

AMAZON ORIGINAL STORIES

HAPPY
NEW YEAR

a novella

same time next year

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

TESSA BAILEY

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Published by Amazon Original Stories, Seattle
www.apub.com

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ISBN-13: 9781662517914 (digital)

Cover design and illustration by Elizabeth Turner Stokes

Chapter One

BRITTA

New Year's Eve 2023

“**T**hat table isn’t strong enough to hold three people!” I shout over the sound of fireworks bursting outside, directly above the harbor. A dancing trio of ladies in sequined dresses is putting way too much trust in an ancient piece of furniture, the stems of their high heels dangerously close to the edge. And somehow, their safety is the least of my concerns.

Sluggers is slammed. I can’t sling beers and shots fast enough.

Despite the handwritten sign I posted on the door, people continue to bring lit sparklers inside the bar. It will be a miracle if we don’t get shut down by the fire marshal. The glittery gold garland I hung in a zigzag pattern across the bar in the name of being festive is now being used for an impromptu game of tug-of-war. This year is definitely going out with a bang.

An hour ago, the volume level went from merely loud to earsplitting when the hockey boys arrived, fresh from a win. They seated themselves at one of the dented, wobbling picnic tables at the back of the establishment, but despite their location, they’ve managed to take over the entire bar, as usual. Out of the corner of my eye, I witness an arm wrestling contest, a violent game of beer pong, and the goalie, Riggs, making out with a girl who I’m dead certain arrived with another guy.

Ladies and gentlemen, our local, beloved hockey team: the Bridgeport Bandits.

They might be amateur players, but they’re professional partiers.

I wince over the sound of the belching competition that is literally drowning out the music and pour a round of shots for a group of college

students wearing sparkly gold glasses shaped like 2024. I ring them up. Clean up a spilled pint of Guinness. Uncap three Coors Lights and slide them down the bar, which is a risk, because the warped wood has seen better days. Then I jog for the kitchen, where the cook has been slapping the bell for a full five minutes. I'm relieved when I see the food order is up for the Bandits, however, because at least it will distract them from their mayhem.

Maybe.

I load down my arms with plates and pray for no mishaps, walking through Sluggers like it's a field of land mines, dodging dancing girls and rowdy guys. There is no easy journey from point A to point B on a busy night—let alone a wild New Year's Eve—and no one can hear me yell *excuse me* over the sound of Greta Van Fleet pumping through the stereo.

At least, until Sumner Mayfield wades through the cyclone of bodies and quietly pushes the crowd out of my way, grunting to signal me forward. I would compare him to a solemn priest walking through a frenzied battle, except that Sumner is a scary-ass giant with shoulders that are wider than I am tall. He's currently sporting bandages over the bridge of his nose and over his right brow, hints of blood seeping through. I've watched him play hockey on our local public access channel—there is nothing priestly about Sumner.

On the ice at least.

Out here in the real world, he is the calmly intense guy on the team. Even now, when customers turn to protest his intervention, Sumner's soulful brown eyes hold a distinctly Canadian apology, and obviously, the patrons drop their protests as soon as they get a load of his otherworldly physique.

"Thanks, Sumner," I say, winking at him.

Just so I can watch that blush ride up the thick cords of his neck.

They match the ones on his forearms. Not that I've been *studying* him.

He's simply impossible to ignore, that's all.

"Welcome," he rumbles, nodding at the plates on my arms. "Take some of those?"

"If you take one, the rest of them will fall like dominoes." His chin dips, as though he's disappointed that he can't do anything more to help me. "You've fulfilled your duty, big guy. Now sit down and relax."

As I'm passing the defenseman, I lift onto my toes and plant a kiss on his whiskered cheek, sending the Bandits into an absolute frenzy of table banging and paper-horn blowing. I shake my head at them in reproof, but I'm smiling. Because as obnoxious as these guys can be, I adore them—and I

adore one of them more than all the others.

Because he's my half brother, Bryce.

"Hey, sis," shouts Bryce over the noise, while I'm setting down his triple cheeseburger in front of him. "Busy night."

"The busiest," I call back, even though we're practically face to face. "The waitress called in sick, but I'm pretty sure I saw her on television at the ball drop in Times Square. My barback is arguing with his boyfriend in the parking lot. The cook plots a new way to kill me every time I let food sit in the window for longer than ten seconds. We're out of house whiskey. I'm officially in the weeds, but it should die down once midnight rolls around."

"Cool. You got a second to talk, though?"

I sputter. "Did you just hear *anything* I said?"

He doesn't look the least bit contrite. "I know, but it's important. Ten out of ten."

My eye roll almost knocks me backward. "Is someone mortally injured and dying?"

"No."

"Then eat your burger and come talk to me when it dies down a little bit."

Bryce presses on. "Sumner is getting shipped back to Canada."

The sound around me grows slightly distorted, my pulse speeding up. "What?"

"*Canada!*"

The bell starts dinging in the kitchen. A glance over my shoulder tells me people are impatiently waiting for drinks at the bar. I don't have time for this problem. Or I wouldn't . . . if it were about anyone other than Sumner. I've got a teeny-tiny soft spot for the guy. He's got a huge one for me, but it's the opposite of soft, if you know what I mean. Unless my radar is broken, he has been nursing a crush on me for a *while*.

As in, the entire year he's been playing in Connecticut.

It's a normal occurrence to catch him staring at me from the back of the dining room, his gargantuan hand wrapped around a bottle of beer, knuckles pale. I work for tips, so flirting is an important part of my job, but flirting with Sumner feels . . . different. Even giving him an innocent peck on the cheek gives me pinpricks on the backs of my knees and elevates my temperature. Normally, I wouldn't hesitate to ask a man out if I felt the spark of attraction, but not Sumner.

No.

I can tell a mile away that he's on the hunt for someone *permanent*.

One time, he opened his wallet to pay his tab, and a plastic accordion of family photos dangled out. Nieces, nephews, sisters, parents. Meanwhile, when his teammates open their wallets, the only things that fall out are condoms—and the goalie now looks like he's ready to use one right here, right now, in the middle of the bar.

“Hey.” I kick him in the back of the leg. “Either get a room or knock it off.”

“Sorry, ma'am,” Riggs slurs, smiling down at the dazed girl.

Oh, yeah. Put a fork in her; she's done.

Next week, she'll be in here wearing a Bandits jersey.

Once you go hockey boy, you never go back.

Not that I would know. It's my half brother's world, and I stay out of it, as much as possible. The absolute last thing I want to do is make things weird between us, so I've turned down approximately nine hundred date offers from his teammates. Somewhere along the line—around a year ago, actually—they finally gave up and started treating me more like a sister than a romantic prospect.

The bell dings with more insistency from the kitchen.

Thankfully, the barback has returned from his domestic dispute, and he's frantically filling orders at the bar. Still, he needs help. “I have to go,” I shout at Bryce, but I'm looking at Sumner, whistling under my breath when he eats his burger in two bites. *Two*. “We'll talk later, okay?”

“Sumner only had a one-year work visa, but it's expiring! *Tomorrow*.” I rarely see Bryce upset over anything but losing a game, but he's visibly distressed over this. “Britta, he's so fucking good, you know? He would have already gone pro, but he had a string of injuries in college. One more year in the amateurs and they're going to call him up to the development league, maybe even straight to the top. Everyone knows it. He can't leave now.”

By straight to the top, he means the NHL.

“Can't he get scouted while playing in Canada?”

“No open spots on any of the best teams—and he needs to be winning to get noticed. He needs *us*.” He swipes at his hair in frustration. “He's going to lose momentum waiting for another team to bring him on. It's fucked, Britta. His bags are literally packed. Right when he's starting to get some serious attention.”

A crevice is beginning to open in my chest.

Why did it have to be Sumner?

I haven't admitted it until now, but I feel safer when he's around. Like I've got someone watching over me. Without expecting anything in return. There's an air of capability and calm to him that I don't experience with anyone else.

Even if there is a buzzy undercurrent of heat.

"I'm sorry, Bryce. I'm sure it's hard to lose a teammate."

My half brother goes quiet, looking at me funny. "Maybe we don't have to lose him."

"What do you mean?"

"He could marry an American girl."

Jealousy catches me off guard.

In all my twenty-six years, I've never really experienced the emotion. But my fingers are markedly icy, back stiffening when I try to straighten. "Y-yeah. He could, I guess." For some reason, I backpedal, not wanting to encourage this idea of Sumner wedding a faceless girl I'm suddenly very annoyed with. "Although, it's not *that* simple. Marrying an American would keep him here legally for now. But he'd have to file a ton of paperwork and go through an interview and . . . why are you looking at me like that?"

"Britta."

Understanding dawns.

And that's when I realize the entire table of Bandits is staring at me.

With hope in their eyes.

Whoa, hold on.

Is Bryce—and the whole team—suggesting I marry Sumner?

My stomach lurches, panic firing through my bloodstream. Marriage? Commitment? *Family*? I'd rather walk into the lion enclosure at the zoo draped in bacon.

"Oh, no. No." I back up so abruptly, the backs of my legs ram into the bench of the neighboring picnic table. "You're all high if you think I'm getting married. Me? *Married*?"

"I'm an ordained minister. We could wrap this shit up *to-night*," says Riggs midburp. "Excuse me. I officiated my brother's wedding. I accidentally said his ex-girlfriend's name during the vows exchange, and the bride broke my nose, but swear to God, that won't happen again." He pauses. "Sumner doesn't even have any ex-girlfriends, right?"

The players consult each other about this and shake their heads.

“You could be his first,” Bryce says encouragingly. “Ex-wife, though. Even better.”

The absolute nightmare of a conversation is interrupted when Sumner stands up, the top of his head not all that far from the ceiling, issuing a menacing growl that sends a hush through Sluggers. “I told you not to bother her with this.”

