful and special. I just have too big of a family to be able to see everyone regularly. Most of everyone is usually too busy with their jobs and significant others anyway, and I respect that. Especially considering that, until recently, I was the one who lived hours and hours away.

Despite the unhappy circumstances that initially brought us together here today, we're making the most of it. That's the Westbrook way.

One of the girls mentioned that chamomile tea bags are great for undereye circles, and heaven knows I've recently earned my share of those thanks to the hockey team's hectic travel schedule. So I'm stretched back with my tea bags over my eyes when I hear a vehicle drive into the yard.

"Karli's here!" I hear Corri announce. I hear a stampede of eager footsteps as she and the rest of Mason's sisters rush out to greet their future sister-in-law.

I find myself really excited to see Karli. Her connection to Ronan is comforting in some weird way. Just thinking about him makes my chest ache. My hand leaps to my sternum, trying to rub away the dull ache that blossoms there.

But my heart nearly busts right through my ribcage when I feel a sharp elbow to the side and I hear my mother say, "Oh, hi, Ronan..."

I shoot upright in my seat, my teabags landing on my boobs.

I stare toward the door and when I see all six feet something of him filling up the entryway, I can barely restrain myself from running to him.

Our eyes meet and the instant feeling of peace that washes over me is indescribable.

“Hi...” he says, and though the greeting is aimed at everyone in the room, his eyes are aimed at me.

“Lovely to see you,” Mom says to him. “But what are you doing here?”

That’s when Karli appears and nudges her brother out of the way. “I don’t know what his deal is. He’s acting so weird today. I mentioned that Grammy had had a little tumble and he nearly bulldozed me on the way to my car.” She shrugs, going around the room and giving everyone hugs in turn.

And Ronan just stands there in the doorway. Watching me.

He’s holding an ice pack to his upper arm.

What is going on with him? What happened? Why does he have ice on his shoulder? So many questions.

But when I tear my gaze away from his ice pack and bring my eyes to his, all I’m aware of is the bubbly feeling filling up my chest. “You...you came here for my Grammy?”

“I came here for *you*.”

At that, Grammy clears her throat threateningly.

“And you, too, Grammy,” Ronan hurries to add, going across the room to give her a tight hug.

As Ronan chats with my grandmother, my pulse is pounding so hard I can’t even hear the conversations around me. I think Nadia and Meghan are asking Karli about the wedding plans. And my cousins are offering Ronan a variety of beauty treatments.

And all I can think is, he’s here. He came. Without me having to ask him to. On his day off. He made the forty-five minute drive from Starlight Falls to Honey Hill just to get to me.

No man has ever done anything like that for me before.

Not any real boyfriend. Not any practice boyfriend.

Well, I haven’t had any practice boyfriends before Ronan, but I’m just sayin’.

And I don’t know how to not make this mean something. Is this part of our relationship training, too?

“What happened to your arm?” I hear one of my cousins asking him.

He glances at his shoulder and looks back at me sheepishly. Almost

guiltily. “I got hurt helping my brother out at his place,” he tells the girls. His eyes stay on me and I feel my own eyes going wide.

It hits me and I gasp. If he...if he hurt himself...I’m going to be in so, so much trouble. Panic sets in.

I am required to be by this man’s side twenty-four-seven, and my little day trip out of town was not exactly approved by the higher ups. If Ronan is injured and can’t play, oh my god, I’m going to be fired. So fired.

There goes my new job.

There goes my cute little house with the front porch.

There goes my family-oriented life back here in Honey Hill.

“It’s no big deal,” Ronan says dismissively. “It’s just a contusion. A bruise.” He moves the ice pack and rotates his arm gingerly. “See? Nothing’s torn. Nothing’s damaged. Just a little banged up. I’ll be fine.”

“For crying out loud, Ronan!” I hiss.

I can’t leave this guy alone for one freaking second. His excuses about his arm sound like a total lie, but I have so much going through my head right now that I’m not even going to touch that part.

I look toward Karli—who’s already sitting with an avocado mask on—and then back to Ronan. “Do the team’s physiotherapists need to be alerted?” I ask.

Ronan sighs, like I’m wearing him out. *Good. Be worn out.* He deserves it.

“No, the team doesn’t need to know,” he says. “It’s just a little bump on the shoulder. It’s really no big deal. Right, Karls?”

Karli presses her lips together, giving me a sympathetic smile. “I do think he’ll be just fine,” she tells me. “I’m no doctor—just a premed dropout—but I looked him over when we stopped for gas. As long as no other symptoms arise, I don’t think it warrants any further testing or anything.” She gives a half-convincing grin.

“Okay.” I nod, still inwardly freaking out.

“Ronan knows the rules,” she assures me.

“Rest the arm. *Ice* my shoulder off and on. Keep it wrapped with a *compression* sleeve, and keep it *elevated* as much as possible,” he recites dutifully. “Rest. Ice. Compression. Elevation.”

“Got it!” Karli gives him two thumbs up. “It’ll help reduce pain and swelling, and it’ll protect your ligaments from any additional damage.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Ronan says, saluting his sister with his left hand.

Oh my god...I can't even process this mess right now.

I'm so mad at myself. I was irresponsible to just ditch my job and run off today. I should have been there. None of this would have happened, if I'd been there. I can't stop ruminating and going crazy inside my head.

When the girls are done giving Ronan a honey-banana-oatmeal face scrub, he finally makes his way over to my corner of the room.

"Hey..." he says softly, towering over me.

The sheepish look on his face weakens me. I sigh. "Hey..."

He pulls off his toque and slices his fingers through that messy hair I love so much. "Can we talk?" He looks so unsure.

I'm already rising out of my seat. "Yeah..."

After pulling on some socks and my winter boots, I lead Ronan out the door onto Grammy's side porch.

"Thank you for coming, Ronan," is what I blurt out before he can say a thing.

He seems taken aback. "I was worried about you..." he says eventually. "You should have told me what was going on."

My eyes flutter closed and I feel my bottom lip begin to wobble. "Grammy's eyes are really bad and she keeps accidentally hurting herself. Now she's having surgery to fix the problem. She's scared." I suck in a breath, and look away, trying to hold myself together. If I'm staring into his kind eyes right now, I'll break down.

He touches my elbow to draw my attention back his way. Somehow the electricity of his touch pierces through all the many layers of my puffy coat. "Vent," he says simply.

"What?"

He reaches for my hand, lacing our fingers up. "I can see that you're holding back what you want to say. Go ahead and vent. Tell me how you feel, Nicky. Don't hold anything back."

"I...I'm scared," I say, my voice shaking. "I know it's a routine surgery that gets done everyday. But I'm still scared. What if those doctors fuck up the surgery? What if I never get to speak to my Grammy eye-to-eye again?" I stop myself because I know I sound silly.

He nods. "Get it all off your chest. I'm here. I'm listening."

My lips wobble. "Yeah, sure. They do the surgery everyday but I've only got one Grammy."

"I hear that." He squeezes my fingers.

“She’s the sweetest little old lady I know. And she’s mine. And she means everything to me.”

His head bobs again, encouraging me to continue.

“I know we’re only talking about an eye surgery here, but imagining Grammy on the operating table—in any capacity—just reminds me of how fragile life is.” I sniffle “And on an unrelated note, you want to know something that really pisses me off?”

“What’s that?”

“I hate when people talk about sweet little old ladies and they say shit like, ‘well, she’s lived a good life’ and then the conversation moves on. As if that’s enough. Well guess what? It’s not enough.” “I mean, how do you even measure what’s enough? How many years? How many birthdays? How many smiles exchanged across the dinner table? And hugs goodnight?”

He shakes his head. “You can’t measure it.”

“Right,” I say, feeling understood. “You can’t measure it. Because the people who loved that sweet old lady still have to wake up each day. Except now, they’re waking up everyday in a world where she’s not waking up everyday, too. And it doesn’t matter how old she was. It will still suck. I know all of this sounds very random and unrelated, but thinking about the mortality of the people I love always gets me choked up. ”

Now I’ve really gotten myself going.

And when the tears come pouring down my face, his big, familiar hands are right there, cupping my cheeks. And his thumbs are brushing the wetness from my eyes.

Ronan smiles softly. “I hear exactly what you’re saying. The idea of death freaks me out. I don’t know about you but my Grandma and Grandpa are gonna live forever. It’s decided.”

I sniffle. “Yeah. My Grammy, too.”

“Yeah.” We’re silent for a moment and then he asks. “How can I help you feel better?”

“A hug...?”

He pulls me into his chest, pressing my cheek against his thudding heart and his arms come tightly around me. “I will hold you for as long as you need me to, Peach.”

I let him. I burrow my face into the warm, familiar scent of his jacket and I just breathe. And he just holds me.

How does he do that? How does he take all the burdens off my plate and

make me feel like I don't have to worry about anything? Like he'll keep me safe, even if I let my guard down?

Do I even know this guy well enough to trust him as much as I do? I trust him. This part isn't practice. It's not training. It's not pretend. It's *real*.

I just know that Ronan is the only person who makes me feel this way.

When I finally feel stronger, I ease out of his arms. "Better?" He asks me tenderly.

"So much better." I wipe at my face, knowing I look like hell right now. Yet he looks at me like I'm in a makeup commercial. "Wow. All of that really just popped up out of nowhere." I'm not used to letting my feelings take over like that.

Ronan traces soft lines down the sides of my face. "It's okay. You're allowed to talk about how you feel."

"I'm sorry, Ronan. I should have told you what was going on with me so you wouldn't worry." I sigh. "It's just—I was so scared when I got that text message. I couldn't stand for you to see me in that state. I couldn't open up to you when I felt that way. I didn't want you to see that part of me."

For the first time since he got here, I see a flash of hesitation bounce across his face. He lowers his head so our eyes meet. "Look, you have a real big mouth in the bedroom and I love it." His thumb traces along my bottom lip and on instinct, I suck it into my mouth. "I love when you're a mouthy girl and you tell me exactly what you want and exactly how you want it. But the only way you're going to get the love you want—the relationship you want—is if you open your mouth outside of the bedroom, too. In fact, the secrets you share with me outside of the bedroom are even more sacred, even more important."

"Okay," I say, my voice hoarse.

"I may not know much about being a boyfriend but I know how to be a best friend. And in my mind, a good boyfriend will be your best friend first and foremost," he tells me. "And as your best friend, I'm going to need you to turn to me when it counts. If you're in pain, tell me. If you're scared, tell me. If you're hurt, tell me. But also tell me when you're happy and when you're proud or excited. I want to be part of all of it."

I nod my head weakly when he takes me in his arms again. "I didn't realize that this relationship training would demand so much from me."

"Yeah, it's pretty scary," he confesses. "Just know that you're not the only one who's scared. I'm just as scared as you are. You know how I get all

up in my emotions. I don't want to get my heart broken, either." He kisses the top of my head. "I'm terrified. Because there is nothing 'safe' about you. You're a force of nature. A tornado, a hurricane and an active volcano all wrapped into one."

I laugh softly.

He carries on. "You're not 'safe'. But you're worth it. Now I'm trying to convince you to think I'm worth it, too."

"You are. In my heart, I know you are."

A warm feeling overtakes my entire body. You know, maybe this whole *talk about your feelings* thing isn't actually so bad.

Forgetting where we are, I reach up with both hands and pull his face to mine. Our lips touch and all the bad stuff in the world fades away as we hold each other.

We get lost, kissing softly and slowly and taking our time. I'm vaguely aware of the clapping and cheers bleeding from the window.

Ronan glances toward Grammy's house. "We have an audience." I hear the mirth in his voice.

I pull his face back to mine. "Let's give those nosy bitches a show." I kiss him until we're both breathless. Then I rest my forehead on his. "We should go home and take care of your arm." I need Ronan Brighton to be in tip-top condition for his next game. Karli said *rest*, so that's what he's going to do. Whether he likes it or not.

"I'm fine."

I'm not convinced.

"Next time I need to be away, I'm getting one of those big baby gate fences and locking you up." I lead him back inside the house.

He grins maddeningly. "Mmm. Sounds kinky. I'm in."

A few moments later, we're ready to leave Honey Hill. I'm feeling well-rested, loved up by my family, motivated to buy that house, *and* ready to take on the next stretch of hockey games.

We get onto the highway, Ronan's car following closely behind mine. I watch his handsome face when our eyes connect in my side mirror. I smile to myself.

Fuck. I'm falling for this guy.

RONAN

“**Y**ou should go slower.”

“I am going slow,” I argue.

“Not slow enough.” Nicky’s fingers curl around the edge of her seat in a death grip. “Are you trying to get us killed?”

I glance over at her to shake my head. “Sheesh, woman!”

Her face goes white. “Eyes on the road, daredevil!”

With a smile, I do as she says. At this rate, we might not make it back home at all.

It’s damned if you do, damned if I don’t out here. It’s not safe to drive any faster because of the thin layer of ice that blankets the highway and literally everything in sight. But with the way the snow is falling now, I’m sort of anxious to get back home before the roads become impassable.

Apparently satisfied with my new slower-than-snail-shit speed, Nicky leans over and turns up the radio a few notches. All the local stations are talking about is the weather.

“We’re expecting six to ten inches when all this is said and done, folks. Don’t take this lightly. Some of you thought this would blow over and miss us to the north, but that won’t be the case this time. Combine the accumulating snow with the layer of ice already out there, and you have a dangerous mix. Stay off the roads tonight. Stay home tomorrow. The driving conditions will be horrendous...”

“No shit,” I mumble, my foot barely tapping the accelerator of my SUV.

The Saints were supposed to play back-to-back home games in Sin Valley this weekend, so Nicky and I were on our way into town for pregame

activities. But when we were a little over half way there, I got the call that everything ended up getting canceled. Not only are the roads shit, our opponents' plane wasn't even able to take off in this winter storm.

So here we are on the road, now heading *back* toward my Starlight Falls house.

Obviously this is not the way we intended to spend this late afternoon, inching our way through a blizzard. The only travelers dumb enough to be on this stretch of highway.

We'd briefly entertained the idea of continuing onward and grabbing a hotel in Sin Valley. But that was before the snow *really* started coming down, so we opted against it. Now I'm hoping we didn't make a bad choice there.

By the time we pull into my driveway, both our faces are nearly pressed against the front windshield, and even then, we can't see more than a few feet in front of us. I don't allow myself to let my guard down until I've safely parked the car.

"Well, that was fun." I shut off the ignition and turn to Nicky with a sigh.

She gives me a wobbly smile, looking relieved herself. "Loads of fun. Thanks for not killing me."

"Anytime."

"Come on. Let me walk you over to the guesthouse."

She unsnaps her seatbelt and grabs her purse without protest. I snatch her overnight bag from the trunk. For once, she lets me walk her down the path without complaint. That's how terrible this blizzard is.

Making sure she gets there in one piece, I give her a hot kiss goodbye before taking the slippery journey back to my house.

I'm tempted to stay, but I wonder if I've been smothering her. Especially with the way I showed up uninvited to her Grammy's house the other day.

Before I turn away from her, I search her expression for any indication of whether she cares if I stay or go. But her pretty face gives nothing away.

By this point, I'm starting to get a little worried about myself. I fear I'm reaching the point of no return. Practice relationship? Give me a break. What I feel for Nicky? It feels a whole lot like the real thing.

With each minute we spend together, it becomes clear that the only thing I'm practicing is how to get my heart broken. That's inevitably what's going to happen in the end. I can see my ugly fate barreling toward me like a runaway train. But I'm already tied to the tracks with no hope of getting away.

The least I can do is brace myself for impact.

So tonight, it's a lonely, hot shower for me. Which wouldn't be complete without a soapy, slippery palm and dirty thoughts of my naked neighbor.

I'm mid-stroke, only minutes away from an explosive finish, when I'm plunged into utter darkness.

Fuck.

The power's out.

And if it's the weight of the ice on the electricity lines that caused the outage, that means it's not coming back on anytime soon.

I wipe off the steam and squint out of the bathroom window. From here, I can see that the guesthouse is in total darkness.

Shit. Nicky.

I wonder if she still has candles over there. And will she be able to find the matches in the dark? What about heat? I need to go start a fire.

I quickly jump out of the shower, barely drying off before I throw on some sweats and boots. Hustling around my house, I grab candles, blankets, and some extra sweaters that I can bring over to Nicky.

The guesthouse door is already half-open when I arrive. It's like she knew I'd be coming over. I like that. Too fucking much.

When I step inside with snowflakes melting on my nose, she smiles at me. "Thanks for coming," she says graciously.

I snap her a wink. "Always, Peach."

I cross the living room to start a blaze in the fireplace. I look back over my shoulder, finding her blissfully wrapped up in one of my oversized Saints hoodies. My lips quirk up. She looks so damn good. Even better than she did in my dirty thoughts.

"We're having roasted marshmallows for dinner?" I ask when I see an open bag of them sitting out on the counter.

"Sounds nutritious, right?" Nicky laughs. Then she explains. "I was actually making some hot chocolate when the power went out. I didn't get very far." She grabs the bag and joins me in the living room.

She lights all the candles I hauled over, and I pull the cushions off of the couch, arranging them on the floor near the fireplace. Then we cozy up and roast marshmallows in front of the fire.

She doesn't hesitate to snuggle up against my side. I love having an excuse to be this close to her.

Even still, my increasingly anxious heart just wants to duck and hide. The

way I feel about her is getting intense, like *scary* intense. And I know she's not here with me forever. As the hockey season ticks down, we draw closer to the inevitable day when Nicky will walk out of here and have no contractually-binding reason to come back. That scares me.

But maybe I should just focus on this moment.

When I catch Nicky shivering, I pull one of my extra sweaters over top of the hoodie she's already bundled up in.

"Here, give me your feet," I command her.

She frowns at me, but complies, shifting so that her feet are up in my lap.

"What are you...?" She fights her tiny smile.

I yank my shirt up just enough to press her iced toes to my stomach. "Holy crap, woman. How are your feet this cold through two pairs of socks?"

"It's a super power." Nicky shrugs. "But seriously, though, I appreciate you sharing your warmth."

The whole scene is straight out of one of those romantic holiday movies. Scented candles. Fire flickering. A sexy woman.

The only difference is that instead of being half-naked on the floor, we're bundled up like we're getting ready to go snow sledding.

Since she can no longer reach the marshmallows, I start feeding them to her one by one. Only a few bites in, and we're a mess. "Whoops," I say, after getting melted marshmallow on my own nose.

Nicky laughs and leans in, swiping it off with her index finger.

I snatch her sticky finger, plunge it into my mouth, and suck off the sugary marshmallow.

Her eyes widen as our stares collide.

There's no laughing now, as I grab her wrist and pull her into my lap. The cold is long forgotten as I pull her in for a long, heated kiss.

That kiss leads to touching. Leads to moaning. Leads to wrestling out of pants and underwear on the floor. It's awkward and it's cold with lots of giggling and fighting against the layers of sweaters that try to get in the way.

But when I thrust my manhood inside of her, my body braced above hers in the candlelit room, I accept that I just don't know how to resist her. I can't resist the way this feels. Even though I know it's going to hurt like hell in the not too distant future.

Who am I kidding? Nicky is not just for practice. She's not my placeholder. I'm falling so hard for her.