“Yeah?” someone shouts back at him. “You expected us to listen?”

“You’re actively getting scouted, Sum,” Bryce says angrily, while shoving a trio of fries into his mouth. “We can’t just let you leave. Fuck that.”

Sumner turns an apologetic gaze on me, but there’s something else in the depths of those eyes that makes my stomach flip-flop. Yearning. “Britta, ignore them.”

My mouth is open. No words are coming out. This can’t really be happening. Did they actually think I was going to say yes? To marrying someone *tonight*? Or ever? I am vehemently opposed to the institution of marriage—and I have been since I was twelve years old. When I sat at the kitchen table and listened to my truck-driver father confess to my mother that he had a whole other family in another state. And he was choosing them. Over us.

Bryce stands up, blocking my vision of the rest of the table. “Britta,” he says, speaking beside my ear so no one else can hear. “What happened with our dad was messed up. I know you never want to get married, but this is different. It’s a *business* arrangement.” He rears back slightly and toggles his blond eyebrows. “He’ll pay you.”

I blink in what feels like slow motion.

Pay me?

I’m still going to say no to wedding bells, but it doesn’t hurt to ask . . . “How much?”

“You two will have to work that out. But, like . . .” He gestures to the dilapidated, beer-soaked bar that is currently being overrun by revelers kissing the year goodbye, more than a dozen people dancing on tables now, sparklers streaking across the interior. The unruly establishment that just happens to be my home away from home. “He could pay you enough to finally become a partner in this place. Isn’t that what you’ve wanted for years?”

Yes. That has always been my goal. Since I was in high school and this place became my refuge. A relationship with another person? Absolutely not.

But being able to commit to this place, which has been the only constant in my life?

Yeah. That *is* what I need. Badly enough to look over Bryce's shoulder at Sumner.

Am I getting married tonight?

No. No way.

But it can't hurt to have the conversation, right? Despite this idea being crazy and out of left field, the last thing I want to do is reject gentlemanly Sumner in front of his team.

"Can we talk, Sum?" I shout over the noise, tipping my head toward the bar.

The Bandits lose their minds, high-fiving, chest-bumping, and ordering bottles of champagne, which we definitely do *not* have in stock.

"It's not happening," I say to a smiling Bryce. "Don't look at me like that."

"I'll wait right here to walk you down the aisle."

"Go take a long walk off a short pier, instead."

"You'll thank me someday!"

Chapter Two

SUMNER

I never know where to look when Britta is standing in front of me.
Or what to do with my hands.

I mean, I know what I'd *love* to do with them, but I'd have to get her permission first, and she's never going to give me that. Not when every guy in this bar is in love with her, and she could have her pick. The fact that Britta is four million miles out of my league hasn't stopped me from threatening my teammates with certain death if they ever asked her out again, however.

Call it a moment of weakness.

My mother raised me to be an unholy terror on the ice but a gentleman as soon as I take off my skates. *Like a fucking Canadian should be*, she'd say. But that afternoon in the locker room when I overheard Riggs saying he planned to ask Britta to dinner at his place, my fist bashed itself into a locker, dented it—and while I had the stunned attention of the team, I told them she was off limits. No dating her. No talking about her. *Nothing*.

I haven't regretted it a single day since.

Nor have I asked her out myself. Fantasizing doesn't count.

At twenty-seven, I'm damn good at hockey. Talking to a stunning blonde with a little red jewel winking at me from her belly button and a smile that could save the world?

Not so much.

She's running back and forth behind the bar, uncapping beers and then sliding cash into the register, but every so often she peeks over at me, as if making sure I'm still there. Does she think I'm going to miss the chance to talk to her about marrying me?

Uh, yeah. I'd have to be dead? So, I'm staying put. Indefinitely.

“Sorry, Sum. Just give me another few minutes, and we’ll go talk in the office, ’kay?” Before I can respond, she’s pointing at a group of revelers holding out twenty-dollar bills. “Another round?”

Then she’s off, her butt shifting side to side in those tight black shorts and making me feel winded. I’ve had a lot of dreams about tucking that ass into my lap while my fingers are busy down the front of her shorts. Rubbing her panties until she’s wet and wiggling around—

I cough into my fist as my cock starts to thicken.

Yeah, I had those dreams while fully awake. Sometimes I have them on the sidelines or even while I’m actively taking an opponent to the boards. Might as well admit it, I’m full-time infatuated with my teammate’s half sister. And who wouldn’t be? She doesn’t take shit from anybody. She can talk hockey. She’s witty, spirited, and so beautiful she hurts my eyes. Compassionate too. I see the way she walks girls out to their Ubers, especially when there are a lot of drunk men around. That fierce protectiveness is probably what I love about her most.

Today anyway. Tomorrow it’ll be something else.

I realize I’m rubbing the cheek where she kissed me earlier and quickly drop my hand.

Not before she catches me, though, pausing as she sets down a bucket of beers in front of a group of guys who are staring at Britta’s headlights instead of their Corona Lights. As soon as she turns her back, I give them a look that says I will hang them upside down by their ankles from a lamppost if they don’t move on—and thankfully they do.

Just in time for Britta to open the hatch at the end of the bar and wave me toward the rear hallway of Sluggers. Oh Jesus, this is it. The first time I’ve ever been alone with her . . . and the topic is *marriage*. Hell of an icebreaker. I damn well know she’s never going to agree to marry me, but I appreciate her turning me down privately instead of in front of the guys. That’s the kind of sweetheart she is.

Shit. I’m going to miss being around her when I go back to Canada.

Going to miss our conversations at the bar during closing time when she lets her guard down and tells me the stories she overheard throughout the evening in that soft voice, the occasional yawn interrupting her flow. That’s usually when she takes the elastic band out of her hair and rubs the tension out of her scalp, and I just watch those fingers rasp around in her blonde hair like I’ve been hypnotized. Sometimes she lets me help clean up, carrying the

heavy stuff from the bar to the basement.

Those are the moments when we're the only two people in the world . . . and sometimes I swear I'm not alone in that feeling, but common sense tells me it's just wishful thinking.

Britta uses a key to open an office door, flips on a light, and stands aside to let me pass.

"*Let's fucking go, Sumner*" comes a guttural shout from the dining room.

"Lock her down, bro. Do it for the team. Do it for *America*."

Out of sight, I flip them my middle finger and follow Britta into the office, ducking just in time to keep my forehead from smacking off the doorjamb. "Sorry about that," I mutter.

"No worries. It's standard Bandit behavior," she quips easily, because she's so effortlessly cool. Although she does seem a little more restless than usual, twisting a silver ring around and around her thumb. "Do you . . . want to sit down?"

"Sure."

I look at the two regular, human-size chairs, know I'll never fit, and opt for the small loveseat in the corner of the office instead. Britta turns one of the smaller chairs to face me and sits down, tipping her head forward in a moment of thought, all that moon-colored hair falling around her bare shoulders. It's almost like being on a date, except she's breaking up with me before we even order appetizers.

"I hear your work visa is expiring tomorrow." She wets her lips. "And they're sending you back to Canada—"

"The guys think they're trying to help, but they shouldn't have put you on the spot like that. I would never expect you to agree to something so crazy."

Her half smile produces a dimple, and I almost pass out, it's so pretty. "Marrying a nice, thoughtful guy isn't so crazy, Sumner. It's just the last-minute timing of it all. Not to mention, the fact that we'd be electing to lie to the federal government, and that's never a good idea." She pauses, squinting one eye. "Also, I would rather die than get married. To anyone. Real or fake."

My throat drops into my stomach.

Bryce mentioned to me once that his half sister didn't "do relationships."

I wasn't sure why. He wouldn't tell me either.

That conversation has been sitting in the back of my head until now, but I had no idea her aversion to commitment was so extreme. “Why?”

She shrugs. Wrinkles her nose. “Reasons.”

“But marriage is so . . . *great*,” I say, kind of dazed.

A blonde eyebrow shoots up. “Has that been your experience?”

“Yeah. My parents have been married for thirty-eight years. They have five kids, and they act like they just got back from their honeymoon.”

Just for a moment, there is a dreamy light in her eyes, but it winks right out. “That’s lovely, Sumner. But not all marriages are like that.” She studies me, as if in a different light than usual. “Yours will be, though. Someday.”

I nod. She’s right. I won’t let it be anything but solid.

Traditionally, women are expected to dream of their weddings. But I’ve been thinking of mine since my oldest sister got married a decade ago. I *want* that moment, surrounded by family and friends, where I commit to love and protect someone my entire life. I want the person I’m marrying to know I mean it. Then I want to spend my life proving myself to them. I just haven’t met a woman that I could picture walking toward me in a white dress. Yet.

Liar.

My ears burn when I remember how many nights I’ve spent lying in bed, beating off while imagining Britta holding a giant bouquet of flowers, a long white train trailing after her. Or holding out her hand so I can slide a ring onto her finger.

An embarrassing number of times.

What self-respecting man jerks off to a *wedding*?

“I guess . . . I think marriage is an honor. Someone putting that much faith in you and believing you can rise to the occasion is a rare thing. You know?”

“Of course, that is . . . a beautiful idea.” She can’t quite hide her skepticism, but I can’t tell if she’s skeptical of me or the overall concept. “It’s just not for me.”

It occurs to me that I sound like I’m trying to talk her into the idea, which wasn’t my intention, as much as I would like her to consider it. Consider *me*. “I’m well aware you’re saying no, Britta. You don’t have to let me down easy.”

“Great. Okay.” She lets out a halting breath, twisting that ring again. “Will you . . . pay someone else? Or was I your only last-ditch possibility?”

Pay someone else?

What is she talking about?

I never had any plans to *pay* a woman to marry me, even if doing so could mean staying in Connecticut long enough to get called up to the professional development league. Did Bryce tell her that? Before I can question her meaning, Britta keeps going. “I’m not saying yes, obviously. I’m mostly just curious. If . . . if you had someone else lined up.”