I'm a simp. I'm whipped. I'm a goner.

I don't fucking care.

Nicky Westbrook has got me by the balls. And by the string of my heart, too.

RONAN

Something stirs in my arms, and I open one eye to find Nicky sprawled out across my chest.

It's morning, but there's still a small fire burning next to us. We're on the floor, wrapped up together and only half-lying on the lumpy cushions that must have scooted around during the night.

It's still snowing outside but it looks like we ended up getting more ice than powder. Everything is so white and bright, it burns my tired eyes through all the floor-to-ceiling windows.

Carefully stretching my arm out, I try to not jostle my snoring Peach as I reach for my phone. Only, there's no service. It looks like the phone lines might be down, too.

Fine with me.

I look forward to a people-less, tech-free snow day with the beautiful, feisty hellcat I'm falling for.

But then I hear a loud, rhythmic grating sounds coming from across the yard. When I twist my neck toward the window, I spot the guys from my yard maintenance and cleaning crew. They're merrily shoveling the freshly-fallen snow from the surface of the skating rink.

For real? At this time of day? In this weather?

I'd practically forgotten that they were even scheduled to come by today. And I definitely didn't remember to call and cancel the service. With the bad weather, I'd expected the guys to skip the day. But here they are, getting the job done despite the storm.

That's work ethic. Good for them.

Letting my eyes close again, I pull my arms tighter around Nicky and decide to get a little more shuteye. This is bliss. This is nice.

But moments later, I'm jolted by the sound of keys jingling and the guesthouse door knob rattling.

Ugh!

"Go away!" I bark at the door.

I see the cleaning guys on the porch now. With their cleaning carts and their buckets and their other supplies.

"Seriously, go away!" I yelp again, starting to grow annoyed. Still, I keep a low profile behind the couch, deciding they'll take a hint and leave.

"Who is it...?" Nicky twists in my arms, but I lock my biceps protectively around her. I want her to stay right here.

"Cleaning crew!" a voice calls through the door.

"Shh. Don't move. Maybe they'll go away."

She starts to sit up, trying to cover herself with the blankets. "And what if they don't? Ronan! We can't—"

"Shh," I insist.

There's another knock at the door.

"Can they see us?" Nicky asks in a horrified whisper while clumsily putting on her underwear.

"No, they can't," I say dismissively as I reach for her again.

"Oh my god, Ronan! I think they can see us!" Nicky is wide awake now.

"No. No, of course they can't see us," I assure her.

Then I hear one of the men say. "Ooh! There's a booty on the living room floor..."

"Oh my god!" Nicky shrieks hard enough to rattle the windows.

I shoot up into a sitting position. And I make eye contact with the trio of strangers with their faces pressed up against the windows, watching us tangled up on the carpet in this state of undress.

"Shit!" Nicky is patting around on the floor for blankets or pillows or anything to hide her peachy behind from view. "Where's my shirt!?" She whisper-yells, crawling around on her hands and knees, tits gloriously on display.

I wish I could just sit back and enjoy the show. But I have wardrobe problems of my own. I rummage around too, searching for my own clothing between the heaps of blankets.

"Where are my pants?" I ask as I peel off my shirt and toss it to Nicky,

allowing her to cover herself.

“Oh, I’m wearing your pants,” she announce.

I freeze, blinking at her. “Huh?”

“I got cold during the night. All I could find was your pants,” she explains with a shrug.

It’s painfully awkward trying to get dressed while these perverts are right on the other side of the glass wall, watching us.

“Um...You think we should leave?” I hear one of them ask.

“YES!!!” Nicky and I scream in unison.

Still, they hesitate. “We can’t leave. We’re under contract. What if we don’t get paid? I need my money.” A loud knock sounds on the door again.

Okay, that’s it!

I’m taking one for the team. A man’s got to do what a man’s got to do. And to protect Nicky’s honor, I will gladly charge into battle.

Cock and balls a’swinging.

With a pillow held over my crotch, I boldly march to the door and swing it open, thoroughly startling the dipshits on my porch.

“Leave! Now! All of you! Or else you’re all fired!” I yell. “And I will make sure you never work in this town again.”

That’s something I heard Darius say once. It worked like a charm.

The men watch me with wide eyes, stumbling and apologizing and bumping into each other as they grab their supplies and run down the porch. Then they hightail it back up the path to their maintenance trucks. A moment later, I hear their vehicles pull away.

Was I too harsh? I don’t know. When the phone lines are back, I’ll call the company and have this all straightened out. But for now, my priority is protecting Nicky and her feminine modesty.

I head over to where she’s still crouched down beside the couch, gnawing on her bottom lip. “You okay?” I ask her.

“Huh? What? Sorry. Got distracted by your tight naked ass.” She grins with mischief.

I shake my head. “Geez. Remind me to never ask a designer for freaking glass walls ever again. Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.”

Nicky looks at me. I look at her.

And we burst into laughter at the ridiculousness of the morning so far.

We give up on finding the rest of our clothes and make quick work of eating what little food we find in the fridge. Most of it is stale and not very

appetizing, but after surviving on only marshmallows last night, anything is better than nothing.

“I have a surprise for you,” I tell Nicky after we’ve emptied the meager refrigerator shelves.

She eyeballs me carefully. “You do?”

I excitedly hop up from the kitchen island and shove my feet into my shoes. “Don’t move a muscle.”

Then I dart right out the door—without a shirt—rushing back to the main house. Digging into the back of my closet, I grab the package that was delivered yesterday. Then I run back to the guesthouse.

Nicky is still sitting in the same spot, looking at me like I’ve lost my goddamn mind. I probably have. My sanity is definitely up for debate.

“Ta-da!” I say, proudly dropping the box on the floor in front of her.

When she tears open the packaging, she gasps, blinking up at me. “You bought me a pair of skates?”

“You said you wanted to get back into skating. I figured while you’re here, with access to a private rink, would be a great time.”

Nicky stares at the dang box for so long her eyes start to water.

“Are you gonna try them on?” I prod after a few moments.

She nods.

She slips her feet in and gets the skates all laced up. They’re the perfect fit.

“Okay then. Get dressed in something warm, and we’ll take them outside and test them out. What do you say?”

Her twinkling smile reminds me of a child on Christmas morning. “I’d like that...”

I lean down to press a kiss to the top of her head. She then snaps out of her haze and peers up at me. “Thank you, Ronan. You’re so good to me, sometimes it’s overwhelming.”

I cradle her cheeks in my hands. “I get that. That’s why we’re practicing, okay? We’re gonna get you accustomed to being treated the way you deserve.”

Holding my eyes with hers, she nods.

When we’re bundled up once more, we hit my backyard ice rink. I walk her through the basics, holding onto her hand at first. But Nicky catches on crazy fast.

“You’re a natural,” I tell her. “You skate better than some of my

teammates.”

She laughs like she doesn't believe me when I say that.

We skate around on the ice, spinning around and Nicky pretends to be a figure skater. She's doing more of the twirling than I am. But I have to admit that it feels nice to be this carefree out here on the ice.

She's a breathtaking sight to behold. Her cheeks are flushed, her hair is flying behind her, and she's beaming from ear to ear. If I'd known that skating would make her this happy, I would have dragged her out here from that very first morning she sat behind that window and watched me practice.

“Come here,” I say, crossing over to her and meeting her in the middle of the ice.

I grip her waist, one hand on each side. When I lift her whole body over my head, she screams for dear life. “RONAN!!!” she squeals again, but when I manage to assure her that I've got her, she strikes a pose in the air.

“There you go!” I laugh, loving the way this feels, loving that she trusts me this much. Then I crouch down and bend my elbows a bit. “You ready for this?”

Then realization dawns on her face that I'm getting ready to toss her up into the air.

“No, no, no, no!” she yells. “If you throw me in the air, I will hurt you, Ronan Brighton! Deliberately and intentionally!”

Apparently, she draws the line at flying. *It's a pity...*

“Okay, okay,” I chuckle, bringing her down slowly, until we're chest to chest. “There. Safe and sound, Peach.” I kiss the crown of her head.

And for a moment, we just stay like that. Standing in the middle of the ice, wrapped in each others arms, my lips pressed to her forehead as the cool air nips at our skin.

If I could freeze this moment I would. I'd save this memory like a photograph. Something I could keep forever.

Even after she's gone.

“You up for an adventure?” I ask Nicky after we've been on the ice for a while. “I want to show you something else.”

She watches me with a lifted eyebrow. “I'd like to say yes, but your adventures scare me.”

“This one will be the best kind of scary,” I promise her.

We change out of our skates, back into our boots, and then I lead her past the skating rink and through the trees. Hand in hand, we venture through the

woods. From the ice to the snow to the occasional red robin, this whole place looks like a winter wonderland.

“It’s beautiful,” Nicky breathes.

“What’s beautiful is being able to witness you taking it all in for the very first time, Nicky Westbrook.”

Squeezing my hand, she rises on her tiptoes and kisses my cheek. I love when she kisses my cheek like that.

After walking a couple of minutes, we make it to my hometown’s mystical waterfall. Growing up, I heard so many urban legends about this place. Even to this day, it’s one of the neatest features around Starlight Falls, any time of year.

“Oh my gosh. Ronan. This is...this is so stunning.” Nicky stares in awe, never letting go of my hand.

“I have to agree with that,” I tell her.

While normally a gushing stream of water, the falls are now frozen like an ice sculpture in the middle of the forest.

Not gonna lie. It’s pretty damn cool.

While I’m busy taking pictures of her with my phone, Nicky tiptoes over to the edge, the ground crunching beneath her feet. She reaches out to touch the ice. When she breaks off an icicle, I nearly jump out of my skin.

“Hey, don’t touch that!” I scold her softly.

She looks back at me. “What? Why?”

I nervously eyeball the frozen waterfall, unable to hide the alarm in my voice. “It’s just that—god, this is going to sound crazy—people say this waterfall has magical powers.”

Nicky hustles backward. “Magical powers? Like what? Like witchcraft?”

“Sort of...” I hedge.

She starts wheezing with panic. “Am I going to die or something?”

“Not exactly...”

“Well, what is it? What’s going to happen?”

I can’t believe I’m saying this out loud. I’m about to lose all my street cred in one conversation. “People say that this waterfall, well you know, makes people fall in love,” I sigh.

It sounds wacky to say it out loud. But it’s true. Every couple I know around town has some creepy story that involves this landmark.

Rather than turning and hightailing it back to safety, Nicky bursts out laughing. “Seriously? I never expected you to be *that* superstitious.”

A nervous chuckle escapes me. “Yeah. I’m just being superstitious. That’s it.” I chuckle again.

“Ronan, you can’t believe everything you hear.”

“Let’s get back to the house. How long have we been out here? It’ll start getting dark soon. If we’re lucky, the power will be back on, so I can make you a real dinner tonight.”

As we start walking back, Nicky reaches for my hand again, effortlessly intertwining our fingers. I sneak one last peek at the ominous waterfall as we make our way through the woods.

I’m just being superstitious. That’s right. Just superstitious.

But that pitter patter in my heart when Nicky squeezes my hand with hers? It’s more real than anything.

NICKY

“Who’s a good boy? Who’s a good boy? Huh? You are. Yes, you are.”

Ronan is crouched on the floor of the elementary school gymnasium, getting wet, sloppy kisses from a frisky Pomeranian named Dolly. Giggling, I snap another picture of the enamored pair.

I’d be jealous of all the making out. But I’m not surprised that these bitches love Ronan as much as I do.

I jolt, tripping over my own feet.

Love...?

Love is a *very big* four-letter word.

Way too big of a label to slap on my feelings for Ronan. Have I ever even been in love anyway? Do I even know what it is? Surely ‘love’ can’t be what’s happening here.

But I don’t know what else to call it. The way my chest fills with fireworks when he says my name. The way my jagged edges soften with just a touch of his hand. The way his smile feels like the warmth of spring on the walls of my ice fortress.

I’m starting to wonder if I bit off more than I can chew when I agreed to this practice relationship with Ronan.

In any case, now’s not the time or the place to be overanalyzing these budding feelings. So I shove them in a closet at the back of my mind, aim my camera at Ronan with his furry friend and capture a few more shots. Then I keep wandering around this charity event.

After another stretch of Saints wins, today is the day of the pet adoption

drive. I'm here in Honey Hill with Ronan, the rest of the hockey team and some associates from the PR department. As planned, we're hosting this event at the school where my mother is principal.

Speaking of Mom, she's definitely enjoying the massive hockey players. She's relentlessly asking them all about the sport and talking about the season, even though I've never seen her watch a hockey game in all my life.

Like, what multiverse have I stepped into?

"You guys have made such a big turnaround," Mom gushes to Tipton. "It's so exciting to watch you on the ice! Oh!"

He's blushing like a good little well-mannered school boy. Totally out of character for his reckless self. "Yes, ma'am. Thanks for saying that."

I'm busy helping people fill out their paperwork and pretending not to be eavesdropping on the conversation. But my ears perk up when Mom turns to Ronan. "And you, mister. Your turnaround has been so impressive this season."

He stands tall, head high. "I didn't have a great start to the season. I'll own it. I let people down, but then with Nicky's influence, I was able to get my butt on track."

My knees falter beneath me and my legs go weak. This man has a power like no other to make me swoon. All it takes is just a few words from him.

But no time for swooning. Because people have been lined up around the block since we opened. It's thanks to all the promotion from the Saints' social media accounts.

And, I can't tell if it's because of how well he's been playing lately or if he just really, really likes dogs, but Ronan is in a really good mood. Like *goofy* good.

Captain Brighton is sauntering around the charity event, grinning from ear-to-ear, high-fiving every person who comes in to consider adopting, and once again, he's down on the floor playing with another dog.

And me?

I'm doing my best to keep it neutral with him. Even though I don't think his teammates will give a crap who their captain is sleeping with, I'm nervous about it getting out.

After making out on Grammy's porch like zoo animals, Ronan and I are probably the talk of the Westbrook family gossip mill. But that's family. I still want to remain professional in front of my bosses and focus on doing my job.

But every time I pass by Ronan, he's winking at me. Whispering dirty things. Flirting with me. Making me goddamn blush. It's getting hard to keep my panties from getting wet.

Despite my inner struggles, the pet drive is a massive success.

Lots and lots of homeless dogs, cats and even one hairless guinea pig end up finding new forever families.

Meghan is thrilled. The pets are full of happy wiggles. And it's clear that the hockey players feel great about being involved in a good cause.

Even the local news station shows up briefly, doing a quick TV broadcast and a few player interviews. For once, Ronan is first in line to chat with a reporter, and he killed it. Florence will be so damn proud.

Between the hired photographer and my own amateur shots, I think we got tons of great photos. We could probably fill a whole calendar. Maybe that will be my next idea to the PR team. Who wouldn't want to look at puppies, kittens, and hot hockey players every day of the year?

My eyes end up back on Ronan, watching as he hands over the leash of an awfully excited pitbull to her new owners. I grin.

Yeah. I could see him as Mr. February. And Mr. July. Hell, there's not a single month that'd look bad on that man.

After the adoption drive is over, the team stays late, helping Meghan clean up.

"I'm so delighted that the event brought such positive attention to the school," Mom says as she shakes hands with the players. "The kids who came were so excited to get pictures and autographs with you guys."

"As well as brand new pets." Ronan grins. "Sounds like they got a pretty good deal."

When all is said and done, I'm in the mood for some of my Grammy's baked treats. In the days leading up to her upcoming surgery, my grandmother isn't working at her bakery. Instead, her hired helpers are running *The Wildberry* while Grammy rests at home.

"I want to swing by and visit my grandmother," I tell Ronan as I'm snapping on my seatbelt at the end of the evening.

"Of course," he says, his tone solemn as he starts the engine of his SUV.

We make the short drive in silence and when we get to Grammy's house, we find her shuffling gingerly around her kitchen. My cousins, Ruby and Maya, hang around at the table, scrolling through their phones and keeping a watchful eye on our grandmother.

“Grammy!” I say with a happy squeal, rushing into the kitchen to squeeze her in a big hug.

Meanwhile Ronan stands cautiously in the hallway, not daring to cross over the unspoken line. My guess is he’s still scared from the way he got scolded the last time he tried to enter the family kitchen.

“Oh Nicky!” Grammy exclaims, beaming. “There’s my working girl!”

I freeze. My cousins snicker.

“Grammy,” I look around, lowering my voice. “I don’t think that’s the right phrase. That term doesn’t mean what you think it does.”

“Well, why the gosh darn not?” The stubborn lady says. “You’re hard working, and you’re my girl.” What a stubborn lady.

I laugh. “Oh, never mind. I’ll be the best working girl you know.”

Catching my eyes, Ronan winks at me. *Jerk.*

“I wasn’t expecting to see you today,” Grammy says as I help her into the living room so we can all sit.

“Well, Ronan and I were in town for work. And then I started thinking about your cherry crumble recipe. And then I started thinking about *you*. And I didn’t want to leave Honey Hill without coming to say hi.”

“Are you in a rush back? I want you to stay for family dinner tomorrow... both of you,” Grammy orders, her weak gaze bouncing between me and Ronan as we lower into our seats. Her face grows somber. “It’s our last family dinner before my eye surgery.”

There’s a pull inside my chest.

I meet Ronan’s eyes, silently asking him if he’s down for family dinner. I’d warn him about what he’s getting into, but he already attended our Christmas meal a while ago, so this can’t be much worse. *I think.*

Ronan gives me a small smile and a nod, answering my unspoken question.

I turn back to the old lady. “Of course, Grammy. We’ll be there.”

Grammy stares at Ronan for the longest time, a soft smile lingering on her face. He smiles back cluelessly. The poor guy doesn’t even realize that she’s sizing him up.

Then she leans over and taps his hand softly with her wrinkled finger. “You know that my Nicky is a special girl?”

He nods solemnly, the seriousness on his face making my heart flutter. “Yes, ma’am. Nicky is very special. She’s one of a kind.”

Grammy’s head bobs. “In case you were wondering, my granddaughter

gets her stubbornness from me. And her nice butt, too.”

“Told ya,” Ronan turns and mumbles to me. I poke him in the upper arm.

Grammy laughs. “Oh, Nicky. Stop playing coy. You know that nice butts run in the family.”

Laughing, I shake my head.

Her attention goes back to Ronan. “Would you like to know the secret to my granddaughter’s heart?”

“Very much so.” The eager words rush out of Ronan’s mouth before I can start to argue. His eyes flash to mine, warm and sincere and full of admiration.

I’m taken aback. His expression looks so real. But then I remember—our relationship is just for practice. I’m not his end game and he’s not mine.

Grammy smiles, bringing me back to the conversation. “Cherry crumble.”

Ronan’s eyebrows jerk upward in surprise, and I laugh. “Grammy, stop telling this man all my dirty secrets.”

The elderly lady completely ignores me. “In fact, I’m in the mood for some cherry crumble myself.” She slowly gets up from her seat. “I could sure use some help measuring out the ingredients with these bad eyes of mine. Come help me.”

He doesn’t question her. He doesn’t even hesitate. Ronan pops out of his seat, holding Grammy’s hand as she takes him into the kitchen. When she confidently sets her treasured recipe book into his capable hands, I almost drop to the ground.

I would be swooning over their adorableness if I weren’t freaking out on the inside.

Grammy just pulled Ronan into the kitchen, so she could teach him one of her top secret recipes.

My cousins make eye contact with me across the distance, their eyeballs bulging. I nod at the girls, feeling just as shocked as they do.

My heart does a flip, and my eyes start prickling. Because this is about way more than just a cherry pie recipe. Grammy only shares her recipes with family members. Everybody knows that.

Yet here she is, inviting a man she’s only met a handful of times into the secret vault. She’s teaching him one of the recipes she has fiercely guarded exclusively for our family for decades.

So whatever is happening in there, Ronan just earned Grammy’s stamp of approval. She just unofficially inducted him into the Westbrook family.

And I don't know what to do with that.

NICKY

“**K**nock, knock!” I loudly announce my presence as I saunter through the side door to my parents’ home.

Better safe than sorry. I’d rather not walk in on any naked surprises under this roof. I would die on the spot.

I texted Mom on the way, to see if Ronan and I could stay the night here. That way we can be present at Grammy’s family dinner tomorrow evening. Technically, we could have driven back to Starlight Falls and returned in the morning but I just feel the need to be close to my family tonight.

Thankfully, Ronan doesn’t seem to mind. He follows me into the house, earning a playful swat from me when he sneakily pinches my ass.

Even though I told my mother we didn’t need anything special except a place to sleep, when we arrive, snacks and drinks are spread out on the kitchen table for us.

Ronan says hello, and then, it’s like I’m suddenly forgotten about.

Like, hello. What daughter?

My mom is absolutely enamored. She’s so impressed by Ronan. I’m quickly starting to see that all the food she set out ahead of our arrival was not for me at all. It’s for the big-time hockey stud that’s visiting her home tonight.

We haven’t even been able to make it out of the kitchen, since we walked in. Mom grins at Ronan. “Would you like another whiskey, dear?”

“Oh no, I shouldn’t.” Ronan pats his belly. “Got to stay in hockey shape.”

She giggles—seriously, giggles—as she skips over to take his empty glass to the sink.

Meanwhile, Dad is a bit more wary of the newcomer. Much like my overbearing brothers, my father has always been protective of his only daughter when it comes to guys. And even though I've been careful to keep my little schoolgirl crush hidden, my father is sending off some serious Dad vibes about Ronan.

"What's your ten-year plan?" he asks gruffly when Mom goes upstairs to change for their date night.

"Oh, sorry, sir?" Ronan frowns.

"What are you going to do with yourself after hockey?" my father clarifies. "You can't play hockey forever, right? So what are you going to do if you have a career-ending injury or when you retire?"

"I, uh, erm..." Ronan fumbles.

"Dad. Stop," I beg, rolling my eyes. "Don't you need to go get ready, too?"

With a sneer, he reluctantly heads out of the kitchen to join my mom.

When I asked about coming over, my parents already had plans to go out. They're getting all dressed up for their weekly date night, and then they're going to spend a night at a guesthouse just outside of town.

Even though I'm still sort of in my anti-romance era, I think it's all very sweet.

Nowadays, Mom and Dad take their date nights very seriously, something I never saw them doing back when they were married the first time. But I think that's part of what makes their relationship so strong now. They work at it. They focus on each other. Whatever placeholders were in their lives during those fifteen years when they were split up are long gone now. These days, my parent are in the right headspace for rewriting their love story.

In any case, them having a date night tonight works out nicely, meaning that Ronan and I will have the house to ourselves.

I'm having all sorts of sexy ideas about bedtime with Captain Brighton.

Just when I think we're in the clear, Dad shows up in my bedroom doorway, wearing a crisp suit. Ronan and I are standing in my childhood bedroom, and I'm embarrassing myself by showing him my old yearbooks off my bookshelf.

Dad clears his throat, demanding Ronan's attention. "Follow me, please."

After shooting me a worried glance, Ronan follows my father out of my bedroom. I tag along to keep the peace.

But Dad doesn't go far. He just crosses the hall and opens the bedroom

door across from mine. “This is where you will sleep,” he tells Ronan, swinging open the door to the room that serves as Sparkle’s princess suite.

It’s all pink butterfly decals on the wall and mermaid-patterned ruffled sheets on the itty bitty bed.

My father turns to me. “Ronan is to stay in his own bedroom.”

“Dad. You don’t...It’s not like—”

He shakes his head, cutting me off.

That’s when it becomes clear to me that there’s no point in lying. The entire family knows that something is going on with Ronan and me. Even though I keep trying to hide it, even though I can’t quite figure out how to label it.

“I don’t need to hear it,” Dad says, his eyes on my guest. “My roof. My rules. No funny business with my only daughter. You hear me?”

Ronan’s throat bobs. “Yes, sir.”

I roll my eyes.

Back when Dad and I used to work together, he acknowledged me as an adult. Now that I’m back home for one night, I’ve suddenly reverted back to being his little girl. He’s ridiculous.

When my parents are all dressed and ready to go out, Ronan and I walk them to the front door. Dad goes out to start the car, and Mom kisses me on the cheek, promising to see us at family dinner tomorrow night.

“Have fun!” She waggles her brows at me, whispering on her way down the driveway. “And no hickies!”

“Mom!” I shake my head.

Good lord. My family is giving me whiplash tonight.

RONAN

I'm lying in a too small bed in a too small bedroom, staring at a ceiling with too many glow-in-the-dark stars. I should be fast asleep by now. Insomnia has never really been my thing, especially at the end of a busy day like today.

But no, I'm lying here, going positively crazy, knowing there's only two walls between Nicky and me. Hell, she's probably less than twenty feet away from me right this second.

I shut my eyes and mentally take a walk across the bedroom and out into the hallway to map it out. It's not like I have anything better to do. Some people count sheep. Horny guys like me count the spaces between them and the pretty girl.

So, it's probably four average-sized steps from here to my door. Then, it's about two easy steps across the hall. Then, it's another six or seven steps from her door to her bed where she's lying right now. Probably wearing some cute freaking jammies from her teenage days.

Since the counting doesn't put me to sleep, I lie in this cramped kids bed, thinking about all the things I want to say to Nicky.

You are the most incredible woman to ever cross my path...

Everything in my life changed the day I met you...

Nothing's going to be the same when you walk away...

I love you...

The truth is, it's not just about the explosive sex with her. I have some major feelings I can't seem to get under control. I'm trying, I really am, but it's a battle I'm losing day by day.

She makes me happy. She keeps me on my toes. She offers me companionship so I don't have to feel alone. And the way she looks at me, makes me feel like the most important guy in the world.

And something I didn't expect? Nicky makes me feel safe, too. Ever since she's been around, I haven't felt the need to act up in public to get attention. When something upsets me, I don't blow up in front of the cameras or make a scene at a press conference, losing my shit. Because I know I get to go home to Nicky and that she'll patiently sit and talk things through with me. That alone is more precious than gold.

I'm addicted to all the things her presence offers me.

My heart jumps when my phone pings with a text message in the middle of the night. I know it's from Nicky before I even pick up my phone.

Nicky: Hi. I just wanted to make sure you're comfortable over there
I smile, immediately texting her back.

Me: I'd be a whole lot more comfortable if you were under me right now

Me: Or on top of me

Me: I like the spooning position too if that's more your style ;)

Then I sit there and wait. A few seconds later, I see that Nicky has read my messages. But she doesn't respond. Guess she wasn't expecting that. Geez. I have a tendency to come on way too strong when it comes to that girl.

Trying to lighten the mood, I scroll back through our text conversation, finding the old message I need. Then I re-send her that photo of Grammy holding hands with her boyfriend.

Me: This could be us right now, but you're playing hard to get.

I lay back, waiting. Waiting. Waiting some more.

When I see three little dots bouncing on my screen, I sit up excitedly.

Then, they disappear.

Three dots again.

Then, nothing.

Well, crap. Did I cross the line again? Is she about to curse me out? Fuck. I'm trying to be respectful and give her her space, but I'm finding it hard to stay on my side of the line. Especially when I just like to be around Nicky all the freaking time.

She's all I think about. She's all I see. Day and night.

With a sigh, I swing my legs over the side of the mattress and start to get

up. Maybe if I hit the bathroom and go grab a glass of milk, I'll be able to catch some sleep.

I don't make it a single step before there's a soft knock at my door. Then it swings open.

Nicky is standing there in the shadows of the hallway night light, wearing nothing but an itty bitty tank top and some shorts that look more like panties. My imagination was right. Those so-called jammies are definitely something she wore like six years ago. It's a sight that makes me drool.

She says nothing as she stalks across the room, gives my chest a hard shove, and makes me stumble backward onto the bed. Not meant for a grown man, the tiny frame creaks under my weight.

I watch like a hungry predator as Nicky climbs on top of me. Careful to rub against the good parts, she leans down, whispering into my ear. "Listen here, Hockey Guy. Tomorrow, we're going to my family dinner. There's going to be at least fifteen members of my family there. If you give me a hickey tonight, you won't live to see the sun rise. I will murder you in your sleep."

A grin stretches over my face as I pull Nicky closer to me, leaning up to touch my mouth to her throat.

"Mission accepted, captain."

NICKY

“Take a right over here on Elm Street,” I tell Ronan from the passenger seat. “Then pull over up there.” I point through the windshield to the weed-covered driveway further up the street.

We’re on our way to my big family dinner, and I’m calling out directions as Ronan drives. But at the last second, I decide to make him take a detour.

Ronan eyeballs me suspiciously as we approach a little house with a *For Sale* sign posted out front.

“Uh. This isn’t where your Grammy lives.” In an instant, absolute terror comes across his eyes. “Are you taking me to an abandoned property to murder me? Come on, Peach. I made sure to not leave a hickey where anyone can see it.”

He waggles his brows at my sweater, to the place near my nipple where he actually *did* leave a mark.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, you deserve at least a knee to the nuts for that one.”

“You liked it,” he taunts.

“Wrong answer.”

Pouting, he covers his family jewels protectively with one palm while still keeping the other hand on the steering wheel.

A laugh bubbles up in my throat. “Pull in the driveway. I promise I won’t kill you today. I want to show you something.”

“Alrighty,” he says. He’s still skeptical but at least he swerves into the driveway.

As soon as he puts the car in park, I climb out and walk up to the front

porch. I grab Ronan's wrist and drag him after me. "This is the house I really like," I tell him. "I've been obsessing over the pictures for weeks. It makes me nervous, but I'm pretty sure I want to buy it."

On a whim, I brought Ronan here. Partly to see if anyone's beat me to buying it, and partly to show it to him.

He follows behind me, and I excitedly show him the big front porch I fell in love with at first sight.

I tell him all about the bedrooms and the antique fixtures and the square footage. I can almost recite the real estate listing by heart, that's how many times I've pored over it.

Then, with a wistful sigh, I'm getting ready to head back to the car. It's hard walking away from this place when I can see myself so clearly building a life here. I just hope that I can pull the downpayment together quickly. So that my dream of owning this house doesn't end up on the pile of the dreams I have to force myself to grow out of.

All of a sudden, Ronan pulls a pocket knife out of his pants. I instinctively stumble a step backwards when he starts to pick the lock on the front door.

"Ronan! We can't do that!"

He looks back at me over his shoulder. "Why not?"

"Because it's illegal!"

"Come on. How illegal can it be?"

I roll my eyes. "Okay, jailbird. I'm too pretty to get incarcerated. Plus, I'm not missing out on family dinner tonight."

I'm yanking him away by his sleeve when an older gentleman in a business suit opens the front door, file folder in hand. Ronan quickly conceals his lock-picking gadgets.

The man standing in the doorway smiles at us. "Are you here for the open house?"

Open house?

"Yes," Ronan says confidently, his hand settling at the small of my back. "Sorry we're so early. My wife was way too excited to wait."

Wife?

Suddenly, my head is spinning.

"A little early," the man says, "but that just means you beat the crowd."

He introduces himself as Gary, the realtor, and he ushers Ronan and me inside.

“Are you two love birds ready for the tour?” Gary asks as we follow after him. He looks at me. “The couple who lived here before had twins. You’re going to absolutely love the nursery.”

I don’t know why, but when he says that, heat blasts into my cheeks and I stumble, stubbing my toe in the doorway. Ronan’s arms sweep around my waist, keeping me upright.

The sexy devil rubs my lower back, smirking. “Want to see the nursery, wifey?”

Oh, I’m squirming and he’s loving it.

Adjusting my scarf, I turn my eyes to Gary. “Do you mind if we walk around a little bit to check everything out?”

“No problem at all,” the realtor says. “I’ll be right here if you need me.”

Ronan and I guide ourselves around the empty house. I *ooh* and *ahh*, walking from room to room while he follows closely behind me.

“I know the kitchen needs some work, but it’ll be fun to put my own touch in here. I’d maybe paint these teal.” I point at the bar stools by the kitchen island. “Get some fancy new hardware.”

“Kitchen renos add up quickly,” he says warily, opening and closing cabinet doors, looking inside them. “Are you sure that’s in your budget?”

My shoulder lifts then falls. “Well, I might have to just work on one thing at a time...but I’ll figure it out.”

I take him to the main bedroom next, already imagining what color might look best on these walls.

“Isn’t this so roomy?” I spread my arms out, spinning around the empty space. It’s not as big as the bedroom at Ronan’s guesthouse, but it’s loads bigger than my old Chicago bedroom. “I think a whole California king could fit in here.”

Ronan frowns, looking around the space. “I don’t know, Nicky. Those cracks in the ceiling are a concern. You’d want to get the foundation inspected to make sure there’s nothing structural going on there.”

I can’t help but notice that he criticizes every stinking thing that I like about the house. I can’t tell if he’s just being a buttface, or if this is just his way of telling me that he doesn’t want me to leave his house yet.

But that would make no sense.

So I just chalk it up to his grumpy old man attitude, and make fun of him for it as we wander through the empty house.

I stick my tongue out at him. “You’re like an eighty-year-old man, just

making up things to complain about. It's like you secretly want to keep me locked away in your guesthouse forever."

Grabbing my hand, he reels me into his arms. "I don't think that's a secret, Peach."

My heart shouldn't flutter the way it does. My cheeks heat up.

"What?" Ronan asks me, observing my face in that searching way he always does.

I hold his stare for a while, then I say, "I'm not sure this practice relationship is paying off." I laugh. "It still makes me blush like crazy when you say those sweet, silly things to me. Shouldn't it feel normal by now?" I frown, concerned. Exactly *how* broken am I really?

But Ronan is there with his patient self as always, saying exactly the right thing. "If you need more practice hearing nice things about yourself, I'm always here to help. Here goes." He gets into his practice boyfriend character right away. "I don't want you to move out." He kisses my forehead. "I want you to stay with me." He kisses my nose. "Because I like when you're the first person I see in the morning." He kisses my eyebrow. "I like skating with you in the afternoon." He kisses my jaw. "And I definitely like the things we do at night." He kisses my lips, sweeping his tongue inside and making me dizzy in the process.

When we pull apart, I'm in a haze. I blink up into his eyes. And he's a really good actor because the way he's looking at me seems so convincing.

"Wow. You're good, Hockey Guy," I say, my voice cracking with desire. "You'd get all the brownie points for saying that to your real girlfriend one day."

There's a bittersweet quality to his smile. "Yeah, well. Practice makes perfect, right?"

"Right."

We finish up at the house and thank the realtor on the way out. Then we make the short drive to Grammy's house.

I had no idea what to expect with this dinner, but it's going surprisingly well. Everybody's here. Like, *everybody*. My brothers and their wives. My parents. My cousins with my uncle and aunt-in-law. I even get to meet Grammy's adorable boyfriend, Sherwin, for the first time.

The meal is loud and rowdy and just an *oh so typical* Westbrook family dinner. Ronan gets welcomed right into the fold. Of course he does. He has the kind of personality that pulls you in.

There is absolutely no-one in this world like Captain Ronan Brighton. I can't imagine his twin ever overshadowing him, but I believe him when he says it's something he's struggled with his whole life.

Everyone at dinner is chattering and laughing. But it's not show-n-tell, like the last time Ronan sat at this dinner table. The conversation stays away from hockey and no one puts Ronan on a pedestal. Tonight we just talk about...*life*. And Ronan isn't some big celebrity sitting in our midst. He's just one of us. He's just part of the family.

While I'm so, so, so proud of his career and the progress he's made over the season, I'm enjoying this down-to-earth version of Captain Brighton tonight.

We're halfway through dinner when Ronan looks toward Emma. "Hey, I was wondering, will there be a sequel to *His Blazing Bedsheets*?"

My bestie blinks. And then she blinks again. "Um, yes. There will be a sequel. I'm in the middle of my first draft now."

Ronan nods, grinning. "Good. Good. I just feel like Marissa and Jose deserve their happily ever after, y'know? I mean, especially after all they went through with the whole kidnapping subplot."

"Totally agree," Harry pipes up from across the table and Nadia nods along with him.

Emma smiles broadly. "A lot of readers have been saying that in their reviews."

"Cash thinks that Marissa should dump Jose and move on with that shady character from the accounting firm." Meghan look to her husband for help. "What's his name again?"

"Rawlings," Cash throws in. "He's a way more intriguing character. I find Jose pretty one-dimensional. Marissa deserves better than that."

"Okay, come on guys. I'm only at chapter seven. You're ruining all the spoilers," Dad says, looking a little pissed off.

Grumbles spread around the table but Emma discretely makes eye contact with me. *I love him for you!!!* she mouths across the distance. I pull my lips into my mouth to keep from smiling.

Toward the end of the meal, Simon shows up. I'm guessing he stayed late at Jasper's mechanic shop to close things down for him.

Ugh. Awkward.

He comes around to give Grammy a peck on her cheek, and as he does he gives me a weak smile.

I smile back then turn away.

Standing at the sink, I'm clearing plates at the end of dinner. Simon finds me alone in the kitchen. He approaches, but keeps his distance, lingering by the counter.

"Nicky...?" he calls out to me.

I release a heavy sigh. "Yes, Simon." I feel my lips flatten into a line.

"You, uh, you look good." His eyes sweep over me from head to toe.

"Thanks." I leave it at that.

It's a little awkward, seeing him after all this time. But the weird part is, I feel...nothing. No pitter in the chest. No sweaty palms. No butterflies in the tummy. I feel neutral. Simon and I are ancient history. This is confirmation.

He glances over his shoulder and then shuffles a little closer. "You think we could talk?"

"We really have nothing to talk about, Simon." I state it calmly, with no emotion. It's not my hurt feelings talking. It's just the facts.

There's a bit of commotion in the hallway and then Sparkle runs by. Emma hurries after the little girl on the way to the bathroom.

Startled, Simon quickly picks up one of the freshly-baked pies on the counter. He's clearly only trying to make himself look busy in case anyone walks in on us.

A feeling of disgust rises in my tummy.

Still the same shit. Still trying to sneak around. Still trying to keep me a secret. This shit is so old. Glad I'm over it.

If there's one thing that my practice relationship with Ronan has taught me, it's that I don't have to be treated like this ever again. I don't have to be some guy's dirty little secret.