All I can do is answer the question. This was a wild suggestion made by one of my teammates this afternoon. The idea of marrying Britta was incredibly tempting, and hearing someone say it out loud made my heart hammer like a motherfucker, but I never actually expected it to happen. “There’s no one else.”

Does she look relieved, or is that wishful thinking? “How much were you willing to pay me?” She tilts her head. “On the *totally* far-fetched chance that I was game for a green card marriage. Which I’m not.”

I’m a very honest man. I’m also a man who sees an avenue to the goal—and takes it.

I’m shocked to realize . . . she’s not completely against this. Marrying me. I can see it in her eyes. I’ve got a one in a million shot—but it’s a better one than I had walking in here. Is it deceptive to pretend like my plan *was* to pay her all along? Slightly. But maybe offering her money in exchange for her help is what I should have done in the first place.

Why *else* would she fake marry me?

This could be the missing piece.

I might have a minuscule chance to stay in Bridgeport *and* be married to Britta.

Am I dreaming?

“What kind of number were you hoping for?” I ask.

She processes that question quietly, her gaze tracking around the small office. “Well, I could come in as a partner on Sluggers for fifty thousand—”

“Really? That’s exactly what I was going to offer you.”

“Really.” She jolts forward slightly in her seat. “Fifty *thousand* dollars?”

I desperately try to swallow the taste of acid in my mouth. I do *not* like lying to this girl. Also, if she’d said a million dollars, I probably would have figured out a way to take out a loan. She’s that amazing—and she’s worth a lot more than \$50K. I just don’t have millions to my name yet—and maybe I never will, unless I find a way into the NHL. “Yeah. Fifty.” I can’t stop

myself from soaking up the opportunity to find out more about her. Up to this point, she has kept most of our conversations surface level. “I didn’t realize you wanted to become an owner here.”

“Well. Maybe that’s . . . maybe I’m not qualified. I don’t know.” Her cheeks are turning pink. She’s so cute, I’m not going to survive the night. “It has just been my home for a long time. My mom worked here when I was a kid. I used to do my homework on the bar after school while she cut up limes and married the liquor bottles. Once I got older, I started helping the cook plate food and running it to tables. And then my mom . . .” A shadow flickered in her eyes. “Sometimes she didn’t feel like working, and I just kind of . . . stepped in. This place has stuck around for me and . . .” She shakes herself, like she’s said too much. “I’ve always planned to make Pablo an offer once I got the money together. I just expected it to be years from now.”

Am I actually beginning to feel hopeful about this? Is there a chance I could end up married to the girl I’ve been borderline obsessed with for a year? “Maybe you don’t have to wait that long.”

Several beats pass while she studies me. Thoughtfully.

“Maybe.” She puts air into her cheek and lets it out. “What would be the terms?”

I did not think we’d get this far. I have zero terms.

“Obviously, this would be a business arrangement only.” She waits for me to confirm, but I don’t. I’m not sure it’s possible for me to treat this like some kind of platonic bargain. “You would be giving me money in exchange for marriage. I’m your ticket to extending your time in Connecticut. We could work on getting your green card while you wait to be scouted.”

“Right.” My head is in the game now. “And a green card is going to require a lot of planning. We’ll have to get mail at the same address. We’ll have to know things about each other for the eventual interview. We’ll need pictures together. Proof we’re a couple.”

Is she growing paler? “Which means spending time together.”

“I don’t smell that bad, Britta. Once I shower.”

A ghost of a smile moves her lips, but they quickly flatten into a worried line. “If we did this, it wouldn’t be a real relationship. Not physical or emotional. You’d be okay with that?”

No. What choice do I have, though?

And maybe a miracle will happen and she’ll change her mind about a relationship with me. It’s a long shot, but I’ve learned to never count out an

underdog. This time it's me. "Yeah, Britta. I'd be okay with that."

"Really."

She taps her index finger against her knee, and my attention is drawn there like a magnet, sliding higher on her bare thighs, before I remember my manners and refasten my gaze where it belongs. On her beautiful face.

When she speaks again, I'm not prepared for the tone of voice she uses.

It's quiet and intimate. Like a husky purr. It instantly twists my abdomen muscles into a knot, my Adam's apple getting stuck high beneath my chin.

"Are you sure, Sum?"

The fly of my jeans suddenly feels like shrink-wrap. *Way* too tight. "Sure about what?"

"Your ability to keep this friendly." Slowly, she rises from her chair and, miracle of miracles, moves into the V of my thighs, bringing her sexy, round tits within inches of my face, and my manners become a thing of the past. I don't remember ever having them. My chest rattles up and down as this girl, this fifteen out of ten, straddles me, parking her hypnotic ass on my thighs . . . and begins to play with my beard, twisting it around her index finger. I'm *reeling* from that contact when life gets even better. She leans in and rubs her lips side to side against mine, transforming my dick to wrought iron in my pants. "I see the way you watch me. I think you like me a little too much for this to be nothing but a business arrangement." She gently touches her tongue to the seam of my lips, and I hiss like a teakettle, my hips shifting restlessly. "Don't you, Sumner?"

My brain is upside down. I'm *panting*. "I, uh . . ."

She looks into my eyes, nodding over what she sees. "You're going to want more than my name on a marriage certificate, won't you?"

"I can keep it under control," I say thickly, my tongue nearly lolling out of my mouth.

Britta presses her forehead against mine, and we both look down at the crude outline of my erection, her letting out a soft expulsion of air. As if to say, *Caught ya*. The things I would give to have Britta unzip my pants and ride me on this couch. Limbs. Years of my life.

Hell, I'd give up hockey.

Because of that, I come very close to crying when she scoots off my lap and reclaims her chair, leaving me breathing like a marathon runner with a throbbing spike between my legs. "You're a relationship guy. I can tell.

Throw in the fact that you're attracted to me, and this *will* go sideways."

"You're right. I am a relationship guy, but . . ." I'm searching for any way to reassure her that I'm listening and acknowledging. Taking her seriously. "It's . . . obvious you're not a relationship girl."

That's what I come up with.

She blinks. Rears back a little, then recovers. Did I say the wrong thing? "R-right. I'm not. I'm not a family girl either. I don't want to get married and have kids. None of that. And you clearly do. I'm worried this arrangement might mislead you—"

"No. I *won't* be misled." All right, look. If I'm saying this to her, I have to mean it. I can't lie to her. Maybe I'll never totally let go of the hope she'll change her mind about me, but I won't try to trick her into changing. I won't back her into any corners. That's a vow. "You're not a relationship girl. You're not a family girl. I won't forget."

"Sumner, I don't know . . ."

"You get to be an owner in this place. I get my green card. We can do this as friends."

"Not a relationship. An . . . *expirationship*?"

I loathe that word as soon as it comes out of her mouth.

"We can't break up as soon as you get your green card, or everyone would do it. They'll find it suspicious, and neither one of us wants to go down for fraud. So . . ." She consults the ceiling. "We could expire the same time next year. New Year's Eve 2024. That should be enough time to file paperwork, go through with the interview, and stay together awhile once the dust settles." She studies me. "Can you live with that?"

Can I? Live with the knowledge that I'll have to let her go the same time next year?

Again, I have no choice.

Not if I want to stay in Bridgeport and play hockey. I'll just have to worship Britta from afar for the rest of my life. Keep my feelings to myself. What she is asking me for is fair—a platonic arrangement where I don't get the wrong idea. And I won't. She's making it clear that she doesn't want anything more from me than \$50,000.

"Yeah. I can live with that." It's my damn optimistic heart that won't let me hold the rest inside. "But it's just you and me. Neither one of us dates anyone else. For authenticity's sake."

She scrutinizes me long and hard. "I can live with that."

I let out a pent-up breath, trying not to show the magnitude of my relief. But rest assured, it is fierce. “Then I guess we’re getting married tonight.”

Noisemakers and some concerning crackles go off on the other side of the office door, followed by a rousing round of “For He’s a Jolly Good Fellow,” except *He*’s has been replaced with *She*’s.

Britta doesn’t so much as flinch.

“One year, Sumner.”

“One year, Britta.”

Chapter Three

BRITTA

March

I'm trying to make an inconspicuous entrance to the Bandits practice, but of course they cannot allow me to be low key. As soon as I'm halfway down the concrete steps, Riggs catches sight of me, and the whole team skates up to the glass in a swarm of maroon and white, banging their gloves against it and chanting my name.

Three months have passed since my impromptu wedding to Sumner. Since the chaste kiss I gave him while "Auld Lang Syne" blared from the old bar speakers and confetti rained down on our heads. But the Bandits still never waste a chance to let me know I'm their official hero. They've gone undefeated since Sumner and I tied the knot, a phenomenon they're calling the Britta Effect.

Ridiculous.

I appreciate them giving me so much credit, but apart from reciting some vows, I haven't done much to warrant such a high level of worship. I haven't had *time* since becoming a part owner in the bar and taking on more responsibilities, like payroll and inventory. However, starting today, I will definitely be earning my \$50,000. The paperwork has been compiled and filed for Sumner's green card, and while we haven't gotten a date for our official interview yet, we were advised by his immigration lawyer to start studying. Each other.

Down on the ice, Sumner takes off his helmet and gives me a serious nod, shoving one of the guys who chants my name with a little too much enthusiasm. I curtsy to the team by way of thanks, and they graduate to smacking their sticks against the glass before returning to practice. Sumner

doesn't go with them, though. He skates to the bench area, leaves his stick and helmet behind, and exits the ice, throwing one thick leg over the white waist-high board and then, still wearing his skates, climbing the stairs to where I'm sitting.

I try hard to keep my pulse ticking along at a normal pace, but there is no use pretending I don't find this quiet giant appealing, with his hockey pads and sweaty hair. Someone in the bar referred to Sumner recently as a *motherfucking powerhouse* and that's exactly what he looks like now. Strong enough to carry a baby elephant on each padded shoulder. Ready to crush someone. And apologize afterward.

I'm not volunteering to be crushed, I remind myself, but I can't help but feel a very distinct tug low in my belly when he gives me a half smile. And the world slows down as he grabs the front of his shoulder pads and pulls them off over his head, taking the practice jersey with it. He's wearing a sweat-soaked T-shirt underneath, but my God, it rides up all the way to his collarbone, and my ears begin to ring, my ovaries performing a complicated tango.

My husband is ripped to shreds.

And *thick* with it.

Uhh. Daddy? questions my brain.

There is hair on his chest. Like a really nice amount—and this is a weird observation that I wouldn't normally make on a man, but he has great nipples. They look like they've been stretched tight, along with the rest of his skin, to accommodate all that pesky muscle, the edges slightly puckered from the cold.

"Hey, Britta," he says, tossing his gear onto a seat and then swiping back his sweaty hair.

"Hi," I respond, trying to sound cheerful, but I sound like my throat is being stepped on instead. "Good practice?"

"Yeah." He indicates me with a jerk of his chin. "Better now."

My skin starts to tingle ominously, the organ in my chest pumping a little faster.

Uh-oh.

Sumner drops heavily into the seat beside me, bending forward to remove his skates, and his triceps flex in a way that makes me bite my lip. Usually, when Sumner comes into Sluggers, he's wearing a sweatshirt, but he's not wearing one now. All that muscle definition is simply out in the open

for public consumption. Or private consumption, really. Mine.

Objectively speaking, of course.

I mentally shake myself and cross my legs, finding a more comfortable position in the seat. “Are you ready to study?”

Sumner straightens, gives a quick scan of the immediate area. “You want to study here?”

“Yeah,” I say, retrieving the notebook from my bag and flipping open to the first page. “Where were you thinking?”

He shrugs one of those huge shoulders. “My place. Yours. Or we could go out.”

My throat tightens. “Like a date?”

“We don’t have to call it that.”

“Isn’t that what it would be, though?”

He exhales slowly. “We can study here, Britta. That’s fine.”

A weird combination of relief and regret clings to my insides. For the last three months, I’ve been careful to keep my relationship with Sumner professional. We meet in public—and *only* in public. He recaps his meetings with the lawyer. I update him on my progress in having my name added to the liquor license and deed to Sluggers.

We exchange necessary information . . .

. . . and I try not to notice the longing in his eyes when he looks at me.

One crook of my finger and this Goliath of a man would probably rush me to the nearest dark corner and take out a treasure trove of pent-up sexual frustration on me, those powerful hips pumping like a jackhammer. But I’m definitely not looking at the laces of his hockey pants and wondering how fast he could get them undone. I’m absolutely *not* doing that.

Words bleed together in front of me on the page of my notebook. “Um. Okay, I figured we would start with middle names. Mine is Lark.”

“Lark? Really?” He turns as much as possible in the seat that is half his size, considering me with interest. “Britta Lark Mayfield.”

A gust of warm wind travels through my middle. “My grandmother on my mom’s side was a bird-watcher. I can’t really remember her face, because it was usually hidden behind binoculars. Anyway, larks were her favorite species. She used to say they sing the sweetest song.” He doesn’t blink once as I’m speaking, almost like he doesn’t want to miss something. “What’s yours?”

“Wade,” he says.

“Is there some special significance to it?”

“Yeah.” He lounges back in the chair, resting his linked fingers on his stomach. “My parents met while their families were on separate vacations at Lake Louise. My dad was seventeen; my mom was sixteen. The first time he ever saw her, she was wading into the lake. He said that was the moment he started believing in magic. That’s where the middle name Wade comes from.”

My lungs have ceased to operate. “That is . . . breathtaking.”

He nods to himself, like he’s reminiscing. “They still go to the lake once a year on vacation. He has this wall in his office covered in picture frames. They hold the same snapshot of my mother where she’s wading into the water in the same spot she did when she was sixteen, but she’s a year older in each one. Think there’s around forty of them last time I checked.”

There is so much love in his expression that it makes my chest uncomfortably heavy, and I have to look down at the notebook. Not that I’m seeing much of what is written there. “He obviously loves her very much. They must be the exception to the rule.”

My words cause him to tilt his head. “What is the rule?”

“Take your pick. What goes up must come down. All good things come to an end. What can go wrong *will* go wrong.”

A line is forming between his brows. “You’re implying relationships always flame out.”

“I’m not *implying* anything. Statistically speaking, they most often do. The chances of them ending badly are too high to take the risk.”

He shakes his head. “No.”

I wait for him to elaborate. He doesn’t.

“Just . . . no?”

“No, I don’t agree with that. You can’t forgo the risk when the potential reward is so great. That’s why people do it. Fall in love and get married. Because if you get it right, you end up with forty pictures on your wall of the same woman. You have a *person*.”

What does that churn just below my collarbone mean? Maybe I’m just not used to anyone being this passionate when speaking about relationships. Especially a man. Sumner is a different breed. “Not everyone needs a person.”

He concedes this with a nod. “Maybe that’s true. But even if you’re strong alone, when someone wades into your lake and you feel something . . .

if you choose to ignore it, maybe that strength is actually just something else in disguise.”

“Weakness?”

“Fear.”

SUMNER

Britta shoots to her feet, fumbling the notebook closed in her hands.

Dammit. I went too far.

I should have just agreed to disagree and stopped talking. My only excuse is that I’m frustrated. I’m *married* to this girl, and she won’t even spend time alone with me. We don’t text. We don’t share meals. Nothing. And believe me, I’m well aware that she stated her terms up front. The relationship is a business arrangement only. I have no right to be irritated, because she is proceeding exactly as discussed.

Problem is, I’m even more obsessed with her than I was three months ago—and that is saying a lot, because I have been blind to anyone but Britta since the moment I saw her slide a foamy pint of beer down the bar in Sluggers. This is the first deep conversation we’ve had in a good while, because she has built a forty-story wall between us, and I’m absorbing the weight of it like an eager sponge . . . and I went too far.

“Britta,” I say, lunging to my feet, the impulse to wrap my arms around her, keep her from leaving, blaring in my head. But in nothing but socks, I’m still a foot taller than her, and I remind myself that I’ll never use that size difference against her. Words. *With women, problems need to be solved with words.* My father taught me that lesson early and reiterated it throughout my life. It’s engraved in my psyche. “Will you please stay?”

“No, I remembered I . . . um. I agreed to cover a shift—”

“Look at me.”

She won’t. All I can see is the center part of her blonde hair.

My heart twists like a doorknob.

Start talking. Fast.

“Listen, I’ve known for three months that you’re not a relationship person. I don’t know why. I’m not aware of the cause, but it’s obviously a

sore spot, and I prodded it anyway.” God, I have to fist my hands to keep from cupping her fragile jaw. “I apologize.”

After a beat, she gives a stiff nod, but she still won’t let me see her eyes. “Could we just talk about, like, astrological signs and where we went to high school?” She’s twisting the notebook in her hands, and I gently take it from her before she rips it in half. I don’t want that to happen after she put so much work into something that will ultimately benefit me. “I doubt the green card interviewer is going to ask about our outlook on marriage.”

“No, probably not,” I say.

I lower myself back into my seat, releasing a breath when she does the same. “I’m a Libra.”

Her throat works with a swallow, and she finally, finally looks at me again, a couple of shadows lingering in her eyes. What happened to this girl? I want to know. I want to know the root of what is hurting her so I can rip it clean out of the ground. “Aquarius,” she murmurs. “We’re both air signs.”

Does that mean we’re compatible? I want to ask, but I’m not that stupid. Plus, I already know we are.

“I went to McNally High School. Played hockey and wrestled. My dad was the woodshop teacher, and he coached the wrestling team too.”

“You had one of those families that was a household name in your town, didn’t you?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “You?”

She nods. “For different reasons, though.” Instead of explaining that, she changes the subject quickly. “Favorite food?”

“Broccoli cheddar soup.”

“Oh my . . . God. I wasn’t expecting that. I thought you’d say steak or poutine.”

“Poutine? You stereotyping me?”

She winces but doesn’t take it back.

“Fine. Poutine is a very close second,” I say, making her laugh.

A lush garden springs to life inside me at the sound. It’s the most beautiful noise I’ve ever heard, and I want to tell her that Lark is the perfect middle name for someone with a laugh so perfect, but I can’t. So I lock it down tight and order myself to respect her wishes.

“What’s your favorite food?” I ask her.

“Breakfast.”

My lips jump. “That’s not necessarily a food.”

“I love all of it equally.”

She tilts her head back, blissfully lost in her thoughts, and I can't help myself: I use the moment to look at her tits. *Fuck*. The way I want to suck them. Just ride my tongue all over those nipples and draw hard on them when she least expects it. I'd get two fingers inside her pussy and keep them tucked in extra deep, too, so I could feel her getting wetter right at the source. I haven't been with a lot of women, not compared to some of the guys on the team, but the times I *have* spent being intimate with another person? I've paid close attention. Enough to know exactly how to satisfy Britta. *Just give me one motherfucking shot.*

“Eggs, pancakes, waffles,” she says. “And syrup on everything.”

Pay. Attention. “You even put syrup on your eggs?”

“Don't yuck my yum.”

“I wasn't yucking.” I pretend to write something in her notebook, and she laughs again, turning me inside out. “I was taking notes.”

“Ahhh. Underline and highlight that.”

“Unfortunately, you haven't had the best syrup. You'd have to go to Canada for that.”

“Are you . . . ?”