At that moment, the man himself saunters into the kitchen. Ronan's suspicious eyes bounce between us. And then his territorial stance comes out loud and clear.

"Need a hand in here, Peach?" He takes a few steps closer to me at the sink, all big and broad and possessive.

And even though I don't feel threatened by Simon in the slightest, Ronan's presence envelopes me in a kind of protection I didn't know I needed.

A smile spills across my face even though I try to hold it in. "Yeah, I could use a hand."

Neither of the men speak to each other. Simon only tips his chin in

Ronan's direction, giving him a respectful nod before walking away and taking the pie into the dining room.

Ronan sets a hand at the small of my back and presses his lips to my forehead. He doesn't bother checking whether anyone will see. I lean into his strong chest.

I feel treasured. Like something worth defending. Something worth taking a risk for. Something worth sticking up for. Something worth going a little over the top to protect.

I like it here.

RONAN

We're in the kitchen, washing dishes. Nicky is soaping them up and I'm rinsing.

And she's laughing at all of my jokes. Because I'm funny like that.

Then Karli stumbles excitedly into the doorway. "Nicky! Get in here. Alana's baby is kicking like crazy. You've got to check this out!" My sister disappears again.

"Oh my gosh! I'm coming!" She rinses off her hands and plants a quick smooch on my lips. "I love to feel the baby kick. Be right back," she tells me with a wink.

I keep on doing the dishes. Technically, I'm only a guest here but I don't mind pulling my weight. That's just the kind of mood I'm in after spending the evening with Nicky and her people.

Vaguely, I hear footsteps approaching. I don't pay it any mind. Until Harry Westbrook sneaks up on my left side.

"Hey..." I say as he leans against the counter.

He grabs a spoon and digs into an empty pie dish, scooping up the crumbs. "What's up?" He tips his chin.

Davis then appears on my right side. He grabs a cold beer, unscrews the top and leans against the fridge door.

Um...? I frown.

When I spin around, I see Jasper and Cash closing in on me from behind. I'm surrounded on all sides.

Fuck—it's an ambush.

I sigh with relief when I see a friendly face following after them. Mason steps into the kitchen and I smile pleadingly at my future brother-in-law.

But he lingers in the background, stuffing his face with cookies at the counter.

Reading the pleas in my eyes, he shrugs. “Sorry, bro. I’m a Westbrook, first and foremost.” He holds up a first aid kit. “But I’m totally on medical standby, if you need me. I’ll totally do your stitches when this is over.”

Traitor. I’m going to sic Karli on him later. Back when we’re in Starlight Falls.

Honey Hill is Westbrook territory.

Whatever. I’m not scared.

These dudes are no wimps. They’re big and they look pretty strong. But I fight hulking professional athletes on the regular. While wearing ice skates. I can take the Westbrooks.

But I don’t think Nicky would like me very much if I beat up all her brothers and make them cry. So rather than throwing punches, I try to diffuse the situation.

“What’s up, guys?” I say, smiling and trying to keep it cool.

They all just leer at me, jaws tight, expressions grim.

“Is there something I can help you with?”

“So...you’re in Grammy’s kitchen, huh?” Harry begins, eyeballing me untrustingly.

“Yeah,” I say slowly. “She had me help her make a cherry pie last night. So I figured it would be okay to be in here today. I’m only here to wash the dishes.” I hold up my soapy hands in surrender.

The air in the room seems to instantly shift. The guys go from threatening to confused.

Jasper quirks an eyebrow. “Grammy taught you one of her recipes?”

I nod. “Yes. From that old handwritten recipe book she keeps in that drawer over there.”

“So you *have* been messing around with our little sister?” Jasper asks, like I just confirmed what he’s suspected all along.

“I, uh, I wouldn’t exactly call it—”

“Don’t even try denying it.” Harry scowls at me. “You and Nicky are the most poorly-kept secret I’ve ever seen.”

“Apparently, you guys were making out on Grammy’s side porch on spa day.” Davis gives me an untrusting look.

“And you were standing way too close for comfort in the elevator at the Saints building the other day,” Cash adds.

Harry jumps in again. “Plus, the way you’ve been looking at her all night is obvious as hell.”

Davis shakes his head in disgust. “Sloppy. Sloppy. Sloppy.”

I wince and hang my head in shame.

Then his tone changes suddenly. “But luckily for you, all the girls love you.”

Cash nods. “Meghan won’t stop talking about how much you helped out at the pet adoption drive.”

“And you won completely Emma over when you asked about her books over dinner.” Jasper smiles broadly.

“And Grammy was basically swooning over how you showed up here to check on her when she fell and hurt herself the other day.” Harry’s expression begins to soften.

“All in all, you *might* be a good guy,” Cash says.

“Maybe,” Harry emphasizes. “You’re still in the ‘maybe’ category.”

“That’s fair,” I mutter.

Jasper’s brow crinkles with concern. “All we want to know is that you won’t hurt our sister.”

“I don’t plan to hurt your sister,” I tell them. “I really care about her. But Nicky...”

Nicky’s a tough cookie. And I’m not sure how she feels about me. I think *I’m* the one at risk of getting hurt here.

Cash steps forward and grabs my shoulders, shaking me. “You’re standing in Grammy’s kitchen, Brighton,” he states, a grave look on his face. “Do you even understand what that means?”

“Um, it means...” I’m not quite sure how to respond.

Davis jumps in for me. “That means you have Grammy’s approval, bonehead. It means she trusts you with Nicky. It means she’s welcomed you into the family.”

I hold a hand up in surrender. “Does Nicky even have a say in all this?”

Out of nowhere, I’m reminded of that house on Elm Street. That cozy little house Nicky wants to buy. I wanted to be supportive. I wanted to be excited about paint colors and the new faucets and the flooring ideas as we took that tour. But every room was just another reminder that she’ll be leaving me soon. We don’t have a future together.

“If Grammy is welcoming you into the family, that means she already sees how Nicky feels about you,” Jasper explains. “That’s how it works.”

I’m not so sure about this. Even I don’t know how Nicky feels about me. How can her grandmother know? “I feel like Grammy may have gotten the wrong idea about Nicky and me.”

Harry’s chest puffs up threateningly. “Grammy is never wrong.”

Wow. Nicky and I must have really accomplished *something* with our practice relationship if her family is so convinced that we belong together. This is a lot to process.

“Look, I...I’m crazy about Nicky. I really am. She’s the only woman who has ever made me feel this way,” I confess. “But I can’t say that she reciprocates what I feel.”

Davis pats me appeasingly on the shoulder. “Then you’re going to have to make her, my man. You can’t let Grammy down.”

Jasper and Cash step aside when their dad comes into the room, walking right up to me. “What we’re saying is, you’d better not hurt Nicky. My daughter has always been a tough nut to crack. She can be challenging and stubborn and downright scary when she wants to be. But she’s different with you. She trusts you. Don’t make her regret it. Don’t make us all regret it.”

Harry elbows me in the ribs. Hard. “Man up, ass wad.”

Then the Westbrook men lumber out of the kitchen one by one, leaving me with a lot to think about.

RONAN

Tonight's our night. The second biggest night of the hockey season. The night I never thought would be possible until just a few weeks ago.

The Saints are playing game seven of the conference finals. And so far, in this best-of-seven series, we are tied with the Dallas Mountaineers three to three after they knocked New York out of the running two days ago.

So, tonight is it.

Loser goes home.

Winner goes to the series finals.

I have a good feeling about this match. Like, a really good feeling. I woke up with it, and I've been riding this high all day long. I think we're going to win this. It's fate. We've come too far not to.

It's been a tough matchup. The Mountaineers are playing rough and scrappy. But we're holding them.

I know Rainbow is predicting that we're going to lose this one. She didn't tell me straight out, though. She's too sweet to mess with an athlete's mental space like that right before the match. But I could tell when I texted her earlier. She thinks we're going to lose.

But Nicky encouraged me to believe in myself and in my talent instead of that psychic stuff today. So that's what I'm choosing to do.

I'm going to trust my gut above all else.

And y'know what? Nicky trusts in me, too.

I have to say that even if we don't win tonight, the Saints have far surpassed everyone's expectations this season, especially for a first year

expansion team. We're the first team to lose as many games as we did in the beginning of the season to then turn it around and make it into the post-season playoffs.

It's kind of embarrassing how bad we sucked in the beginning—but hell—we killed it the past couple months.

Everything changed when Nicky walked into my life.

Thanks to her, I'm a better player. A better leader. A better man.

And that's exactly why I'm head over heels for her now.

My Peach. Warmth rushes into my chest at the mere thought of her.

In any case, I'm proud of this team. I'm proud of our guys, and the way twenty-three strangers came together and grew into a unified team. If I think of it that way, what we accomplished this season has been pretty damn admirable.

And that's exactly what I reminded the guys during my captain's speech at half-time, when we're down by one.

We're now about to start the final period of the match. My eyes zero in on my favorite section of the jam-packed arena, narrowing in on Nicky in the crowd. Tonight, she's with my family in the stands, watching the game. She's wearing my jersey. She even has my number painted on her cheek.

She's been so supportive during this whole playoff series, and tonight is no different.

Number seventeen looks damn good on her. I'd bet my last name would look good on her, too.

Head in the game, Brighton.

Seeing Nicky in my jersey only gives me a deeper drive. A heightened sense of motivation as the game resumes. I don't know why, but the *why* doesn't even matter. Because whatever it is, it fucking works.

It's after a clean pass from Parker and then a fastbreak up the ice that I see the opening I need. I fake a pass, throwing my opponents off my trail, and then I shoot.

The Mountaineers goalie scrambles and misses the puck. The biscuit glides into the net, giving us the point we need to tie the game.

The crowd goes wild, and I shake my stick in the air.

My eyes go back to Nicky. She's screaming her little head off as she jumps around with my family. It's a beautiful sight, but I only allow myself a fraction of a second to view it before getting my head back in the game.

There's no time for celebrations yet. We've tied the game 2-2, but we're

not done yet. This game can't end in a tie, which means that if neither team scores, we're minutes away from an overtime from hell.

Our coach calls our only thirty-second time out, so we can regroup.

I skate toward our box, and I catch a quick glimpse of Nicky in the stands. She's waving a homemade sign with my name. Her excitement is what gives me the encouragement to give it my all for the last ninety seconds of regulation.

We come out strong, and I put my all out there on the ice. But then, the goddamn Mountaineers slice the puck into the back of the net at the last possible second.

The Saints lose at the buzzer.

There's no penalty. No video review. Nothing. The game is over.

I fall to my knees on the ice, defeated, while our opponents skate around, chanting in celebration.

Our season is over. We're done.

RONAN

When the Saints lost last night's match against Dallas, it felt like my whole world screeched to a grinding halt.

In one gut-churning moment, everything changed.

No more waking up at the crack of dawn for team meetings. No more listening to motivational tapes on the drive to game day in Sin Valley. No more away games. No more sleepy rides back home after days on the road.

All of it is done.

I've only had one night to sleep on this new reality, but in most ways, I've come to accept it. I am okay with hockey being over for the season. It happens. Most of the league was already done anyway. The Saints were fortunate to make it this far, especially after such a rough start.

What I'm not okay with is this feeling that *everything* is suddenly over for Nicky and me.

She's been living in my guesthouse for months now. Heck, I've practically been living in my guesthouse for about half as long, too, just to be near her.

If the season is over, then this babysitting gig of hers is over, too. And if she has to leave, we haven't had a single discussion about what lies ahead.

What's that mean for us?

Does she still consider me her practice boyfriend? Is she going back to having lousy placeholders? Or is she ready to upgrade to the kind of relationship she deserves? Either way, I still get left behind.

A girl like her deserves more. A girl like her could get the real thing in a heartbeat. But for some dumb reason, I'm still not convinced Nicky realizes

how much she's really worth.

She couldn't be more blind.

Nicky is quiet the whole drive into Sin Valley today. We have a meeting with the higher-ups this morning, and I almost wonder if she's feeling as nervous as I am.

Or maybe she's just busy picturing her new life back in Honey Hill. Without me.

Yup. Probably that one.

I'm lost inside my head by the time we make it to the Saints' headquarters. The conference room is packed. There's grumpy Darius, who's actually been less of a stick up my ass since our season turned around. Then there's Nicky's brother, Cash, along with my sports agent, the Saints' general manager, and the head of PR. In short, everyone who was present on that fateful day when they assigned Nicky to be by my side is here in this conference room.

That's how I know she's at least half the reason for this spur of the moment meeting.

When we step inside, Nicky takes a seat at the table. The seat furthest from me. She's too fucking far away. In a room full of people, I feel lonely without her at my side.

I snap to attention when people start talking.

"That was one hell of a finish, Ronan."

"Yeah, we couldn't have been happier with how the season ended."

"I'm proud of you, little brother. You really got your shit together."

"Between the pet calendar, the volunteering, and the press interviews, the media has been loving you," Florence adds and then she beams at Nicky. "You both did wonderfully. I don't know how you did it, Nicky, but you made magic happen."

Oh, she made magic happen alright. I don't even feel like the same man I was just a few short weeks ago.

They all look at her and she keeps her head down, cheeks reddening. "Th...thank you," she stammers.

But when her eyes flick to mine, I try to send her a silent message, to remind her that she more than deserves to be seated at this table, that she deserves to bask in pride for what she's helped the team accomplish. Instantly, she sits up taller, straightening her spine.

"Thank you," she says, full of that confidence I love so much.

That's my girl.

Except she's not really mine. Is she? That's the part that stings.

"And we're on track to discuss Ronan's contract bonuses after this, right gentlemen?" my agent asks the owners.

"You betcha," the GM confirms.

My agent winks at me, but I find it hard to care. It's just money.

And money doesn't do a whole lot for me these days. If I'm not spending it on buying Nicky pretty new dresses or her ice skates or jewelry from the farmer's market? Then, I just don't have much use for it.

The team executives continue to express their pride in the season, talking about the Saints' new standing in the league, positive fan perception, community positioning, and team sponsorships. Not to mention the astronomical ticket sales. At the beginning of the season, we barely had a handful of apathetic fans present in the stands at each game. By last night, the arena was packed to capacity and overflowing.

Yeah, the Saints may not have made it to the finals, but sitting here listening to the big wigs talk, I know they're happy with how things turned out.

They're over the fucking moon.

Me? Not so much.

I try to smile and show my appreciation for the flowery words they're all spewing, but it's an understatement to say that I'm downtrodden. I'm starting to realize how annoying it is when people clearly expected you to fail, but are thrilled that you didn't. In some ways it feels like Nicky is the only one who believed in me from the beginning. And now I'm about to lose her.

My shitty mood is the same one I woke up with. The one I've been in since after last night's loss, when I realized I don't fucking know what this means for me and the girl I'm probably, possibly, *most definitely* in love with.

When I shouldn't be.

I tune out of the meeting until I hear her name spoken aloud.

"Nicky, I can send a moving company to help you move out of Ronan's guesthouse," Darius offers, pulling out his tablet. "What time works for you to—"

"No!" I blurt out, earning more than a few funny looks as heads turn my way in surprise. "I'll help her," I say simply

Darius eyeballs me suspiciously, slowly putting away his tablet. "Well.

Okay, then..."

Shit, I'm losing my mind.

Now the Saints are rewarding her with her freedom once again. I'm guessing that Nicky is itching to leave so she can move to Honey Hill and buy her new house soon. She won't need to stay in my lame little guesthouse anymore.

I really don't want her to go.

I'm feeling desperate enough that I'm already considering acting up next season just so that Darius will send her back to me. But with my luck, they'd probably really send a dweeb with the bowtie to babysit me this time.

I'm out of ideas.

I'm out of ways to make her stay.

So now, I have to let her go.

If I thought the ride to the meeting was bad, the ride back to my place is even worse. Nicky types away on her phone the whole time, and I crank up the radio to bury the painful silence.

Once we're back at the guesthouse, it doesn't take long to help Nicky pack everything back into her suitcases and a few boxes. Then we carry her things out to the car the Saints loaned her.

To be honest, I try dragging it out as much as I can. I'm wishing I would have purchased her more stuff during her time here, just so that it would take longer to pack up her belongings. Aside from dumping her clothes out on the driveway, I'm out of options here.

Very few words are spoken. The comfort and ease we used to find in each other's company seems to be long gone. Now, we're awkwardly in each other's way every few minutes, doing everything humanly possible to not touch or run into each other as we load up Nicky's car.

It's all just sad.

I've already completed three walk-throughs to make sure she didn't leave a shoe under the bed, a book behind the couch, or her favorite travel mug in the dishwasher.

But there's nothing.

And she knows it, too.

"So, this is it..." Nicky says after we hit another uncomfortable stretch of silence in the guesthouse living room.

I nod. "This is it."

She makes a feeble attempt at a smile. "Having a babysitter wasn't so bad

after all, was it?”

My aching heart forces me to be honest. “Having *you* as a babysitter wasn’t so bad.”

Another beat of silence.

She steps forward for a hug, and I rush to embrace her, breathing in the scent of her fruity shampoo, melting into the softness of her curves.

I’d do anything to keep her in my arms a little longer. But a goodbye hug doesn’t feel right. This all feels wrong.

I open my mouth to just lay it all out in the open and tell her how I feel. But Nicky speaks first.

“Thanks for practicing with me, Ronan.” Her words come out softly. “Your future real girlfriend will be one lucky woman.”

My chest wrenches with pain. *Fuck*. She really is done with me. With us. With this.

I hug her tighter, burying my nose in the strands of her hair. “Your future real boyfriend will be the luckiest guy on the face of this earth, Nicky. Make sure you never let him forget that.”

Too soon, she lets go and steps back. “I should get going.”

Reluctantly, I walk her outside, standing miserably on the sidelines as she climbs into the driver’s side of her car.

“Nicky?” I call out, my voice cracking.

She looks over her shoulder. “Yeah?”

“We should hang out sometime.”

She hesitates. One second. Then two. “Yeah. Totally,” she finally says, but she doesn’t sound the least bit convincing.

It sounds a whole lot closer to ‘no thank you, asshole.’

“Bye, Hockey Guy.”

I give a little wave. “See you around, Peach.”

It feels like she slams my heart in the car door when she bangs it shut. Then she yanks it out and runs it over as she speeds away.

I stand there like a fool, watching her drive off.

There’s no hockey. No Nicky. No happiness.

I was on top of the world a week ago, but now there’s not a single thing that feels right in my life.

NICKY

Today is my first day in my tiny new office.

Yup, I got upgraded from my cubicle into a little shoebox that I can call my own. It's been nice to have a bit of privacy when I break down sobbing over Ronan every forty-five minutes or so.

I'm grateful for the small mercies.

The office is lovely, though. It truly is. But I kind of feel like I'm trapped in a closet. I already miss doing my meetings from the couch at the guesthouse, looking out across Ronan's never ending yard, the ice rink, and the woods.

It was all so serene and cozy, and now that I'm here, so far away from Starlight Falls, I realize that living with Ronan felt a lot like home. Which makes no freaking sense at all. But not much has been making sense since I moved away from the stunning hockey captain.

It's hard to explain this ache in my chest, and it's even harder to shake it off.