She was going to say *Are you inviting me?* I know it in my bones. When she lets herself relax with me, even for a minute, she forgets not to flirt. I live for those fleeting moments. If I still sent a Christmas list to Santa every year, it would say *a lifetime of flirting with Britta*. I'm convinced it's the only thing I'd need to survive. And I'm not quite ready to let it come to a screeching halt this time.

“I have tentative plans to go home in the offseason this summer. I could bring you back some syrup for your eggs. Or you could come pick it out yourself.”

She huffs a laugh, like she thinks I'm kidding. When it becomes obvious that I'm not, she shakes her head at me. “As much as I would like to see your dad's infamous wall of devotion, obviously the answer is no.” A flush climbs her cheeks, and she seems to surprise herself by asking, “But just out of curiosity, what would one of your family gatherings look like? I'll need to know this kind of thing for the green card interview,” she rushes to tack on.

I'm not buying it, though. She's curious. Does that mean something? “Well, we'd have it at my parents' house. Of course, my four sisters would be

there—”

“Four sisters?”

“Yup. I’m the baby.”

“No way you have ever been a baby. You were born six foot five.”

I crack a laugh. “Nope. Not until sophomore year of high school.”

Briefly, she stares off over my shoulder. “You having four sisters explains a lot.”

“What do you mean?”

She hums in her throat. “You’re polite. You give off this sense of . . .”

“What?”

It’s like she can’t find the right word, so she flutters her fingers for a few beats. “Safety. You respect women. I can tell. You’re not just pretending to listen to me. You look at me in a thoughtful way that doesn’t make me feel like I’m rambling—and I *always* feel like that. Sometimes even when I’m talking to other women. You’re not just pretending to listen while ogling my chest and wondering when you’ll get to see me with my shirt off.”

Silence passes. “Confession. I just ogled.”

“Oh, honey.” She gives me the cutest pout. Like it makes me want to slam my head into a wall. “You were doing so well.”

“I’m sorry.” I drag my hands down my face. “You have incredible tits.”

“Thank you.”

“I can listen and absorb everything you’re saying and still hope your shirt accidentally rips and they come popping out of your bra.”

“I don’t think you understand the mechanics of breasts. Or clothing.”

“Yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised. I haven’t laid a finger on a woman since . . .”

Her eyes narrow curiously, her smile playful, but I see the way she digs her fingertips into her knee. Is she nervous about my answer? “Since when?”

I’m powerless to do anything but tell her the truth. “Since the first night I came to Sluggers and saw you.”

The flirtatious quality of her smile melts away slowly, replaced with something so vulnerable, I almost reach over and pull her into my lap. To protect her from whatever it is. “Sumner. I don’t . . . I can’t—” She remains very still for a moment, then turns to face me with her eyes squeezed shut. “What you said before—about fear—you were right.”

Sensing she’s on the verge of opening up to me, I don’t dare move a muscle. “Was I?”

“Yes.” She wets her lips and braids her fingers together tightly. “My father was a long-haul trucker. When I was twelve, he sat my mother and I down at the kitchen table and told us he had another family.” She looks at me to get my reaction. I have no idea what’s showing on my face, but I’m totally and utterly stunned, so probably that. “He told us he was sorry, but he was going to live with them permanently.”

I’m not even sure I can form words. “Britta . . . you never should have been there for that conversation. Not like that.”

She acknowledges that with a stilted nod. “My mom’s mental health suffered for a long while after that. She couldn’t get out of bed for her shifts at Sluggers, so I tried to help. And I felt so bad, because I didn’t want to be home. It was so scary to see her so still and silent like that. And my dad was gone—”

I pick her up and put her in my lap, my arms wrapping around her like steel bands.

She’s trembling a little, and I have to trap a tortured shout by pressing my mouth to her shoulder, stroking her hair probably way too hard. The story she just told me is so much more fucked up than I was imagining. I’m livid. I’m fucking livid over her having to live through any of that. But I can’t let the anger run away with me because the focus needs to be here, on Britta, not on my reaction. “Sweetheart, I’m so sorry.”

Practice is over, but some of the guys are still down on the ice.

Bryce is among them, and he’s looking at me knowingly. And it dawns on me why.

“Bryce is your half brother. He’s . . . part of that other family. That your father left for.”

She nods into my neck. “He got in contact with me when I was a senior in high school. To say sorry. I really wanted to hate him, but I couldn’t. He’s too . . . Bryce. For years, we kept in contact, online mostly. It was just a coincidence when he got picked up by the Bandits.”

I’m desperately trying to take in all this information and keep my millions of questions at bay. There will be time for those later, but right now, there is one pressing issue that I can’t ignore. I’ve seen this unique light shining inside her since day one, and here it is. Proof that I’ve had her pegged correctly as one of a kind this whole time. “Britta.”

“Yeah?”

“The grace and character and fucking *forgiveness* it took to be friends

with Bryce? Those are not small things. The bravery it took to cover your mother's shifts . . . not small." I let out a gusting exhale. "I'm sorry I mistook protecting yourself for fear."

I hear her swallow several times, and I pull her as close as I can, wishing I could soak her into my chest where it would be easier to guard her. If anyone ever hurts this girl again, I'm going to start tearing down skyscrapers like hockey Godzilla. "Does he ever come to the games?"

She knows I mean her father. "Always. Every single one. That's why I never buy tickets."

Even as I nod in understanding, I *hate* knowing that. I'd rather have her at my games than the entire rest of the crowd. "Thank you for telling me all of this, Britta."

We inhale and exhale together.

"I think telling you helped, actually. I feel lighter."

"I'm glad, sweetheart. I'm sorry about all of it."

"I know you are. Your heart is bashing up against my ear." With her cheek nuzzled into my sweaty chest, she closes her eyes. "Tell me everything about your four sisters."

Above her head, I smile, grateful for her curiosity. Grateful to finally be holding her. Praying like hell that it means more than interview preparation. "Well, the oldest is Chrissy. She's a hairdresser, and she used to use me to practice her skills. You should have seen my blowout on the first day of fourth grade . . ."

Chapter Four

BRITTA

June

I'm in the passenger side of Sumner's truck, fanning my cheeks even though the air conditioner is blasting. We're sitting outside a long beige government building with black reflective windows, an American flag whipping overhead in the summer breeze.

Today is the day of our green card interview.

Sumner reaches over from the driver's side, stilling my flapping hand and then bringing it to the center of his chest. "Britta, we have nothing to be nervous about."

"I don't know, Sum. They say these interviewers are human lie detectors."

He raises a dark eyebrow. "Who is 'they'?"

I give him a sheepish look. "The internet."

Sumner shakes his head at me, and I can't help but notice the way his black hair rubs against his collar in the process. My fingers twitch, wondering what it would feel like wrapped around my knuckles. Not that I plan on finding out. Or anything. "Did you pick up any conspiracy theories while you were scaring yourself on the web?" he asks, clearly unaware that I'm mentally pulling his hair while he—

"Don't get me started on the Roswell cover-up," I rush to say, giving him a half smile to let him know I'm joking. But our usual banter is doing nothing to calm the butterflies in my stomach. Or the sexual tension that has been creeping into my stomach more and more quickly, *potently*, when he's around. "I just don't want to let you and the team down."

"You've done more than enough for the team. I'm still here, aren't I?"

he says without missing a beat. “I understand why you’re nervous, though. We don’t exactly have jobs that require interviews. It’s new territory.”

“Bashing bodies is your job application. Pouring liquor is mine,” I murmur, staring out the front windshield of the truck, my fingers clutching the binder in my lap. It contains electric bills for my apartment in both our names, mail Sumner has received at my place, pictures of us together that we’ve taken over the last six months. In the bar, at the Bridgeport Marina, in the stands after hockey practice. Our arms are around each other, and we’re smiling. Looking like a couple. There were a few times I wanted to suggest he kiss me in one of the photos, but something held me back. Maybe a fear I wouldn’t be able to stop once I started? “Although, now that I’m a part owner in the bar,” I say, needing to distract myself from those wayward thoughts, “I’m realizing how little I know about the business end of things. In another life, I would . . .”

I can feel Sumner’s gaze brushing down the side of my cheek. “You’d what, Britta?”

“Go to business school. Maybe.”

I’m surprised by the nerves that bounce around in my stomach just having spoken that dream out loud. Why would I be apprehensive about something that will probably never happen? I don’t know, but the idea of spending significantly less time in the bar, while I attend classes, makes me feel more exposed than I would have expected. Almost like I would be without my armor. Has Sluggers become more of a safety zone than a livelihood?

“You’re an owner now, right?” he says, diverting my troubling thoughts, thankfully. “You could hire someone to work while you’re in class.”

“I could. You’re right. But speaking of job applications, I doubt a lot of bartenders have ‘hockey player babysitter’ listed under their special skills.”

He sighs. “Good help is hard to find these days.”

“Mmmm.”

We trade a slow smile, and my stomach does a somersault—which is beginning to become a regular thing. Out of necessity, Sumner and I have been spending time together, learning everything there is to know about one another’s lives, down to the names of our first-grade teachers and the outfits we’d like to be buried in, in the event of our untimely deaths. I know his mother’s maiden name, his preferred brand of laundry detergent, and his

favorite movie, which turned out to be *A Dog's Purpose*.

In fact, I watched it alone one night, for research, and refused to speak to him for a week afterward, my emotional damage ran so deep.

"If they ask me your favorite movie, I'm going to lie, by the way," I say, leaning closer to the air conditioner. "They probably don't grant green cards to psychopaths."

"Me?" He tips his head back on a laugh, and there's his throat . . . that *incredible throat*. "Your favorite movie is *Clue*. If they should be worried about anyone, it's you."

"It's a good thing they can't kick me out of the country, I guess."

His attention runs down to my bare thighs, lingering on the hem of my skirt, the black of his pupils expanding. "No one would kick you out of anything, sweetheart."

Oh. Wow.

I resist the intense urge to squirm. Or cross my legs.