When I drove away from Ronan, it didn't just sting. It felt like someone ripped out my insides and strung them along the highway, leaving a red and bloody trail all the way back to Honey Hill.

Yeah. Last night, I may have stayed up half the night watching too much true crime.

But that's not the point. The point is...I'm hurting.

The only bright spot in my world is that I now have a permanent place on the PR team. I'm doing the Saints' community outreach and event marketing. Not only did the organization consider my time working with Ronan as a

striking success, they also used a few of my public relations ideas over the course of the season.

I think Cash is even prouder of me than I am. He already popped into my office to drop off some congratulatory flowers and again to see how I'm settling in. He's been great in all this. I would have never had this opportunity if my brother hadn't set this all up.

I owe him big time.

Now I've got to start thinking long-term. Now that I'm not following Ronan around twenty-four seven, I'm finally ready to buy that real estate that I've had my eye on in Honey Hill. I'm ready to put down roots. Start living my new life that I set out to do when I left Chicago.

All of this positive change and planning for my future should bring nothing but happiness and anticipation. But inside, I just feel sad and empty. All the things I thought I wanted so damn badly aren't bringing me any joy. And that scares me.

What scares me even more is how I can't stop thinking about Ronan. And I can't figure out what any of it means.

Why? Why is this predicament with Ronan so different? Why haven't I moved on from it like the meaningless situation-ships in my past?

Because you're in love with him, idiot, I hear a muted voice whisper somewhere inside my head.

I'm not trying to hear that. My aching heart has its theories, but I'm not ready to touch those with a ten-foot stick just yet.

I've been in this spot a dozen times over the years. At the end of a hookup, I enjoy a bottle of wine, and then I jump right back into work until my next placeholder comes around.

I'm used to it.

But *this*? This doesn't feel the same. Not at all, dammit.

I keep telling myself that it's no big deal. That I'll get over it. That what we had was just temporary. Not much different from the situation-ships I've had in the past. I keep telling myself that, this time, I'm equipped with the tools I need to navigate dating, thanks to all of the things I practiced in that fake relationship with the hockey god who haunts my thoughts.

Yet somehow I can't bring myself to feel better about what I lost when I left that man behind in Starlight Falls.

Trying to ignore the stinging pain I'm feeling, I trudge through my morning's work. Then on my lunch break, I head out back to where my car is

parked.

“I’m gonna go grab a bite to eat from my grandmother’s bakery,” I tell Florence who’s entering the building as I’m leaving.

“*Bon appetit*. See you later.” She waves at me.

I hop into my car and drive across the bridge to Honey Hill. I find myself parking outside of *The Wildberry Bakery*, needing to feel a sense of calm familiarity.

My grandmother is not at work, though. She’s at home these days, healing from her operation. She pulled through her eye surgery like a champ. Now she’s resting and recovering. Her new man has been at her side every single day. It’s beautiful to watch.

I used to take comfort in knowing that the strongest women in my life stayed single and thrived. But now I’m realizing that Grammy and Mom are still just as strong as they’ve always been now that they have men in their lives. My real life heroines have coupled with men who offer them support and love and partnership. Men who make their lives better, rather than taking away. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with that.

I’m starting to wonder if I was wrong in thinking I’d be better off shutting myself off from that possibility. Because Ronan gave me a glimpse into what it could be like to be loved. And I have to admit that everything was better when I was wrapped in that safe little cocoon he built for just him and me.

It was fake, Nicky. It was fake. And now, it’s time to get over it.

When I step into my grandmother’s bakery, in the place of Grammy’s usual warm smile, there’s some stoic stranger behind the cash register. I order a light lunch from the cashier. Then I eat my sandwich alone at one of the small tables and do some reading for work on my phone.

I’m about done with my lunch when I look up and spot Simon grabbing a homemade cinnamon roll and a coffee. He’s got a hoodie pulled up over his messy head and he’s wearing a pair of sunglasses. I imagine he must have had a long night out at the bar or something. I feel nothing at the thought of him with other girls. No jealousy. No longing. Just indifference.

Maybe I *do* finally believe that I deserve better. And despite all the pain I’m in now, that in and of itself is a tiny victory for me. Evidence that what Ronan and I did together wasn’t in vain.

He’s on his way out the door with his purchase when he backpedals and stops next to my table.

“Hey, Nicky. You’re back in town?”

I shake my head. “No, actually. I’m secretly a clone sent here by the government to spy on the people of Honey Hill.”

A small smile spreads across his face. “Nah, you’re the real thing. *Way* too hot to be a clone.”

I chafe at the flirtation. Back in the day, an empty little comment like that from Simon would reel me right in. Today, it doesn’t even land.

Wow, I really am a different person.

He seems to realize it. His smile disappears. “Can I sit with you?”

“Sure,” I say with a sigh. He’s still a family friend. I’m bound to see him from time to time, especially now that I’m back in town for good. Making things awkward between us is pointless.

I shove my mess to the side, giving him a little space at my table.

He joins me, pulling off his sunglasses and wincing.

“Shit. You have a black eye,” I observe, taking in the swelling and bruising right above his left cheek.

He flinches. “Yeah. I came clean to Jasper about us this morning.”

“What?” My eyes bulge.

Emma must not know about this yet or else she would have been ringing down my phone immediately.

He continues. “I got tired of keeping you a secret. And I get that we’re done and you’ve moved on with that hockey dude but...I wanted to be honest with my best friend.”

I don’t correct him or tell him that Ronan and I aren’t really together. That’s none of his business, quite frankly.

“Anyway, let’s just say Jasper didn’t take it well at first. He was mostly pissed at the way I treated you, keeping you a secret. But I think he’ll be fine now after getting that out of his system.”

I shrug, not knowing what to say. “Shit. Simon, you know my brothers are hot-heads.”

He runs his hands through his hair, looking quite uncomfortable. I don’t blame him. “Yeah, I deserve the black eye.” He chuckles ruefully. Then he meets my eyes. “Nicky, I’m sorry. I’m sorry I wasn’t ready for you, when you were ready for more. I just...I’m sorry for hurting you.”

I shake my head. “You don’t need to apologize. I get it. I’m over it.” I feel such a sense of inner relief, knowing that the words I’m saying are true.

“I need to make sure you know how sorry I am,” he insists. “You know how messed up I am, but I’m trying to be better. I’m finally trying to heal this

heartbreak I've been drowning in since my ex left me at the altar. You...this situation with us...it was a fucking wake up call. Because losing a woman like you is something I know I'll regret for the rest of my life."

As he continues to speak, I sit here comparing and contrasting two men in my mind. When Simon and I said our goodbyes, it only stung because my ego was hurt. With him, I'd been playing it safe because as my brother's best friend, I'd never expected him to hurt me. That's why it felt like such a letdown when he did.

But from day one, Ronan was the opposite of safe. Opening up to him felt like the biggest risk of my entire life. Because from the very first moment I saw him on that train, I knew that man had the power to devastate me with one simple touch, with one simple kiss. And he did.

Still, even as I sit here in the wreckage of my heartbreak, I know it was so very worth it. Ronan was worth it.

"Thank you for your apology, Simon. I knew you weren't ready, so it was unfair of me to push you. It's a good thing that you're working on you. That you're becoming a better man." I pat his hand.

A sheepish smile comes to his face. "You think I might have a shot with you again sometime in the future?"

Now that I know what I'm worth, my stomach turns at the mere idea of settling ever again. "Not a chance in hell," I say.

Maybe a little too harshly.

When Simon jolts, I soften my tone. "No offense, Simon. Keep working on yourself. When your main character shows up, you'll be ready, and you'll be glad that I wasn't there hogging the space that belongs to your real soulmate."

He shakes his head but grins a grin that almost reaches his eyes. "You're too smart for me, Nicky Westbrook."

"I know, right?" I laugh, all while thinking how grateful I am that my mom taught me this particular life lesson.

Simon rises to his feet, and I do, too. Without warning, he leans in and wraps me in a strong hug that takes me off-guard.

It's the flattest, driest, no sparks hug I've ever had. We both pull back quickly, putting space between us.

"Did you feel that?" I ask, almost in shock over how awkward the hug felt. Like, did I actually use to sleep with this guy?

He chuckles uncomfortably. "Yeah. That felt weird, right?"

I nod. "Yes. Like I was hugging one of my brothers. What the heck?"

"So that answers the question of whether we'll ever hook up again," he mutters.

I smack his shoulder. "Already told you it was a 'no', asshole."

We both laugh and clean up the table.

Together, we walk to the door.

"I'm happy to see you happy, Nicky. You deserve it more than anybody I know." He sighs. "Even if it's with that hockey douchebag."

"Don't call him that," I bark, instantly defensive of my Hockey Guy. Ronan and I may not be in each other's lives anymore but I will forever have his back.

"Sheesh. Sorry." Simon throws up his hands in defense.

He looks at me again, and I give him a small grin. "Thanks. You deserve to be happy, too, you know," I say, hoping he believes it. I hope he finds his own version of happy. "Bye, Simon."

He slips his sunglasses back over his injured face. "Bye, Nicky."

And then he walks away.

RONAN

The obnoxious lights and sounds of the North Node Tavern buzz all around me, making my whiskey-soaked brain thrum painfully. Shifting on my barstool, I stare into the bottom of my glass, willing my tired eyelids not to slide shut.

Because every time I close my eyes, I see it again.

The nightmarish memory of Nicky in the arms of that loser at her grandmother's bakery the other day.

Hugging him.

Laughing with him.

Moving on with him.

She's already forgotten me. I'm nothing but a distant memory to her. Shit—I really was nothing but a placeholder to her. Just practice so she could score the guy she *really* wants.

And I can only be mad at myself. That was our arrangement after all. I told her she could practice with me so that, in due time, she'd feel confident to go after the relationship of her dreams.

Well it backfired like a motherfucker *for me*.

Because after building up my courage, I showed up at Nicky's new office, holding a huge bouquet of flowers and asking around the building for her. When Florence told me where she had gone for lunch, I booked my ass to Honey Hill and stupidly walked into her grandma's bakery.

I was finally ready to tell Nicky how I really feel about her, but much to my surprise—and goddamned misery—all I accomplished was seeing my Peach draped all over her ex.

I could have gone a hundred more lifetimes without seeing that.

In all the scenarios I envisioned, where Nicky moves on without me, her going back to Simon was not something I ever seriously considered. Yes, it had been a fleeting thought here and there, but I was sure that she finally realized she deserves better.

I figured she'd buy her own place. I figured she'd be her badass independent self. But I foolishly believed that she was done with that tool.

Come on—he dumped her! On her freaking birthday. After hiding her from the world for months. Meanwhile, here I am, ready to shout her name from every rooftop in town. And she doesn't want me.

I'm the one who makes Nicky's morning coffee and listens to her favorite motivational tapes with her as we drive.

I'm the one who takes her to farmers markets and surprises her with gifts and desserts and pretty dresses.

I'm the one who rescues her in winter blizzards and catches her when she slips on the ice.

I'm the one who slow dances with her on Valentine's Day.

I'm the one who spends snow days ice skating with her and feeding her marshmallows in front of the fire.

I'm the one who became a better person just to be good enough for her.

I'm the one who loves her.

But still, after all that, Nicky goes back to him.

Fuuuuck.

With nothing better to do tonight, I find myself at Nolan's bar. Mostly because I knew my siblings would drag me out here eventually if I continued to wallow indefinitely in this pity party at home.

But now I'm just throwing my pity party in public.

Super.

Across the room, my brothers are playing darts, working on my last nerve and having a good old time. As for Karli, she's in her own world, dancing wildly with Daphne and Layla.

I don't feel like throwing darts. I don't feel like dancing. I don't feel like eating. And I definitely don't feel like making conversation with the random women who keep coming up and trying to flirt with me. I ignore them just like I'm ignoring everyone else today.

I pull my baseball cap low over my eyes and I mope. Because now that Nicky has up and moved on with her life, I'm nothing but a grumpy fuck.

Even I don't want to hang out with my miserable self.

That doesn't stop Darius from trying, though. He comes up to me, flipping the front of my hat. I glare at him and adjust the cap I'm wearing tonight.

"Wow. You're really bummed about the Saints not making it to the finals, aren't you?" He lowers into the seat beside me. "It's okay, brother. There's always next year. And with how great the team press has been, that'll make the off season trades even smoother. We'll get a few more solid players around you, and you'll be back better than ever next year," he shares excitedly, clapping me on the back.

I grunt. Of course that's where his mind goes.

"It's not hockey that I'm bummed about," I grumble.

Darius' brows pinch together. "Are you sick? Do you have a fever?" He immediately touches the back of his hand to my forehead.

I push him off, annoyed. We already have three doctors in our family. Three. Our dad, Felix and Mason. See? None of them are named Darius.

"Quit touching me. I'm not sick. I'm in love, you knucklehead."

Darius lets out an obnoxious gasp. "In love?"

"Yes. In love. Are you deaf?"

He turns toward my twin, who is carrying some drinks to a customer's table. "Holy shit. Nolan! Nolan! Ronan is in love!"

Nolan's feet slow. "Oh...uh...okay..."

Darius must not be happy with Nolan's reaction, because his arms shoot out, shaking Nolan as he starts to panic. "Fix it! Fix your twin!"

The alcohol on Nolan's tray splashes all around.

I drop my face into my palm.

Oh my God. Who are these idiots I'm related to?

Nolan shrugs. "I'm divorced. I don't know shit about love." His hand claps my shoulder. "I already knew. But sorry I can't help." Then he goes to drop off his drinks.

Darius spins around, looking for someone to come 'fix' me. He turns to Archer, who is throwing a dart at the board, flinging it just like he does when we're ax throwing. "Archer. Come here. Help him, for crying out loud."

Archer shrugs. "Me? What do I know about love? I'm in an intimate relationship with my left fist, and I'm fooling around with my right hand on Thursdays."

Darius turns to Mason next, and I'm starting to really feel like a loser.

Mason's digging into a plate of nachos at the other end of the bar, only half-listening to our conversation. He holds up a hand. "Don't ask me. Nicky's my cousin. Conflict of interest."

Shit. Apparently everyone aside from Darius already knows exactly who's got me torn in two. Nolan walks back by with his empty drink tray. "Let Felix fix it. He's the one in a real relationship, walking around like a happy go lucky fool."

Felix steps forward from wherever he was hiding, with Daphne now hanging off of his side.

"Told you he'd be next," Daphne grins as Karli and Layla come over and join our little huddle. "I win the bet."

"What bet?" Karli asks suspiciously.

Daphne shrugs proudly. "I bet Felix five dollars that Ronan would be the next Brighton to fall in love. I was right."

Grumbling, Felix whips out his wallet and slaps a crinkled bill into his fiancée's waiting palm. She pinches his cheek, gloating shamelessly at my misfortune.

Darius is getting more and more impatient now. "Can we get back to the emergency at hand please?"

Felix grins proudly, dusts off his hands, and grabs my shoulder, nearly pushing me off my barstool. "Okay. Here's the plan, baby brother...Here's what you're going to do."

NICKY

I'm in my office, hunched over my desk, miserably typing away on my computer.

I'm writing up a press release for new stadium security measures for next year. It's not exactly the most thrilling piece I've ever done. On top of that, it's the fourth press release I've typed up today, and it's safe to say my brain is starting to melt.

A knock on my open door startles me. I glance up to find Steven, one of my coworkers, standing there. "Look at that idiot out the window." He points to the glass behind me.

The window is the best part of my office. It overlooks the park across from the building. But today, like most days, I don't have the luxury of free time to stare out windows.

I want to get this day over with as soon as possible because I have plans for this evening. Plans that include a forty-five minute drive into the mystical mountains of Starlight Falls.

I can't do this to myself anymore. I have to go see Ronan. I have to tell him how I feel about him.

This is something I've never done before. I've never been a girl to pour out my heart to some guy. But if there ever was a man who's worthy of my rawest emotions, it's Ronan Brighton.

He taught me to not be afraid of my feelings. He gave me a safe space to dig into the deepest parts of myself. And now I'm ready to use my newfound voice to tell him the truths buried in the furthest corner of my heart.

I love him. Simple as that.

And I want him to know. I need him to know.

This is not practice. This is not a drill.

My love for him is the realest thing I've ever experienced.

I just need to get these damn press releases out of the way first.

Steven continues to stand there in the office door and I continue to ignore him, typing away on my keyboard.

He sighs dramatically. Then he marches all the way into my office, right up to my desk. At first, I think he's going to reach over my shoulder and help me finish writing this press release, but then he grips the sides of my chair and physically turns my swiveling office chair around to face the window.

"What the hell?!" I don't even know this guy. I met him like, two weeks ago. The nerve of him to get all in my personal space like this!

"Look," he commands firmly.

"Seriously? What is so important that..." I look out the window and my protests die on my tongue.

The first thing I see is a giant of a man, figure skating in the park across the street. Then I see the huge poster board he's holding in his hands.

I lean in closer. "Is that...?" My eyes blink rapidly, waiting for the image to change.

It doesn't.

My heart squeezes. Then it starts to pound like a drunken jackhammer.

It's been over a week since I last laid eyes on that beautiful man. And now, there he is, right within reach...

Steven is oblivious to my heart palpitations over here. He's too busy ranting at me. "Yes, that's Ronan Brighton, hockey sex god that he is. And he's determined to see your stubborn butt for whatever reason." My coworker huffs. "He promised me one hundred bucks if I could get you to go out there. So hurry your little butt down there so I can collect my money. I've gotta pay my car note like yesterday before I'm stuck walking to work in this horrible weather. Go! Scoot!"

I'm up, flying out of my chair and running out of my office. I'm already dashing down the multiple flights of stairs when I realize I didn't grab my jacket or anything. It's too late for that. I'm not turning back. I'm scared that I might blink and realize that this was all a dream.

I burst out of the building, trampling through the freezing cold snow. I slip and slide across the sidewalk, arms out wide, trying to balance myself. It's almost like I'm the one ice skating over here as I duck around pedestrians

and vehicles alike.

But I'm just a girl. Trying to get to a boy. By making it across the street. Without slipping on a deadly patch of ice. And getting knocked on my ass.

Wait—I don't think that's how the line went in that old movie.

Finally, I make it across in one piece. Barely.

I don't slow down until I'm hiking across the frozen grass to the ice rink. The moment Ronan comes into view, I realize I have no idea what I'm doing. Instead of all the slipping and sliding, I should have been trying to figure out what I was going to say once we're face-to-face.

When I'm close enough, I can finally read the poster board in his hands. *If you see Nicky, tell her I'm here for my grand gesture.*

Oh my god. What the hell?!

But the biggest smile explodes across Ronan's face when he turns and spots me.

"Nicky," he breathes.

"Ronan."

For a long moment, we just stand there, ten feet apart, staring at each other.

My oh my, how I missed those pretty frost blue eyes.

And those strong, wide shoulders.

And the way he looks at me.

And the fact that for the first time in my life, I feel stronger than I ever have. All this time, I thought I needed to be single and independent in order to be a strong, badass woman. But Ronan has shown me a different way.

Love doesn't make me a weak woman. In fact, loving the *right* man makes me stronger than I've ever dreamed of.