Did the temperature go up another fifty degrees in here?

"Sorry, I slipped," he says, voice low.

"It's okay."

We stay quiet and still while his statement fades from the air, but the effect of his words doesn't go away so easily. "Listen, I uh . . ." He clears his throat hard and leans back, digging in the pocket of his suit. "In the name of this, us, looking authentic . . ." He opens his palm and produces two gold bands. "I picked us up some rings to wear for the interview. Or for . . . whenever we want to wear them." He slides the larger of the two onto his ring finger, and it's such a natural movement, I almost wonder if he's practiced it before. "I plan on keeping mine on while I'm in Canada this summer."

I'm so distracted by the glint of the rings, his announcement almost slips past my notice. When it does sink in, however, my heart burrows down into my stomach. "While you're . . . where?"

SUMNER

"While I'm in Canada," I say again, slipping the gold band onto her finger

while she's not paying attention. Not very ethical, no, but I tell myself it's a necessity for the interview. As soon as it's finally on her all the way, a puck gets stuck in my throat, and there is no amount of swallowing that will dislodge it.

Damn, I wish I could afford a diamond, but maybe it's for the best that I can't. I don't think I would be able to play it cool right now if she had an engagement ring on her finger. The gold band alone is nearly enough to kill me. I'm so busy trying to absorb the sight of her wearing a symbol of commitment to me, whether it's real or not, that I almost miss her stricken expression. What the—

“Britta, what's wrong?”

“Nothing.” Her gaze bounces between her ring and mine, her hand dropping kind of fast. “I didn't realize you were officially going home. You just caught me off guard.”

“Going home *temporarily*. I'm coming back.” For some reason, I feel the need to clarify that information, even though it's obvious. “Providing this interview goes well—and it will—I should have an interim green card that will get me through customs.”

She nods.

And she just keeps nodding. “Yeah, you have to go home and see your family. They must miss you so much.”

Something about her demeanor is off, but I'm not really sure where we got off track. Was it the rings? Or is it the fact that I'm leaving? I've mentioned the possibility of going home for the summer to her a few times, and it never seemed to bother her before. It's kind of standard procedure for athletes to go home in between seasons. And believe me, I considered forgoing the whole trip so I could stay close to Britta. I've thought about it *a lot*. But she makes it pretty clear every chance she gets that I shouldn't be making decisions around her. That I shouldn't treat this as anything other than an expatriation. So what's with her hollow expression?

Am I missing something?

“My family is a major reason I'm going home, sure, but there's also a training camp in Edmonton. I'm not going home to lie around and watch television for two months. I need to be ready when practices start again in September. I'm not going to squander this chance you're giving me, Britta.”

“Two months,” she says under her breath, almost to herself. “Cool, I'm just going to . . .” I watch her hand fumble with the door handle of the truck,

and before I know what's happening, she's launching herself out into the parking lot. The door closes behind her.

I shove mine open, jumping out too. "*Britta.*"

We meet at the bumper of my truck. "Yeah?"

I have to dig my fist into my pocket to resist cradling the side of her face. "What's going on with you?"

"Nothing. I'm fine."

I've never seen her like this. Dazed and a little fidgety. I don't know how to handle this, so I dig back into my memory bank and recall a time when my mother kept saying, "I'm fine," and my father wisely didn't believe her. This moment with Britta is somehow reminiscent of that. What was it my father said to my mother that got her to crack? "Can you please try and piece together what you're feeling and communicate it to me?"

She blinks up at me once, twice, like she can't believe what she's about to say out loud. "I think I'm going to miss you."

Holy fuck, my father is a genius.

"I . . . wait." Don't move. Don't even breathe. "Did you just say that you're going to miss me?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"How . . . am I going to miss you?"

"That's what I'm asking."

She stares at my chin hard, like she's thinking, her attention cheating up to my mouth briefly, followed by a hard swallow. "Well," she begins slowly, a flush spreading in her cheeks. "As a friend, obviously. We've been spending all this time together, getting to know every detail of each other's lives. I guess I like having you around."

"I'm canceling the trip," I rasp, ripping my phone out of my pocket.

"*What?*" The exclamation bursts out of her. "No, no, no. No, that's not what I was . . . I wouldn't expect you to do that. I *want* you to go see your four sisters and keep yourself sharp at training camp. Of course I do. I was mostly just surprised. How m-much."

She might as well be carving my chest up with a meat cleaver, inch by bloody inch. "How much you're going to miss me?"

"Yes. I think that's it."

In my periphery, I see movement in the parking lot. There are people witnessing what is both an amazing and terrible moment, because on one

hand, my dream girl just admitted she's going to miss me. On the other one, she's going to miss me *as a friend*. I'm not sure I believe her, though. How can I honestly believe this attraction doesn't run both ways when I catch her staring at my throat so often, I would develop suspicions that she's a vampire if we weren't out in broad daylight?

There's only one way to find out if I'm imagining things. No, this is not the moment for conducting an experiment. Not when my status in this country hangs in the balance. But I'm not a man who wastes an opening like this. Not when it comes to Britta.

Ignoring the sound of a car door slamming nearby, I take a step forward, lean down, and wind an arm around the back of Britta's waist, slowly hauling her up against me, listening to her gusty intake of breath, watching the way her head falls back. And I savor the sight of her rosy cheeks, the glazed quality of her eyes while I brush our lips together. "Say the word, and I'll stay, sweetheart. We can pretend we're still studying for this interview. Take pictures together and pretend we're only interested in each other's lives so we can answer some questions. Even though we both know that's bullshit. We just like being together."

"As friends," she whispers, pushing higher on her toes, arching against me.

"Friends?" I drop my forearm lower, so it becomes a seat for her tight ass, and I lift her straight off the ground. "Tell me that's not the bullshit part."

She's on the verge of cracking. I can see it.

She interlocks our damp lips very slowly, cautiously, barely suppressing a moan. Then, motherfucker, her thighs open slightly, allowing just my growing bulge to make it beneath her skirt, between the V of her thighs. It thickens dramatically against her panties, and we groan into a hard pressing of mouths, inhaling and exhaling each other's oxygen. My God, we're not going to make this interview, are we? I'm going to drive us to a rest stop and ride her pussy in the bed of my truck, aren't I? I'm reckless and horny and throbbing, enough to make public sex feel like the only option. And that's what it becomes when she cinches her hips up and back one time, and my free hand starts to reach beneath her skirt to grip that ass—

A door slams again, and Britta gasps, twisting in my arms until I set her down.

She backs away from me a step, then another, smoothing her skirt and hair with unsteady hands. Simultaneously, we both glance toward the

interruption and find a man walking toward the building, a briefcase in his hand. I'm not sure, but I think there might also be a touch of smugness in his expression.

"We should go in," Britta says. "We're going to be late."

"Tell me to stay in Bridgeport," I demand, feeling kind of wild. Off my game. Not cautious at all, the way I would normally be with Britta. I should rein myself in and live to fight for her another day, but I'm so close to a breakthrough with us, I push too hard. "If it makes you feel better, I'll even pretend we're just friends while I'm nine deep, ringing your bell."

Her cheeks pinken like she's been slapped, even if there's unmistakable arousal in the depths of her eyes. "No, I definitely think you should go."

Why can't life have a do-over button?

Like why?

"Then I will," I say, taking her hand and guiding her toward the entrance to the building. "But you should know I'm going to miss you, too, Britta. Every day I have to go without seeing your eyes is going to be a slow death."

Her eyes soften briefly, but she doesn't respond. Her mouth remains in a flat line the whole way through security, and my desire to rewind the afternoon turns more severe—and more futile. A few minutes later, we've made it through the metal detector, and we've been directed to the waiting area where we slow to a stop, brought up short by the sight of no fewer than three dozen couples. All here to prove they have a legitimate marriage. How many of them—*us*—will actually succeed?

Britta's hand finds mine, and several bolts loosen in my chest, because I can tell she reaches for me unconsciously. For comfort. Not for show. We check in and find two seats next to each other, her side pressed up against mine, my arm draped across her shoulders.

"I'm sorry," I say against her temple.

"I know. Me too," she whispers back.

I bite my tongue to keep from asking again if she wants me to stay. I will. In a heartbeat. Doesn't she realize I'm dying for a chance to prove myself to her? Can't she *feel* it?

Then again, maybe it's for the best if I *do* go to Edmonton for the summer. Maybe I'm too close, such a constant that I'm crowding her. If I give her some breathing room, maybe she'll take the time to think. To consider me for real.

“Mr. and Mrs. Mayfield?”

We trade a steady look, then stand, holding hands as we’re led down a corridor toward an office. We’re let inside.

Britta’s hand jolts in mine, both of us recognizing the man behind the desk at the same time. He’s the man from the parking lot who walked by with his briefcase while we came very close to making out. With her legs wrapped around my waist.

“You can relax,” he says, gesturing to the chairs in front of him. “I know the real deal when I see it.”

Britta’s chest dips with relief—and I’m glad about that, but I never had a moment of doubt. Mainly, the interviewer’s words continue to ring in my head as we go through the process of the interview, nailing every question.

I know the real deal when I see it.

And I wonder . . . what if Britta never does?

Chapter Five

BRITTA

September

I slide my key into my mailbox and open the slim metal door, narrowly catching the avalanche of envelopes before they end up on the floor. Nine months into this expirationship, and I still haven't quite mastered a technique for catching Sumner's and my combined mail. Nor have I devised a way to block the catch in my throat every time I see his name on a white business envelope. Once every two weeks, I send a bundle to Edmonton, and even writing his name on the package makes me feel . . . regretful.

Like I should have asked him to stay.

We text each other daily, but it's not the same as seeing him face to face. Last night, he informed me he'd hurt his right wrist during the final day of training camp, and not being able to see that he was okay in person made me feel helpless. He's returning to Bridgeport today, and I'm checking the impulse to show up at his house with ice cream and magazines, as if he's suffered a traumatic injury that landed him in the ER. I might even sit through another showing of *A Dog's Purpose*, if it made him feel better.