Yes, *that's* what I see when I gaze into those eyes of his.

"I think you owe Steven a hundred bucks," I finally speak first.

Ronan blinks. "Who's Steven?"

My forehead scrunches into a frown. Did I get this all wrong? Did Steven lie to me? Is this all a cruel prank? Or did Ronan bump his head out here on the skating rink?

"What do you mean?" I'm almost afraid to ask. "The coworker of mine that you promised a hundred bucks to?"

"Oh. I..." he rubs the back of his neck, suddenly looking adorably impish. "I might have made that deal to at least ten different people who walked into your building. I wasn't sure which ones actually worked on your

floor, so I wasn't taking any chances."

My tummy flutters. "Not taking any chances on what?"

Dropping his poster board to the ice, he slowly skates forward, coming up to the edge of the rink where I'm standing. "On you, Nicky. I wasn't going to leave here without seeing you. I would have skated back and forth out here in the cold until you left work this evening, if I had to."

"If...If you wanted to talk, why didn't you call me? Don't you still have my number?"

He's already shaking his head before I stop talking. "I didn't want to do this over the phone."

"Do this...?"

Okay, now my heart is officially trying to body slam its way out of my chest as I wait for his next words. It's rattling my ribs so hard. I think I'm going to be sick.

He reaches out and grabs my hand, cupping it in his much larger ones. "Yes, this. Nicky, I had to tell you that I love you."

"You love me?" I hear the tremble in my own voice.

"Yes, I love you. You're the main character to me. You're the center of my universe. Everything is just background scenery when you walk into a room. Everything else revolves around you. Including me. You deserve more than a string of placeholders, Peach. And I'm hoping you'll let me be your leading guy." He wipes the tear I didn't realize was rolling down my cheek.

I give him a watery nod. "I love you, too, Ronan. I don't want a placeholder anymore. I only want you."

Ronan starts to pull me closer, but then he pauses, peering down at me. "What about that other guy?" he asks warily.

"What other guy?" I scrunch my forehead.

"Your ex. I saw you guys hugging a few days ago, and I just thought..."

My eyes widen. "You saw us? You were in Honey Hill? At the bakery?"

He nods, a pained look on his face.

I leap up on my toes and startle him with a kiss on his surprised lips.

There's a hopeful look in his eyes when we pull apart. "Not that I'm complaining, but what's that for?"

"It was just a goodbye hug with Simon. Nothing more. There's no one else in my life. Only you. You're the one I love, Ronan Brighton."

"Only me?" he asks softly, his eyes twinkling.

"Yes, only you. The only man who's ever made me feel anything real.

The man I've been miserable over. The man I've been missing and thinking he didn't feel the same."

He cups my cheeks. "I feel the same, Peach. I feel everything for you."

When he says all the things I've been wishing he'd say, I shiver as tears race from my eyes.

Ronan plucks off his toque and tugs it down over my ears. Then he holds his jacket open, pulls me forward, and wraps me up against his chest, so that we're both warm and snug inside his jacket. "I want to be your safety net, Nicky. When I'm here, it's okay to fall apart because I'll catch you every time."

"My safety net?" I let out a watery laugh. "Shit. I really need one of those. I'm always slipping and sliding and falling on my ass when I'm around you."

"Because I make you weak in the knees?" he asks cheekily.

"Definitely because you make me weak in the knees," I confess.

"You make me weak, too. It's embarrassing." He kisses me. "I love you."

I grin in his face. "I love you back."

He presses his cheek against mine. "Roses are red. Violets are blue..." I hear him whisper into my ear.

I laugh. "Oh god. Here we go again..."

"You know I'm awful at writing poetry, right?"

"So awful," I confirm.

He cracks up. "So, I'm just gonna say this without worrying whether it rhymes."

"Go right ahead." Beneath his jacket, I drape my arms around his waist and squeeze.

Pulling back slightly, he looks me in the eyes. "Nicky Westbrook—I want to be your date every Valentine's Day for the rest of your life. I want to go way over the top and celebrate each of your birthdays with a marching band parade. I want to love you on Christmas and New Years and on a regular old Tuesday, too. In a way that makes you feel special and important and adored. I want the big moments and the small moments with you, Peach. I want all of it. All of you. Tell me you'll be mine."

I clasp his cheeks and kiss his face all over, not caring that we're out in a public park. Not caring that I'm very quickly turning into a human icicle.

My eyes travel across every inch of his perfect, beautiful face. "I'd rather be yours than be anything else in this world, Ronan Brighton."

“Then it’s official,” he says simply. “You’re mine.”

I melt, soaking up the feeling of being in Ronan’s arms once again. It’s now my favorite place in the whole wide world.

He picks me up off my feet, swinging me around, and then skating around the ice, with me still in his arms.

“I love you.” He presses a dusting of kisses all over my face, repeating himself over and over, as I giggle. “I love you. I love you. I love you.”

“I love you, I love you, too.”

Ronan continues to skate and whisper in my ear. “You really turned my world upside down one hundred and three days ago, Nicky Westbrook. You have no idea.”

“What?” He’s still been keeping track of the days? All this time, he’s been keeping track of the days since we met?

His skates come to a halt as he peers down into my eyes, the most reverent look in his cool blue peepers. “One hundred and three days since I met you. One hundred and three days since you changed my life. For the better, Nicky. Everything’s been better since you walked in.”

“Good. ‘Cause you’re stuck with me, Hockey Guy. Forever and ever.” I burrow my face against his pounding heart. “I lied to you. To myself. And I’m sorry for that. Because the truth is, you’re not my practice anything. You’re my endgame. You’re my biggest win. You’re my championship cup.”

RONAN

The arena is buzzing. The crowd is going wild. Two teams hit the rink. But my ass is in the stands tonight.

It's kind of nice, actually.

The Saints may not be in the championship finals this year, but I'm watching the match in person. After being so damn close to making it this season, I felt I had to come to this final game. It stings to not be out there on the ice, but I think it's the motivation I need to get my ass here next year.

Our time will come. I'm sure of that.

In any case, it's come down to game seven. The eastern conference finalists versus the western conference finalists. The Saints should have been the team out there playing for the Cup. I know we could have kept up with these teams. But considering my current company, being up here in the nosebleeds with Nicky right now really isn't so bad.

My Peach and I flew first class to New York to come watch the Cup finals together. It worked out, being a weekend game, and she managed to use one of her vacation days to make this a little three-day getaway. It's just what we needed as a new couple.

The hockey game is just the cherry on top.

It's near the end of halftime when I'm dropping back into my seat from hitting the concession stands. I hand Nicky a beer, and before I can set mine in the cup holder, she's bumping my shoulder.

"Oh my god. Ronan! Look! We're on the jumbotron!"

My head shoots up. Sure enough, there we are in full color on the thirty-foot screen, our faces encased in a giant heart.

The crowd starts chanting. It's a combination of "*Brighton! Brighton! Brighton!*" and "*Kiss her! Kiss her! Kiss her!*" It all makes me laugh.

Leaning toward my girl with a devious grin, I cup her cheek. "We've got to give the people what they want, right, Peach?" I get closer, more than ready to comply with the crowd's demands.

Pinkness floods her face as I approach. "Ronan..." she warns. "Don't go overboard. Don't go over-the-top."

I pretend to frown. "Me? I'd never."

"Oh god..." she mumbles. "Behave yourself—"

Chuckling, I cover her lips with mine, immediately swallowing her protests. One swipe of my tongue and her reluctance dissolves. Then she's leaning toward me, too, and kissing me back eagerly. Next thing you know, we're making out like lunatics.

Cheers go up around the stadium. Would you look at that? I guess the fans approve.

I love that for them, but personally, I don't care about their opinions. Nicky is mine and that's all that matters. Bonus points that I get to show her off for all the world to see.

After years of settling for assholes who wanted to hide her away, it's my absolute greatest hobby to show Nicky off every chance I get. I bet that Simon idiot is in his smelly basement apartment somewhere, watching us smooching on live TV and eating his pathetic heart out. *Take that, bitch!*

When we pull apart, she smacks me on the shoulder. The people who are seated around us all laugh and give me a hard time.

An easy grin stretches across her face and I beam at my girl. It's my everyday mission to put that smile on her face.

I lean back in my seat and shout at the top of my lungs. "This is my super hot girlfriend!" I hold my arms up in the air, obnoxiously pointing down at Nicky with both hands. "She's the hottest, and she's all mine!"

The game whistle is what eventually brings everyone's attention back to the ice. Half-time is over, and it's now the third period of the hockey match.

"You're totally going to be in the headlines for that one," Nicky warns, patting her blushing cheeks.

I waggle my brows. "Which means you and your hot lips will be, too."

"Ronan, we've got to keep your reputation in tact in the off-season. I'm sure my bosses would agree."

I shrug. "Peach, you're the best thing that ever happened to my

reputation. You're the best thing that ever happened to *me*."

She turns all pink and she can't fight her smile. She whispers by my ear. "I can't believe I'm getting turned on right now. Keep talking like that and you're going to get me in so much trouble, Ronan Brighton."

"Good. We'll be in trouble together." I finally take a swig of that beer I bought.

"You're lucky you're so handsome. Why can't you just behave for once?" She pouts.

"Behaving is overrated," I complain.

Besides, I can be a good boy on the ice, and also be a bad boy in the bed. Or at least, that's what Nicky was telling me last night in our luxury hotel room when she presented me with a pair of handcuffs.

I won't tell you which one of us wore them.

"Easy for you to say. I'll be working late all next week trying to creatively spin this incident back in the team's favor."

"What? Why? You're in PR. Shouldn't it be a win to get us in the news?"

Nicky leans back, rolling her pretty eyes. "Do you know what PR even is?"

"Nope, I just do whatever you tell me." I wink at her.

She folds her arms across her pretty chest. "You never do what I tell you to do."

"Tell me to kiss you." I grin devilishly.

She grins back, her fake anger melting. "Kiss me."

So, I do. Happily. Greedily.

I may not have won the Stanley Cup, but this is way fucking better. My new favorite pastime revolves around rubbing everybody's face in the fact that I've got the hottest girlfriend around. Because she is.

I still don't know what the hell I did to get so lucky.

I'm pretty sure the moral of my story isn't '*get arrested, act like a shithead, and win the girl of your dreams*', but hey, it's hard to say that I'd go back and do things any differently if I could.

NICKY

“Hey Layla. Do you, uh, wanna dance?”

The conversation and laughter halt as all eyes at the table lift toward Archer

He’s expectantly hovering above us. His focus is pinned on his neighbor and he looks about as confident as a high school junior attending his very first winter formal.

Layla’s eyelashes flutter and she clears her throat, setting down her fork. “Yes, uh, sure.”

Daphne swoops in immediately, stealing Baby Sky out of his mother’s lap so she can go dance with the sexy lumberjack.

With shaky hands, Layla blots at her lips for pastry crumbs. Then she tries to deposit her napkin on the table but she misses by a mile, dropping it right to the floor.

Archer lunges for the napkin at the same time that Layla does, too. And their foreheads collide with a painful thud.

“Oh!”

“Ow!”

“Sorry!”

“Are you okay?”

“Maybe we should get you some ice.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

Archer helps Layla out of her chair and instead of hitting the dance floor, they clumsily make their way over to the bar in search of ice.

Emma’s already got her notebook out. A little grin dances on her face as

she's busy scribbling down the scene for future use.

"Archer and Layla are hopeless," Karli says with a shake of her head, and Mason just chuckles along.

The happy couple just tied the knot this afternoon in a small ceremony at a tiny church in Starlight Falls. Now, the combined Westbrook and Brighton families are at a cozy reception hall to celebrate the newlyweds. To celebrate family. To celebrate love.

As my eyes move around the room, I realize that we all have so much to be grateful for. Just being here all together is such a blessing in and of itself.

"That grandpa really has the gyrating move down, doesn't he?" Daphne points in the direction of Grammy and Sherwin who have been on the dance floor the whole time, boogying to Elvis' greatest hits.

"I know," Ronan's mom says, a concerned look on her face. "Is it safe for eighty-year-olds to twerk like that?"

"It's okay," I pat her hand. "Apparently, Sherwin is really into yoga. It keeps him flexible."

"Mmm. Lucky Grammy," Ronan mutters suggestively. He waggles his brows.

I nearly barf in my own mouth and die.

This is Grammy's first outing since her eye surgery. The operation was a complete success. Although her vision may never be twenty-twenty, it truly has improved so much. The doctors are very pleased with her recovery and gave her the okay to be here this evening.

My grandmother is definitely making the most of her newly improved eye health. Since we got here, she's been too busy dancing to pay the rest of us any mind.

Harry pushes a chair to the center of the room.

"Time for the garter toss!" he announces to all the wedding guests.

Mason leaps up eagerly like he's been waiting for this moment all night. My cousin is wearing the biggest smile ever as he leads his wife to the middle of the dance floor and dramatically seats her in the chair. Karli wiggles around on the seat with a semi-nervous smile on her face, trying to get comfortable in her pouffy wedding dress.

The DJ starts playing *Pony* by Ginuwine and Mason's grin goes even wider.

Let's just say Karli's brothers don't seem to share the enthusiasm.

Ronan makes a grunting sound in my ear.

Darius looks like he's about to pop a neck vein.

Felix is growing redder by the minute underneath the reception hall lights. Daphne soothingly strokes his chest while fighting back her own giggles.

"Oh boy..." I whisper, champagne glass in hand, ready to be entertained.

The beat of the music starts to build and the groom stands before his blushing bride, rubbing his hands together. Cash and Davis flank our cousin on either side and when Mason sticks his arms out by his sides, my idiot brothers step in, dramatically helping the groom remove his tuxedo jacket and rolling his shirt sleeves up to his elbows.

"Oh my god. They practiced choreography." Meghan laughs into her palms.

Mason continues his show, gyrating his hips, painfully off-beat. It's awful. Like watching a train wreck up close and in person. Karli is a blushing bride for sure, but for all the wrong reasons.

"Good thing he has a day job as a doctor," I laugh into Ronan's ear. "The stripper thing wouldn't work out too great for him."

"Good thing he has a day job as a doctor," Ronan echoes. "Humpty Dumpty might be able to put himself back together after we tear him apart, limb for limb."

Mason is blissfully oblivious to his brother-in-law's plot against his life.

He drops to all fours and Karli squeaks. *Poor girl.*

Things go downhill for the bride from there when the groom starts crawling across the dance floor. Then he does some kind of Magic Mike, slithering-on-the-ground move. And his head disappears beneath the hem of his wife's dress.

I think it's supposed to be a seductive move but it's mostly just highly traumatic for all involved.

Mason's father drops his head into his hands and sighs. "Where did I go wrong with that boy?"

It's utter chaos in the reception hall and the rest of us are going wild, cheering the newlyweds on. In the middle of the madness, I look around the room at all these people I love. And I just feel lucky.

This is what I wanted. More moments like this. Surrounded by family and smiles and love. This is why I left Chicago. And now, I've gotten even more happiness than I bargained for.

In the middle of all the upheaval over the past few months, I found my

soulmate.

Ronan is everything I always secretly wanted in a man but was too afraid to wish for, too afraid to ask for. I just couldn't bring myself to believe that a man like him could even exist. Now here he is, in my life, by my side, every single day. He is the most attentive, most supportive, most caring man I have ever met.

He was with me every step of the way as I ran around like a chicken with my head cut off, working with my realtor to close on my dream house in Honey Hill. Ronan was so incredibly patient throughout the whole process, making it known again and again that although he would rather have me move in at his house with him, he was completely supportive of my homeownership goals.

Well, I finally closed on the house last week and became the owner. Then I promptly found an amazing tenant and moved my butt in with Ronan in Starlight Falls. Now, I understand what it means to have my cake and eat it, too.

Loving Ronan Brighton is the best of both worlds. The best of *all* worlds.

We watch as Mason's head finally pops out from beneath the hem of Karli's wedding dress, her lacy white garter clenched in his teeth.

Ronan brings his lips to my ear. "I'm traumatized," he whispers.

I laugh. "Me, too."

Then it's time for all the bachelors to circle around for the traditional garter toss. Mason is in position at the front of the room, ready to throw the little scrap of lace into the crowd.

"This is my time to shine," Ronan says with a grin as he rises from his seat, smoothing down the front of his suit.

"Bring home the goods, baby," I cheer him on as he goes to join the few unmarried men now forming a semi-circle on the edge of the dance floor.

"Remember," the DJ drawls into the mic, "tradition says that whoever catches the bride's garter will be the next man to get married."

Ronan sends me a confident wink as he gets into position. *Can't wait to marry you*, he mouths to me.

I clutch my hands over my chest, swooning. I so believe in him. He's tall, he's strong, he's an athlete. He's got this.

I quickly size up his competition. Darius stands on the fringes of the semi-circle scowling and scrolling through his phone. The only reason he's even up there is because his mother physically pushed him into the mix.

Archer throws a quick glance at Layla and then he steps stealthily into the group of bachelors as well. He's big and lumberjack-y but that growing knot on his forehead seems to be putting him at a disadvantage. He looks a little unsteady on his feet.

It's looking good for Ronan. It really is.

But at the last second, Grammy's boyfriend shows up in the thick of the crowd. He confidently elbows the other competitors out of the way.

"Damn, he's a savage little thing," Nadia remarks.

I shrug. "Have you seen Grammy's butt? No surprise he wants to lock that down."

"Touché." Meghan nods along.

Mason crouches down, bending at the knees. Then he flings Karli's garter over his shoulder.

Out of nowhere, Stella goes racing across the dance floor. "Daddy, I'm bored. Can we have cake now?" the little girl asks.

Eyes bulging out of his head, Nolan takes off, trying to grab his daughter out of the way.

We all watch in slow motion as the garter soars through the air...and it lands on Nolan's head.

The single dad falls to his knees, shouting in horror, face lifted to the ceiling.

"Goddammit!" he sobs in pain. "Why'd it have to be me? Why me?!"

A moment later, Ronan plods back to the table, clearly disappointed. "Damn. I was really hoping I'd catch the garter."

"Oh, baby, it's okay. It's all superstition anyway," I say to him, trying to cheer him up.

"Of course it's real," Ronan insists. "And the worst part is, Nolan doesn't even want to get married. It's Inez or nobody for that guy."

I waggle my brows at him. "Bet you five dollars Nolan's perfect woman comes out of nowhere and saunters into his life. Sooner than later."

"Fine. I'll take that bet." Ronan locks his pinkie finger around mine.

I drape my arms around my pouty man. "Come dance with me."

"My fucking pleasure, gorgeous." He takes my hand.

We head to the dance floor, twirling around to some slow song I've heard a few times on the radio. Ronan runs his hands up and down my curves, whispering to me that I'm beautiful. I definitely feel beautiful in the sexy wine-colored lace dress he bought me a few months back. I saved it for a

special occasion just like this. I'm so glad I get to wear it for my man tonight.

"You really did want to catch that garter, huh?" I ask Ronan who still seems to be in a pouty mood.

"Of course I did," he says, smiling kindly at me and cupping my face. "Do you know how much I love you. I'll marry you in a heartbeat, the minute you'll let me, Nicky Westbrook. I can't wait to make you mine."

I press my mouth to his. "I love you, baby. And here's a secret." I lower my voice. "I'm already yours. I'm your Peach."

He rubs the tip of his nose against the tip of mine, whispering right back. "You're more than my Peach. You're my best friend, you're my only lover, and soon, you'll be my wife."

EPILOGUE

NICKY

Three years later...

“**L**et’s go number seventeen! Man on! Man on!” I scream, trying to warn Ronan that there’s a defender on his tail. I have no idea if he hears me, or if he hears the guy coming, but he cuts to the left, shoots, and scores before his opponent even knows what’s happening.

“YES! HELL YES!”

The Saints crowd around me erupts, all cheering for Captain Brighton.

“*My man, my man, my man!!!*” I yell at the top of my lungs, not caring how many side-eyes I get.

Karli throws her arms around me and gives me a squeeze, before launching herself at Mason for a hug. Nolan reaches over Stella’s head to give me a high-five. Felix sends me two enthusiastic thumbs up from where he’s seated halfway down my row. Ronan’s mom is already crying happy tears and Dr. Brighton is enthusiastically pumping a fist in the air.

The Brighton family cheering section is in full force and effect tonight. And we’re so proud of number seventeen.

I’m too wired to sit back down. So I just stay on my feet as the game continues. I’m in the stands watching my husband fly around the ice and compete in the biggest game of his career.

It took three long years for Ronan and the Saints to finally make it all the way to the finals, but he’s had his best season ever, and it’s paying off.

I couldn’t be more proud of the honorable man, the mature professional, and the downright superstar he’s grown into.

Tonight is game four of the best-of-seven series. Most of the time, these series go to five, six, or even seven games to figure out the winner. But so far, the Saints have swept the Grizzlies, and if we win this one tonight, we could actually finish this whole thing in just four games.

I'm so excited for him.

I'm so scared for me.

If Ronan scores another goal, and I keep jumping up and down like this, I'm likely to go into labor before this game's final buzzer sounds.

Being this late in my pregnancy, Ronan insisted that I shouldn't travel. My friends said I shouldn't travel. Hell, the doctor said I shouldn't travel.

Since when do I listen when other people tell me what to do?

I did what any rational, hockey-loving devoted wife would do.

I brought the doc along with me. Three of them, actually.

Mason, Felix *and* Ronan's dad.

In turn, they made arrangements with an obstetrician at a private hospital nearby just in case. All I know is, there was no way I was going to miss Ronan playing in the Cup Finals.

In this profession, an injury or a string of losses could come in between him ever making it back to the finals. It's a long season, and you just never know how it's going to end. Even the best teams get kicked out of the playoffs early on.

I already made it clear that if I go into early labor here, there'd better be a kit right here in the arena, because somebody's going to be delivering this baby *on-site*.

Ronan knows the deal.

So, I guess that's giving him a little extra motivation to score tonight.

Having gotten married less than a year ago, we're still trying to find balance in our busy schedules. It's tricky to coordinate my job with all his hockey games, but I try to go on the road as much as I can with him. Because once our baby gets here, I'm sure that will have to change. But for now, I'm here in the stadium cheering and yelling, "*My man, my man, my man!!!*"

The game is tied right now, 2-2. This has been the most evenly matched game of the series so far, and it's causing me to chew my already short nails off.

The Grizzlies have come out swinging tonight, and things are getting chippy too, as they do anything to keep themselves from losing the Cup.

In the last few minutes, Ronan sets Parker up with a beautiful pass, and

then his teammate slices his stick across the ice and scores the goal that puts the Saints in the lead.

The crowd goes absolutely nuts.

But the game isn't over yet. Even after that goal, the last minutes are as stressful as ever, and I find myself holding my breath as the defense manages to hold off the Grizzlies.

I don't look away for a single second.

And then there goes the final buzzer, blaring through the arena.

They did it! They really did it!

Ronan and the Saints just won the championship cup.

The emotional piñata I've been all day finally erupts. It all comes gushing out. I'm bawling. I'm yelling. I'm waddle-dancing in the stands.

Ronan skates over and pulls me onto the ice with him amid all the celebration and chaos.

"I'm so proud of you," I say, hiccuping around the words as he squeezes me tightly to his chest. "I love you."

"I love you, too, my Peach. None of this would have happened if it weren't for you." My husband drops to his knees, looking at me with tears in his eyes. He positions his mouth right against my oversized belly. "We did it, Baby Brighton. We did it. We did all of it. Your daddy just won the championship cup, and you're on the way, and I'm married to your super-hot mom. Every one of my dreams has come true." He places a dozen consecutive kisses on my tummy.

I'm so overwhelmed with emotion. So full of love, I feel like I might burst.

In fact, I think I just did.

I feel a warm rush of liquid soaking the legs of my very unflattering sweatpants.

My entire body freezes. "Oh my god, Ronan!"

"What is it, Peach?" From where he's kneeled, he looks up at me, oblivious.

"My water...My water just broke..."

He blinks rapidly, releasing my waist. "Your water?!"

"Yes! The baby's coming! Our baby's coming!" We draw attention from around the room, giving the crowd yet another reason to cheer.

Ronan carefully loops an arm through mine, guiding me off the ice as everyone quickly clears out of our path.

The entire arena is roaring, cheering us on as we head off to the delivery room. “BRIGHTON! BRIGHTON! BRIGHTON! BRIGHTON!”

Ronan kisses the side of my head and grins. “This is officially my favorite day ever!”

I clutch my husband’s arm and wheeze through an incoming contraction. “Every day’s my favorite with you, babe.”



THANK you for reading *Play Thing*. Yay! I hope you enjoyed Ronan and Nicky’s story. [Make sure to grab their spicy bonus epilogue.](#)

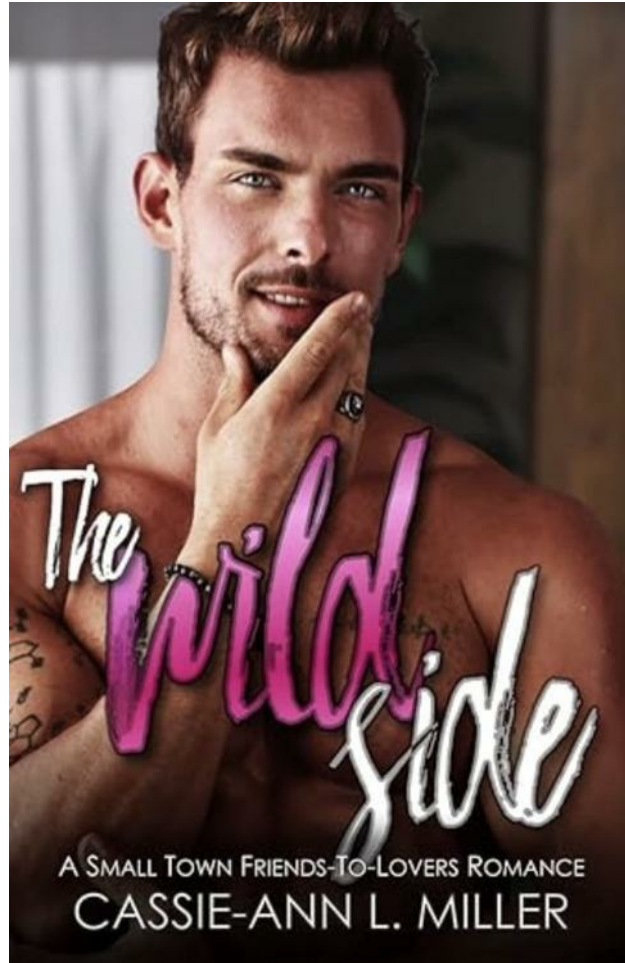
You guessed it—Nolan’s up next! Poor guy. Stay tuned for the next Brighton Family story coming in summer 2024!

SO, WHAT TO READ NOW?

Want more Nicky Westbrook in your life? I've got you covered. Nicky appears in [The Wild Side \(The Wild Westbrooks book 1\)](#) (Cash and Meghan's story).

If you love a steamy and hilarious rom com about a grumpy workaholic billionaire and the one woman who can dig up his soft side—his sunshine-y best friend who scribbled a marriage pact with nine years ago, [The Wild Side](#) is for you.

Cash and Meghan's sizzling chemistry will short-circuit your kindle. (It's free in Kindle Unlimited.)



Excerpt
Cash

I PUSH BACK the cuff of my custom-tailored dress shirt and glare down at the face of my Patek Philippe watch.

Fuck, I'm running late. Very late.

Across the massive mahogany conference table, a bunch of disgruntled corporate executives slam around their whiskey glasses and grumble about having wasted their Wednesday afternoon.

Tough luck.

Today's negotiations were a complete bust but that's not my problem. If those assholes had approached this deal in good faith, we could have easily struck a mutually-beneficial agreement. Instead, they decided to be stingy.

So, no deal.

I know what my time is worth and I know what Westbrook Wealth Management brings to the table. I refuse to do business with a group of slick-haired swindlers trying to lowball me.

In one seamless movement, I briskly glide out of my executive chair and give them a curt nod. "Gentlemen." *And I use that term lightly.*

I'm unapologetic as I leave the men to their whining and exit the conference room. Nicky is hot on my heels, an iPad and a slim file folder neatly gripped in her manicured hands.

"Traffic is gonna be a mess at this time of day, and you still have to swing by the bakery," she reminds me as we hustle down the carpeted hallway back toward my corner office.

Through the gleaming floor-to-ceiling windows, I can see the sun diving behind the skyscrapers embellishing the Chicago skyline. The clouds are dark and thick.

That's not a good sign.

I throw her a scowl over my shoulder. "You're not helping."

She shrugs, struggling to keep pace with my long strides. "I told you I could have gone to the bakery for you."

"And I told *you* I'd handle it myself."

"The CFO of the city's fastest growing wealth management company fetching a birthday cake from a bakery halfway across town—on the company dime, no less. Yeah, that's fiscally efficient," she bites, unfazed by talking back to her boss.

"The icing gets smushed every single time you go to the bakery."

"That was *one* time."

"Every time, Nicky. Every time."

Agnes from Human Resources looks up from her fax machine and catches my eye. She gives me a grandmotherly smile. "Good luck tonight, Cash. If everything goes according to plan, next time I see you, you could be a married man!"

I crinkle my brow. *Uh...um, huh?*

Nicky snickers into her sleeve.

I turn my glare on her. "Do I even want to know what garbage the office

rumor mill is spewing today?”

She flinches. “Probably not.”

I shrug it off. I so don’t have the time to deal with this.

“Were the balloons delivered?” I demand as we turn a corner down another long, busy hallway.

“For the seventeenth time, yes, the balloons were delivered. They’re in your office.” She pauses. “I still say you should go with roses. Red roses. Nothing says I’m here to collect my mail-order bride like red roses.” The little devil smirks.

My younger sister has never shied away from pushing my buttons. I hired her as an intern here a few weeks back. More and more, I’m regretting that decision.

“She is not my mail-order bride.”

“What do you want to call her?”

“She’s my friend,” I state as we enter my office.

And—whoa!—the balloons are here. A *lot* of them. I may have gone a bit overboard with my order. I have to twist my body like a contortionist just to get around my desk.

Nicky sets the tablet and folder on the edge of my neatly-organized wood and chrome tabletop. “Your friend who you promised you’d marry if she was still single at age thirty. Newsflash, boss—as of today, she’s officially age thirty. Time to redeem your marriage pact,” she sings.

“Jeez—that was a stupid joke Meghan and I made. A million years ago. You should quit spreading rumors about your superiors if you want to keep your job here. There is no marriage pact.”

I check the time again. Shit. I should have hit the road hours ago.

“So I’m supposed to believe that you’re driving the next six hours to deliver a birthday cake to a friend?”

“You can believe whatever you want to believe, Nicky,” I deadpan, growing tired of this little chit chat, especially when I’m running so late.

“Admit it—at night, you lie awake thinking about wedded bliss with Meghan Hutchins.”

“At night, I lie awake thinking about how much happier my life will be once I fire you.”

My sister dramatically throws her head back and emits a heavy sigh. “You’re twenty-nine years old, Cassius. You can admit to having a crush on a girl.”

Sylvester from accounting pokes his head into my office, purple satin shirt gleaming and green polka dot tie swinging. He props a hip against the doorjamb and folds his arms across his chest. “Ooh! What’d I miss? Cash’s off to do that whole arranged marriage thing? So fricking hot.” He fans his cheeks and wiggles his narrow shoulders.

I telepathically shoot eye-daggers at his face.

He clams up and skitters off down the hallway.

Nicky titters under her breath. I snarl and narrow my eyes at her.

“Sorry,” she mumbles.

She’s not sorry.

Grabbing my dry cleaning and the balloons, I head for the door. On the way to the elevator, I nearly run head on into my father who’s wandering out of the executive break room, dairy-loaded bagel in hand.

“Daddy, lay off the cream cheese, would you?” Nicky chides in a low voice. “Remember what the doctor said.”

He looks like he might argue but we all know he’s mush in Nicky’s hands. Dad may be a hardass with my brothers and me, but my sister can get him to do practically anything she wants.

“Can’t catch a break around this place,” the old man grouses. He takes one big bite out of his afternoon treat and dumps the rest into the recycling bin under someone’s desk. He turns a grave expression toward me. “So the Blanchet Trust negotiations fell through this afternoon?”

“Yep.” Avoiding eye contact, I stab the elevator button.

I can feel him staring at the side of my head. “Well, that’s a shame...” he says carefully.

Nonchalant as fuck, I shrug. “You win some, you lose some.”

The elevator arrives and thankfully, it’s empty. But if I thought I’d get rid of my meddling family members so easily, I was wrong. My father and sister climb onto the lift right along with me and my three thousand helium-filled balloons.

“I reviewed the terms the company proposed,” Dad says, craning his neck around the balloons to catch my eyes. “We could have made a few concessions. At least, for the sake of closing the deal.”

I turn and stare at the elevator panel. I prod the ‘ground floor’ button half a dozen times. Can this thing move any slower?

“Those penny-pinching assholes were trying to undervalue us, trying to cut down our portfolio management fees. I won’t stand for it,” I snarl. “I’m

confident that we can quadruple their money in the next eighteen months. But I won't put in all that work for free. They have to make it worth my while."

I scowl at him. He scowls at me.

"Maybe you could have taken them out for drinks?" Nicky intervenes oh-so-helpfully, trying to play peacemaker. "You might have gotten them to loosen up a bit, y'know, in a more social setting."

My voice goes even rougher as my annoyance continues to rise. "Our company's reputation speaks for itself. I don't have time to pander to time-wasters who aren't serious about what they want. I don't have to kiss anyone's ass."

I set up a firm, un-fuck-with-able boundary long ago—whoever has the nerve to demand even a moment of my precious time had better make it worth my while. I'm a busy man and there aren't enough hours in the day for bullshit.

"Jeez. Don't bite my head off." Nicky throws her palms up in surrender. "It was just a suggestion. Since the whole stubborn-grumpy-asshole vibe doesn't seem to be getting you anywhere." She turns to our father. "What's that Grammy always says about catching flies with honey instead of vinegar?"

Dad's face goes red and daggers of frustration shoot from his eyes. "You know how your brother is," he says to Nicky like I'm not standing right here. "Set in his ways. You can't convince him of anything." He stomps a foot.

Lately, my father and I have been arguing a lot. Mainly about strategies for growing the company. We hardly ever see eye to eye on the topic.

I should be in charge. He should be retired by now.

I square my shoulders, ready to go to war with him—as usual—but the hostility in the elevator dissipates when he sways a little on his feet. A slight frown ripples across his forehead. He lowers his face and pinches the bridge of his nose.

Nicky and I exchange a look. I open my mouth to say something, to tell Dad that he can't keep getting himself worked up this way. And beyond that, it's damn time for him to slow down. But my sister subtly shakes her head, reminding me that now isn't the time to get into it.

The elevator arrives on the ground floor. I wrestle my balloons out the door and try to hurry off with a quick goodbye, but my dad hustles on right alongside me, beating away the balloons that smack him in the forehead.

A teasing grin takes over his weathered face. "So...off to cash in your

marriage voucher, huh?”

I groan. “Does everybody in this office just sit around gossiping about my non-existent love life?” With my free hand, I loosen the knot of my tie.

“Not everybody,” Nicky quips. “You might find someone in the mailroom who doesn’t—no, wait—don’t they have that bet going on downstairs?”

Dad smirks. “Yeah, I put fifty bucks in the pot.”

“Whaaat?! I only put in a twenty!” Nicky groans. “The pay sucks around here. I’m gonna have to skip a couple lattes this week to up my bet.”

I point a glare at her. “Your smug little attitude won’t serve you well in the unemployment line, Nicky.”

Dad throws an arm around my sister’s shoulder. “Don’t worry, honey. We’ll get HR to check the box next to ‘hurt Cash’s feelings’. Then you can come work in my office, where you’ll be appreciated.”

“Aww, thanks, Dad!” The little brat beams and my own father high-fives her. “By the way, do I get a pay raise?”

Dad thoughtfully considers it.

“Nepotism will be the downfall of this place,” I hiss under my breath.

Nicky ruefully shakes her head. “Y’see? There goes the pot calling the kettle black again.”

That’s where she’s wrong. My rise in the ranks of this company has not been a free ride. My father may be the one who founded WWM but I’ve sure as hell paid my dues, working my ass off all the way up the ladder. And I plan to keep climbing. I have big goals for the firm’s future. I just need to get Dad to see the vision I see.

That’s a discussion for some other time, though. I snap out a gruff response instead of prolonging this pointless argument. “Stuff it. Both of you. Or I’m not coming back.”

Stopped in the middle of the lobby, my father feigns shock, slapping his palms to both sides of his whiskered face. “Oh no! How ever will you find purpose and meaning in your life if you aren’t chained to your desk eighteen hours a day, six days a week? Might you actually find a hobby or two to revolve your life around?”

Dad and Nicky throw their heads back with laughter.

I have no time for their bullshit. So I keep walking. Straight for the door.

Richard, the security guy, offers me a grave salute as I stroll past the front desk. “Good luck with all that arranged marriage stuff tonight, Cash.”

Goddamn.

I don't stop shaking my head as I'm fleeing the building, desperate to get out of the city before the traffic holds me captive for the night. After a quick stop at the bakery, I hit the highway.

The worst part of the six-hour road trip is being left alone with my thoughts. Thoughts that keep creeping in, trying to hijack my lifelong friendship, and take it to places that terrify me. Thoughts I find myself battling to push aside for every one of the next five-hundred plus miles.

The further I drive from the safety of Chicago, the more tied up I get in my imagination. I've entertained the idea of marriage and kids, I guess. But it's always been something out there in the distant future. Far down the line. Something I could delay just a little bit longer. Something for some other day. But with each mile I drive, that landmark seems closer and closer on the horizon. Too close. It's terrifying.

I snap out of my introspection as I swerve onto my exit. Through the drizzle hitting my windshield, I glance up at a large, familiar highway sign looming above the roadway.

Welcome to Honey Hill, Iowa.

A strong gust of wind rattles the crooked sign as I drive past it, entering my sleepy hometown. I flick my indicator and make a quick right turn. I pull into the local gas station to fill my tank. A sense of nostalgia wraps around me. So many memories in this place.