Freakishly wifely behavior.

You are his wife, Britta.

Yes. I am. He has a shiny new green card to show for it.

And I don't think about our almost make-out session in the parking lot before the interview at all. I don't think about the way he drew me up off the ground with his meaty forearm and offered to pretend we're friends while he was nine deep and ringing my bell.

Like I don't think about that on a nightly basis. At all.

I realize I'm staring down at the pile of mail in my arms and shake

myself. Sumner might be coming home tonight, but I can't dwell on it. I have concert tickets. My two best friends, Kelis and Trisha, who I've known since middle school, scored babysitters for their infants, and I've finally, *finally* convinced them to set aside the mom guilt and party like we used to. My shift is being covered at Sluggers. Just because I'm a part owner now doesn't mean my bartending days are over—they're still very much alive. And exhausting.

Which is why I've been looking forward to tonight for *months*.

A chance to blow off some steam. Reconnect with my friends.

On my way into my apartment, I happen to notice one piece of Sumner's mail is a certain famous swimsuit edition of a sports magazine, a gorgeous woman on the cover tossing her hair provocatively. A stab of jealousy in the dead center of my throat catches me off guard. Is he going to . . . look at this? Does he wait for it to arrive every year?

Am I ridiculous to be jealous over a magazine when pornography is famously free on the internet? *Yes*. Especially when the jealousy pertains to my fake husband. It's just that my stomach has been tied up in knots since he left.

That's not how people feel about their friends.

We *are* friends.

That's what I wanted.

No, want. *Want*.

Meaning, my breath shouldn't catch in anticipation every time he texts me.

I hold out my hand so I can look at the golden band I haven't taken off in months and—

My phone dings, distracting me. But it's not Sumner; it's Kelis.

I'm so sorry, Brit, the baby is sick. Picked up something at day care and gave it to the whole family. We're plague ridden.

My shoulders sag, and I flop onto the couch, preparing to text her back. I'm disappointed that I won't be able to see my best friend, but mostly I just feel sympathy.

Oh no! I'm—

Before I can finish my text, another one hits the group. From Trisha.

You got it, too, Kelis? We're down for the count, too. Much puking. Fevers through the roof.
Can you give our tickets to someone else, Brit?
So so sorry. Was so excited for this.

Heat presses in behind my eyes, and I let the phone drop into my lap as I stare off into space. I'm a little ashamed of the way I feel. Let down. Depressed. Frustrated. They are the ones with sick children to cure. They have it much harder than me right this very moment. Meanwhile, I can still go to the concert if I want to, right? Alone?

No one will even know if I got home safely afterward.

That's never really bothered me before—and it doesn't bother me now. It's just that lately I feel a little left behind. Like everyone is checking off the boxes of life, and my pencil is broken. Or I didn't bring one to class at all.

Sluggers used to be the place I felt happy. Safe. Competent.

I'm not sure when going there began to feel like a chore, but lately when I turn off the lights, I don't feel as much contentment as I used to.

I'm restless.

Still, I send an upbeat text to the group, wishing Trish and Kelis good luck battling the germs and offering to pick up groceries or medicine, if needed. Then, despite the tears that seem determined to hover in my eyes, I rally, heading for the bedroom to change into the concert outfit I've been planning for weeks. It's a purple strapless minidress and cowboy boots—

My doorbell rings right as I'm pulling the garment over my head.

Frowning, I leave the bedroom and stop in front of the front door buzzer, holding down the button to talk. "Hello?"

A brief pause. "Hey, it's me. It's Sumner."

"Oh." It's nothing short of drastic, the way my skin heats at the sound of his deep baritone, my pulse pumping in my ears. There's no mistaking the happiness that jumps inside me, like popcorn popping in a microwave bag. "Welcome back, big guy. Come on up."

I hold down the button to open the door.

"That didn't sound remotely casual," I mutter to myself.

He has only been to my apartment once, before our immigration interview, just in case they asked about the layout of our "primary residence."

Most of the time, I was careful to keep all our meetings in neutral territory so he wouldn't get the wrong impression. There's no use for it, though; I'm excited to see him back here, among my things.

I'm excited to see him, period.

I run to the kitchen barefoot and shove a pile of dishes under the sink, swiping crumbs into my hand and dusting them off into the trash can. A firm knock on the door shoots my heart rate to the moon, but I order myself not to fuss with my hair on the way to let in Sumner.

But I find myself wishing I had taken a few minutes with my hairbrush when I open the door, because yeah . . . there's no pretending he doesn't look really, *really* good, despite the black wrist brace on his right hand. The injury might even enhance his ruggedness quite nicely?

For all the sense that makes.

His black hair is still wet from a shower, messy, his plain white T-shirt clinging to all sorts of thick muscles. He's got that pale hockey player complexion that makes his dark eyes look wildly intense, the veins in his biceps starting a flutter beneath my belly button. The jeans he's wearing are ancient. Worn. Tucked into untied boots.

Extremely large boots.

Don't think too hard about that.

I have to remind myself to not think about Sumner's, ahem, attributes *a lot*. But my resolve is pretty weak thanks to the memory of its *generosity* between my thighs in the parking lot over two months ago. Yeah, that recollection has remained firm. Just like Sumner.

"Hey—oh. Shit," he rumbles now, bracing his forearm on the doorframe and sweeping me head to toe with a thirsty look. "Britta, you look . . ." His swallow is audible. "Jesus."

A pleasurable blush sweeps into my cheeks before I can play it cool. Which is not like me *at all*. Men in the bar compliment me regularly, and I feel exactly zilch. Maybe I'm just relieved to see him after two long, confusing months. He's my friend, after all! "Thanks."

When his eyes find mine again, they're darker than before. He's visibly drinking me in, ounce by ounce, and he's doing a very poor job of hiding it. "You're not going out on a . . . date. In that little purple dress. Are you, Britta?"

"No."

His hand is still wrapped around the doorjamb like he's contemplating

ripping it off. “Good.”

“We agreed not to,” I remind him, flashing my wedding band.

He does the same. “Oh, don’t worry, I remember.”

“Has it been . . . hard for you?” Why am I not breathing? “Not to date?”

A muscle dives sideways in his cheek. “Not remotely. You?”

“No,” I admit.

“Good.” Before I can respond to the ragged relief in his voice, he’s taking a step forward, a lump traveling up and down in his throat. “Now, need to know where you’re going in that dress, please.”

“A concert. Wesley Stapleton? He’s playing at the Amphitheater tonight.” I don’t know why I put on such an excited smile. Maybe I’m trying to convince myself it’ll be fun going alone. “My friends were going to come with me, but their broods came down with the plague.”

I expect him to forbid me to go alone (or try), so I’m surprised when a groove forms between his brows, eyes softening. “You’re going to a concert by yourself?”

That heinous pressure is back behind my lids. “Yeah!” I laugh. “It’s fine.”

“Can I come with you?”

The tightness in my chest ebbs, and suddenly, I’m able to blink back the moisture threatening to spill out. “Really?”

He looks a little incredulous that I had to ask. “Yeah. Of course. I’ll drive.”

“Okay.” I let out a breath I didn’t realize I was holding, gratitude making me feel almost light headed. “Um . . . well. We don’t have to leave for a while. Come in and get your mail.”

“Right.”

I watch Sumner duck beneath the door on my way to the kitchen area where I left his mail sitting on the counter. Swimsuit issue sitting on top. After a quick peek over my shoulder to make sure he isn’t looking, I do something wrong. Something bad. Not only do I commit what I’m pretty sure is a federal offense called mail tampering, but when I use my elbow to knock the magazine into my trash can, I give myself definitive proof that I have a giant case of the warm fuzzies for Sumner.

Great. A crush on my husband is the absolute *last* thing I need.

“How did you hurt your wrist?” I ask, sounding hoarse.

“I sprained it on my teammate’s face.”

“Oh my God. Is he okay?”

“Yeah.” He looks genuinely perplexed. “Why?”

Hockey players. I swear to God. “You must have hit him pretty hard if you sprained your wrist punching him.”

“I apologized afterward.” Sumner rolls a shoulder. “I haven’t been in a great mood lately.”

“Oh? Why?”

SUMNER

Why? she asks me.

Britta wants to know *why* I’ve been in a dark mood while she’s standing there in a criminally short dress and cowboy boots. How is everything in the world not canceled right now? Are people still traveling, going to work, and eating in restaurants when my wife looks *this hot*?

It has always been hard to be around her without making my feelings obvious.

But being away from her has been even worse.

It’s a vicious paradox that has literally gotten me injured. Inside and out.

I missed the sight of her so fucking badly today that I came here as soon as I dropped off my bag at the house and rushed through a shower. Now all I see are surfaces. Places where I could set her ass down, kneel in front of her, and get my tongue between those thighs.

I’m *obsessed* with eating her out. And I’ve never even gotten the opportunity.

Yet I’ve thought about it day and night for the last two months. Spreading her legs open and spitting on it, rubbing my face against all that softness, and gobbling her up like dessert. I swear to God, I wouldn’t even ask to fuck her. I wouldn’t dare be that greedy. I could die happy if she just let me kiss and lap at her cunt while she squirms around and pulls my hair.

“Sumner?” she asks, glancing back at me. “Your bad mood.”

“Oh, right.” *Can you not see that I’m starving to death for you? Can’t you tell I missed you so horribly that my family couldn’t even make me smile?*

That might be a little too heavy for our first face-to-face conversation in two months, so I opt for a different truth. “I guess I’m worried that we’ve gone through all of this for my green card, and I won’t get called up to the pros. I know I’m only twenty-seven, but there’s always this feeling like . . . I don’t know. Time is running out.”