In a hurry, I hop out and start fueling up. No fancy electric car for me. I drive a sleek luxury vehicle that demands premium gasoline every few hundred miles. Totally worth it.

While I'm pumping my gas, my phone beeps. It's a text message from my sister-in-law. Well, technically, my ex-sister-in-law but as far as I'm concerned, Alana is still family.

Alana: The weather's looking pretty bad and it's starting to get late. Are you sure you're coming?

I glance up at the darkened sky, inhaling the rain-scented air. I'm hoping to make it to my destination before it starts coming down for real, but my chances are looking slim.

Me: For the millionth time—yes, I'm coming

Alana: Ok

Alana: I'm getting nervous. I just don't want her to be disappointed

Me: I won't disappoint her

Never. She's my best friend in the world, dammit.

Me: Stop worrying

I hurry inside the gas station's convenience store, using the restroom then browsing the sad-looking shelves and trying to decide whether I should grab anything else for Meghan.

I pause in the meager wine section and pick up a bottle of red that looks decent. I grab some soda, too, in case she's not in the mood to drink alcohol tonight. I march dutifully past the dozen different brands of condoms, willing myself not to even take a peek. But when I'm halfway down the aisle, something draws my eyes back to the condom display.

Heat throbs in my crotch. Damn. It's been a while.

Stop it, asshole.

Meghan is my friend, and I don't want to show up and make things weird with her tonight, especially on her thirtieth birthday.

I want to simply enjoy catching up. Hanging out together. Like always. Like friends.

It's just everyone else messing with my head, and making me lose my cool.

Have I ever imagined sex with Meghan? Sure. Yes. A time or two. Or twenty...thousand. I mean, Meghan's *hot*.

But I'm no fool. I'd never compromise our friendship just for a chance to get in her pants. Finding a woman to have meaningless sex with is relatively easy. If I really want to get laid, I don't have to try that hard. But a friendship like the one I have with Meghan? That's one in a billion. I could never put a price tag on it. And there's no way I'm doing anything to put it in jeopardy.

Giggles and shrieks from the front of the store grab my attention. As I approach the checkout, I see three girls in gas station uniforms eyeballing my Audi out the window.

Shit—the rain is already coming down heavier than when I walked in.

The girl with the short red ponytail winks at me as I set down my goods on the counter. “Nice ride, mister.”

I scan the chocolate selection in front of the register, too distracted by my plans for tonight to pay this girl the attention she's so clearly seeking. “Thanks,” I mutter, grabbing a bag of gas station brand peanut butter cups. Meghan's favorite.

A girl with mischievous eyes and straight black hair leans across the counter, exposing her cleavage. “Need some company tonight?” She smiles

at me.

I don't bother to smile back.

The tallest of the girls walks up, slinging an arm over each of her friends. She attempts to sweeten the deal. "If they say three's a crowd, then *four* must be the magic number." She counts each of us in turn with subtle flicks of her chin.

Wow. Classy.

Thankfully, the suggestive comments come to a halt when their manager pops out of the back room holding a clip board. She rolls her eyes at her workers. "He has a girlfriend, you thirsty vultures." The woman turns a tired smile at me. "Hey, Cash."

"Hey." I recognize her as someone I went to high school with. For the life of me, I can never remember her name.

"You have a girlfriend?" The redhead pouts in my direction.

The manager answers for me. "Yes. Meghan. The cute vet technician who always comes in here. Everybody in town knows that."

Um...everybody in town knows that? Looks like the rumors about my love life extend well beyond the Chicago city limits.

Three pairs of eager eyes stare at me, waiting for my corroboration.

"Yeah," I confirm. Just to get these thirsty girls off my back. Meanwhile, inside my head I'm repeating my decade-old mantra. *Best friend, not girlfriend. Best friend.*

"Aww. That's too bad," the black-haired girl chirps with a fake pout. "Your girlfriend is so lucky." She looks ready to throw in the towel. Thank god.

"Well, don't keep her waiting." The redhead grins, shooing me toward the door. "Go! Go!"

I grumble a 'good night' and, on that, I rush out of the gas station into what is now a freaking downpour. The sky is black and the town has already gone quiet for the night. It's late as fuck.

My cheap plastic bags crinkle obnoxiously when I drop my haul onto my passenger seat. I yank open my glovebox and shove my receipt inside. Sure as hell I'm expensing this trip, whether the assholes in accounting like it or not.

As I'm shutting the glove compartment, an older, faded slip of paper flutters to the floor. I swallow and my throat knots hard as I pick it up. I let my eyes skim over the words jotted across the nine and a half year old scrap

of paper, the signatures scribbled in sloppy, familiar handwriting.

On this twenty-fifth day of May, Cassius Westbrook and Meghan Hutchins hereby agree that if neither of them are married by the time they turn age thirty, they shall marry one another.

Putting the old receipt back where I found it, I forcibly shove those memories aside. I slam the box shut and pull out of the gas station with my wipers swishing rain left and right.

Just my friend. Meghan Hutchins is just my friend.

Although the whole world seems to be convinced otherwise.

Meghan

“Y’KNOW, today isn’t *that* bad,” I tighten my towel around my boobs and lift open the top of the washing machine. “Yes, it’s my thirtieth birthday. And yes, I’m spending it doing my laundry—alone—but who am I to expect the world to stop spinning and throw me a pity party, y’know?”

I peer down into the hollow barrel of my washing machine. A full load of pink-tinted blouses stare back at me.

Those blouses used to be white.

Twenty-three minutes ago.

Shit—did I accidentally drop a red sock in there or something?

Rising onto my tiptoes, I lean down and dig through the damp laundry in search of the errant article of clothing responsible for ruining half my wardrobe. “What I’m saying is, life is all about choices. And I choose to be grateful,” I declare as I pick the strawberry-patterned granny panties I wore to work this morning out of the load of discolored blouses. “I’m grateful for this house I bought all on my own. And for a job I love. And for you...”

Feeling a genuine flutter of happiness in my heart, I pause to tickle behind the ear of the five-pound ball of fur and bones curled up atop the dryer. Captain Ginger lazily opens one amber eye to squint vacantly at me.

“As far as birthdays go, this one isn’t a *total* dud...right?”

The grumpy bastard lifts his little orange paw and smacks my hand away from his ear.

“Hey!” I chide softly. “Don’t be mean to me. I’m going through a ‘thing’ right now. I could use some emotional support.”

I pour in a bit of detergent and restart the washing machine, hoping to rinse the red dye out of my blouses. While the barrel fills with water, I turn around to scoop up the basket of tank tops, gym bras and yoga pants I just pulled out of the dryer. I find the haughty white Persian cat stretched out across the top of my clean clothes.

Well, no wonder I’m always covered in cat hair.

“Cotton Ball! You’re not supposed to be there and you know it.” I gently shoo her off and she hops down to her feet in that regal way of hers, cursing at me the whole time.

These two are a pair of entitled, little brats. Too bad they’re so damn adorable. And I’m getting *way* more attached to them than I should.

With my phone clutched securely in my palm, I pad up the stairs, laundry basket tucked under my arm.

“As I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted, today hasn’t been *entirely* lame. Alana took me out for lunch earlier, and she splurged on a huge piece of double chocolate cake. Isn’t she sweet?” I grin at the thought of my lifelong bestie. “Anyway, we didn’t come close to finishing the cake, so I’ve got at least one thing sitting in the fridge to look forward to later. Then, Emma and Ziggy promised to take me out this weekend, so I’ll count that as another ‘something’ to look forward to.”

I enter my bedroom, Captain Ginger and Cotton Ball tangling around my ankles.

These cats have been extra, extra clingy tonight. Which is a tad creepy, because the orange one usually stays hidden all day, only coming out to attack my socked feet while I get ready for bed.

But tonight, it’s like they’re rubbing up against my legs, mewling at me, and saying, “We understand you’re thirty now and still all alone. Adopt us and we’ll upgrade you from lonely bachelorette to crazy cat lady.”

“I’m onto you,” I murmur to them as I lower to the edge of my bed with a bottle of moisturizer in hand.

Most of my recent birthdays have been spent with my girlfriends, but this year, it seems that everyone has something more important to do. Alana, Ziggy, Emma—hell even the woman who birthed me—all had excuses for why they couldn’t celebrate with me tonight.

I’ve been trying to brush it off, to not be offended, reminding myself that

the girls all have their own lives to live with their own things happening. Especially on a week night.

But it sure doesn't help that what was promising to be a sunny spring day somehow rolled into a rainy and miserable night. I thought I could at least treat myself to a solo picnic on my back patio, but apparently the weather gods were like "Nope, we've got other plans, too."

I've been anticipating this day with mild to moderate levels of dread for pretty much the last three years. But now that it's here and has proven more uneventful than a trip to the eye doctor, I'm starting to wonder why I've been psyching myself out all this time.

My phone dings on the mattress next to me and I pounce on it. But disappointment sweeps over my body like a wave when I see it's just a few of the girls from Corri's hair salon, sending me a string of silly celebratory gifs.

Earlier, my friend Minka from Sin Valley sent me the most perfect birthday serenade featuring her rockstar husband, Declan, and their adorable babbling toddler, Melody. I smile to myself as I watch the video again.

Throughout the day, my phone's been buzzing with texts and calls from all my close friends and relatives, wishing me a happy day.

...Except for one person. Cash.

Which, for the life of me, doesn't make any sense. Cash has never, ever missed a single birthday. If we couldn't see each other in person, he's always called. The birthday calls have been the more frequent mode of celebration in recent years since he lives so far away. But this year? Nothing. Dead silence.

I'm surprised by how much that stings.

Yeah, I can gloss over all my other disappointments and make excuses for everyone else who has let me down today. But knowing that one of my closest friends completely forgot about me this year—on such a special birthday, too—that stings.

Right now, I feel anything but special.

After slathering my skin with lotion, I rise from the edge of my bed and drop the towel. I take in my reflection, examining what I'm workin' with.

"I'm kind of cute...right?" I mumble to my furry companions. "Totally. Yeah, definitely...Um, I think."

My hips are rounder than they were this time last year. I've gained a few pounds, for sure. But whatever. I have curves for days. And all the important stuff is still *relatively* tight and perky—for the most part—so I'm taking that as a good sign.

My blonde curls are a frizzy mess after my shower and without makeup on, I'd probably get carded at the liquor store. But what bothers me most is the flatness in my blue eyes tonight.

As much as it goes against my usual happy-go-lucky philosophy, the truth is, tonight, I'm sad. And I don't like it.

"It *could* be worse," I tell the cats who are now sprawled on my comforter. "I mean—I once heard this story about some poor woman who discovered a gray hair in her pubes *right before* she turned the big three-oh." I whisper, feeling a shudder of sympathy move through me. "Can you even imagine that?! At least I didn't find a grey hair in my bush today. There. Something else to be grateful for."

I'm searching for the silver lining. It's a full-blown search party over here.

I'm not entirely averse to aging or anything. I guess a part of me just hoped to have accomplished more by the time I hit this big milestone.

I would have loved to be married by now. And to have a bunch of kids running around the house, driving me crazy. Or at least to have a steady boyfriend to pop a bottle of cheap champagne with. With each passing birthday, it seems like Mom was right after all—the women in our family are cursed. We don't get happy endings.

Deciding not to feel sorry for myself, I dig through the basket of clean clothes and pull on some underwear along with my favorite yoga pants and a fresh tank top. I go down to the kitchen, rummage around in the fridge and put together a small dinner for me and my two foster cats.

I slap together a toasted sandwich for myself out of yesterday's grilled chicken and plop a couple cans of smoked salmon into the cats' dishes. My sandwich doesn't look too great, and I'm completely aware that the cats are feasting like royalty while I'm scraping together scraps from my fridge.

Getting out my leftover lunch cake, I flip it open and stab my fork through the frosting, deciding that it's *my* day. If I wanna eat my dessert before dinner, then to hell with societal rules.

I pour myself a glass of wine, not even bothering to open up the nice bottle. I just keep working on the bottle I opened last weekend. Seems like a waste to have *two* half empty bottles open at the same time on what's turning out to be a regular ol' Wednesday evening.

As I crunch into the mini chocolate chips hiding in the cake, my mind drifts back to one evening in particular. "Wanna hear something funny?" I

ask Cotton Ball and Captain Ginger as I lean a hip against the kitchen counter. “Me and Cash made a marriage pact once. It was the night of his brother Davis’s wedding to your aunt Alana. At the wedding reception, the guy I was dating started making out with some random stranger and left me standing there like a total fool. Cash, in an attempt to make me feel better about myself, swooped in to the rescue and promised that if I was still single on this very day—my thirtieth birthday—he would marry me.” I chuckle wryly to myself. “It was all just a joke, though. I never *actually* expected him to just show up here and whisk me off to the altar.”

Of course not.

Cash Westbrook is now the filthy rich CFO of one of the biggest financial firms in Chicago. He’s gorgeous. He’s brilliant. He has multiple degrees in business and finance from an ivy league institution and a list of accomplishments a mile long.

He’s the perfect man, who has an unlimited pick from the most beautiful women in the country. *Of course* he’s forgotten all about a silly promise he made to me nine and a half years ago. And on the off chance he didn’t forget, it’d only be something he’d laugh about now. A funny story to tell his picture-perfect future wife someday.

I’d like to say I’ve completely forgotten about that marriage pact, too, but since that day, the contract scribbled onto the back of that gas station receipt has been there, dangling in the back of my mind like the lyrics to my favorite childhood song.

I take a small sip of my wine. “Cash is an incredible person. A bit of a grumpy jerk sometimes, but still an incredible person. And I’m so proud to call him my best friend. But that’s all he’ll ever be in my life.”

A dark laugh escapes when I realize I’m having a full-blown conversation with my foster cats, only cementing my own looney future.

God, it’s true. I’m officially the cat lady.

Okay, get yourself together, Megs. The world doesn’t owe you anything. You’ve gotta just be grateful for what you have, right?

I’m not usually like this. I’m usually optimistic and upbeat. Here’s the way I see it—there are two types of people in the world. Those who complain that they can’t see the sunshine through the rainclouds. And those who choose to *be* the sunshine. Usually, I choose to be the sunshine. Usually. At the moment, I’m sort of struggling to wade my way through these rainclouds.

Dinner forgotten, I split up my unappealing sandwich and feed that to the

cats, too. All the while, my phone is never far away. Though I know the day is over, and I've been long forgotten, I can't help but hold out hope for a call.

Stuffing the last bite of cake into my face, I drift to the darkened front window where sheets of rain fall and distort my view of the neighborhood.

My eyes catch on movement at the house across the street. Jasper and his friends are having another party over there. Well, at least *somebody's* having fun tonight.

Cash owns that house. He bought it years ago when my former neighbors left town and put it up for sale. When I questioned why in the world he'd buy a house in Honey Hill, when he never plans to move back home, he told me that you could never have too much real estate in your portfolio.

Spoken like a true business tycoon.

Except now, his freeloading younger brother Jasper is living there, turning the quiet home into his personal playboy bachelor pad, since Cash rarely comes home anymore.

The cats finish their multi-course meal, and we end up snuggling on the couch. I flip on the TV and browse my way to the National Geographic Channel.

I glance at my phone again. Still nothing. No missed calls. Not even a text.

It just doesn't make sense how after all these years that he'd forget.

Unless...

Unless he remembers *exactly* what today is and is freaked out that I'm going to hold him to our silly nuptial contract.

Oh my gosh—that's even more embarrassing. Does he really think I'm *that* pathetic? Now, all I want is to dig a hole in my back yard and hide out in it for the rest of my miserable days.

A documentary on tropical marine life plays as I distractedly pet the cats and scroll through my favorite clothing sites on my laptop.

I promised myself that I'd get my online shopping habit under control. But when I come across a T-shirt that says something about preferring to sleep next to a self-absorbed asshole that purrs instead of one who talks, I suddenly can't resist treating myself to a birthday gift tonight.

Within a few clicks, I'm handing over my credit card information. And then I'm staring at a confirmation email ensuring me that the quirky T-shirt is on its way to my address. To fill the gaping emptiness in my life.

Yes, I'm being dramatic. I know.

As the cats both purr their contentment, I struggle to accept my single cat lady status. If this is the best part of my whole day, what does that say about my future? Hell, I'm only thirty. If I'm around seventy more years, well... I'm not even willing to do the math. That's a lot of cats, and a lot of lonely nights.

A sudden strike of lightning and a crack of thunder sends the cats scampering off my lap and fleeing the room, desperate to save themselves.

Welp. That just confirms how much they care about their foster mom.

I might as well turn in for the night and stop the cats from shredding my bedding. But before I make it to the hall, a loud knock on my front door makes me jump. With a frown, I make my way across the living room and cautiously open the door.

I gasp.

A grumpy-faced Cash Westbrook is standing there, soaked to the bone and out of breath, looking as though he just finished a triathlon in a freaking downpour. His expensive shirt is drenched and plastered to his broad, strong chest. He has an oversized bouquet of balloons, a dripping wet cake box and a bunch of soggy plastic bags clutched in one of his enclosed fists.

My mouth flops open and closed several times as I struggle for what to say.

He swipes at the clump of wet hair matted to his forehead. He thrusts his dripping wet offering at me with a scowl. "Happy birthday, Buttercup."

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Standalone Novels

Holiday Hookup with the Rockstar

Happy New You

DIRTY CAMEOS AND EASTER EGGS

I'm an absolute sucker for 'easter eggs' and they're scattered all throughout *Play Thing*.

If you've read any of my older books, you may have noticed a few familiar faces, quotes and objects making an appearance in *Play Thing*. If you're new to my universe, here's a little guide to help you figure out who's who and what's what.

THE **WILD WESTBROOKS Series** is a sexy rom-com series set in Honey Hill which is a neighboring town to Starlight Falls.

Cash and Meghan Westbrook - [The Wild Side](#)

Jasper and Emma Westbrook - [The Wild One](#)

Harry and Nadia Westbrook - [The Wild Card](#)

Davis and Alana Westbrook - [The Wild Fire](#)

THE **DIRTY SUBURBS Series** is a sexy rom-com series set in Reyfield which is a neighboring town to Starlight Falls.

Nolan's car has been featured in so many of my books (and has been passed around to so many different owners) but, originally, it showed up as Isla's car in [Dirty Stranger](#)

Reuben Barre - [Dirty Stranger](#)

Raphael Silver - [Dirty Silver](#)

THE **PLAYBOYS of Sin Valley** is a sexy rom-com series set in Sin Valley which is a neighboring town to Starlight Falls.

Liam Kline - [Playing Pretend](#)

THE **BLUE COLLAR Bachelors Series** is a sexy rom-com series set in Copper Heights which is a neighboring town to Starlight Falls.

King Xavier of Ridgeland - [Rich Boy](#)

THE **BAD BOYS in Love Series** is a sexy rom-com series set in Crescent Harbor which is a neighboring town to Starlight Falls.

Cannon Kingston - [Mister Billions](#)



Wanna hang out? You can find me here:

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[Facebook page](#)

[Dirty Folks: Facebook reader group](#)

[Bookbub](#)