Britta stops in front of me with a handful of mail I’m assuming is mine. “It’s going to happen, Sum.”

“Yeah?” *Let me hold you.* “How do you know?”

“I know I don’t . . . don’t go to the games, but I’ve watched them on public access. And I’ve been working in Sluggers long enough to know that the kind of faith your teammates have in you is extremely rare. Okay? It’s not typical. Neither are you.”

“Thanks, wife.”

It just slips out. Probably because I’ve been calling her that in my head since leaving. It helped me feel closer to her, instead of twenty-five hundred miles away.

She blinks slowly over the word *wife*, and something I’ve never seen before in her eyes gives them sort of a melted quality. The toe of one cowboy boot turns inward, one knee pressing into the other, her tits rising and falling on a big breath. Holy shit. Does she *like* being called my wife? At this very moment, it’s probably better if I don’t know. Because thanks to my sprained wrist, I haven’t jacked off in three days, and if Britta enjoys being called my wife, I’m going to do something embarrassing, like hump the arm of her couch.

“You ever decide to come to a game, you sit in the family section, Britta. Where I can keep an eye on you. Okay? I know facing your father will be scary, but you’ll never be alone as long as I’m in the building.”

Whatever I saw in her eyes flees as soon as I utter the word *family*. “Those seats are for parents. Grandparents. Do they ever . . . make it to your games?”

“Not this season. Not in a while. My grandmother . . . passed away two years ago.” A nail hammers its way into my throat. “She was the one who bought me my first stick. Taught me how to play and signed me up for my first league. Somehow it doesn’t seem right when they come to the games without her, you know?” I smile at the vision that pops into my head—a woman with a short cap of white hair, arms crossed high on her chest. “She used to wear this red plaid hat to every game. You know, those hunter-style

caps with the ear flaps? I could see it out of the corner of my eye during every game growing up.” I shake my head. “I miss seeing that hat in the stands.”

Britta surprises me by taking a hesitant step in my direction.

Another one.

And then she slowly lays her cheek in the center of my chest.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs.

There’s no way she can’t hear the rapid slamming of my heart, so I don’t bother trying to pull back or hide it. I can’t hide from her, period. Something about her nearness and warmth, her belief in me, brings a confession pouring out of me without warning. “Britta, I should have gone pro when she was still around to see it. That was my goal, but the damn injuries kept setting me back. Now . . . I’m worried my parents are never going to see it either. All of the time they spent in the stands will be for nothing.”

She winds her arms around my waist, and it takes every hint of willpower in my body not to smother her. To let the moment happen without ruining it or doing too much. “You *will* go pro, Sum. But for what it’s worth, I’m sure . . . no, I *know* they’re already proud. And so was your grandmother. Not only because you’re talented, but because you’re a good person.” She looks up at me, eyes twinkling. “This is going to be hard for you to hear, but not everything is about hockey.”

“That’s blasphemy, Britta.”

“Uh-oh.” She chews her bottom lip. “Am I in trouble with the hockey gods?”

I know I shouldn’t—and I blame three days without beating off for muddling my brain—but I let my hands settle on her hips. I rub them in my palms and grip them hard, ready to get my hands on her ass if she gives me the slightest encouragement. *Come on. Let me slide my hands into those panties and play with something tight.* “Do you want to be in trouble with the hockey gods?” I press my mouth against her ear. “You’ve got one right here, sweetheart.”

“Sumner.” It’s a playful admonishment that turns serious when she pushes away from me, working to catch her breath. “Sum.”

The fact that she’s scolding me while her face is flushed makes me even hotter.

My hands curl into fists at my sides. I should go home. This girl wrecks

me. I don't know how to act right around her, because it feels like she should be in my arms. But she's not—and she doesn't want to be.

“Are you attracted to me?” I ask her point-blank. Knowing could kill me but not knowing is already causing a slow, painful death, so what is the difference?

Briefly, she closes her eyes and opens them, answering, “Yes, I'm attracted to you.” When I lunge for her, she holds up a hand. “W-wait. Just wait.” I'm almost shaking, it's so hard to keep my distance, but I stand stationary, vibrations racing up and down my spine. “Can you . . . can we . . . ?”

“Keep going.”

“Can we sleep together without you wanting more?” she blurts, taking her time looking at me, as if she's afraid of the answer. “Be honest with me.”

A churn starts in the pit of my stomach. I could say yes and have her. Maybe even tonight. She'd lead me into her bedroom, and I'd finally get my taste of her pussy. She would work up a sweat riding my cock all night. I'd stuff her so full and so hard, she'd have to scream into a pillow. But I vowed never to lie to Britta again—and I don't break vows. Especially not to this girl. She's my *wife*. “No. I'll want more.”

I'll want everything.

And that's the hundred percent truth.

It's more than a little absurd that having feelings for my wife is a negative thing, but here we are. Her lips press into a flat line in the wake of my confession, and she nods. “Thank you for telling me the truth. You could have lied.” She covers her face with her hands and laughs a little hysterically. “The fact that you didn't only makes me like you more.”

My chest is in shreds.

“Are we still able to go to the concert as friends?” she asks, beautiful eyes hopeful.

“If that's our only option, then yeah,” I say hoarsely. “Because there's no way I'm letting you go alone. And I . . . want to go. I want to watch you enjoy yourself.”

“As a friend.”

“As . . . a friend.”

We stare at each other for several seconds. “I'll just get my purse, and we can go.”

While waiting for her, I sort through my mail. Since most of it is junk, I

tear it in half and cross the kitchen to throw the torn envelopes and advertisements into the trash can.

Sitting right there, on the top of the garbage, is the *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit edition.

It's got my address on it.

Did she throw it away?

She must have. Britta *threw out* my swimsuit edition. And listen, it's not like I wait by the mailbox for the damn thing to arrive once a year. I actually *do* subscribe for the stories. The special edition comes as part of the package. But Britta didn't want me looking at it.

Interesting.

If she were merely attracted to me, she wouldn't go to these lengths to keep me from looking at other women, even if they're just photographs. Right?

Maybe there's more. Maybe she has feelings for me, and she's just not ready to admit them yet. Fortunately, we're married for three more months . . . which gives her plenty of time to figure those emotions out, work through them, while I wait patiently.

The longer I stare down into the garbage can, the wider my smile grows. And it has nothing to do with bikinis.

Chapter Six

BRITTA

I probably shouldn't drink tonight.

That's what I'm thinking as my temporary husband escorts me through the lobby of the venue with his huge hand on the small of my back, his heat making me feel protected. Or maybe it's the fact that his upper lip curls when someone gets too close to me. The way he guards me like the crown jewels shouldn't be such a turn-on, but Lord, it is. Everything about him is a turn-on, frankly, from his fall breeze scent to his complete honesty earlier.

No. I'll want more.

My dumb heart ticks fast at the memory of him rasping those words.

If I drink alcohol tonight, mistakes *will* be made. That truth might as well be written on a stone tablet and brought forth by Moses from the mountaintop. I will not get through the night without begging for a horizontal workout from this thunder god of hockey who loves his grandma. And then I will hurt his feelings afterward when I tell him I'm still not interested in anything resembling a relationship.

Although, if I'm being completely honest with myself . . . that resolve is beginning to wane.

Just the tiniest pinch.

When we reach our seats and he rests his arm along the back of mine, I don't feel alone. And that's not merely because I'm with another person. I've felt extremely lonely while on dates in the past. Sometimes I even feel lonely in the packed bar where I'm conversing with several people at once. It's a very singular, unfamiliar thing to sit beside another person and know they've got my back. I'll never again underestimate what it's like to be understood by someone. That's what it's like in the nook of Sumner's arm. Warm

understanding.

With a razor-sharp undercurrent of lust.

It's dark in the small arena. The opening act, a female country duo with a harmonic style, is finishing their set. The seats around us are filling, but no one is sitting in front of us, because we're in the first row of the mezzanine overlooking the general admission floor, the stage beyond. The air is cool and smells a little bit like marijuana—and there's an exhilarated buzz dancing down the sensitive skin of my arms. It's that preconcert excitement. More than that, though, it's the need to cut loose a little bit.

Or maybe even a lot.

Sumner leans over to speak against my ear in that deep rumble. “Do you want something to drink?”

His breath on my neck lights a sparkler in my belly. *No, I don't think drinking is a good idea.* That's what I should say. What comes out instead is, “A vodka tonic, maybe?”

He nods once and stands but seems reluctant to leave me.

I'll be fine, I mouth at him.

With a final suspicious look at the totally innocent bystanders around me, Sumner moves upstream through the crowd, a giant among regular-size people. I can't help but watch him the entire way, admiring his shifting shoulder muscles until he's out of sight. He returns ten minutes later and hands me a clear plastic cup, fizzing with tonic and with a lime wedge on top. There's a bottle of water in his other hand.

“You're not having a beer or anything?”

“I'm driving,” he says, appearing almost affronted that I would even suggest such a thing. “I'm driving my *wife*.”

Another round of dangerous tingles slithers downward, making my thighs feel loose and sexy. It's growing impossible to ignore how attractive I find this man, mostly because . . . it's more than physical. I admire him. I like him. And I've been missing him for two months.

Missing him *a lot*.

There's even a chance I could trust him someday—and that?

That would be an even bigger leap than love for me. Because I don't know *how* to trust.

Putting my blind faith in someone isn't a quality that exists inside me, and I don't know how to cultivate it. Briefly, I pull my phone out of my purse to check for messages. “Wow. I can't believe the bar hasn't called with an

emergency yet. The night is young, I guess.”

“You’ve been working a lot lately,” he remarks.

“I have. Trying to make small improvements here and there.”

He turns his head, interested. “Yeah? Like what?”

I ignore the feeling I’ve been having lately. Or the lack of feeling, rather, when I talk about the bar. It has always been my dream to own Sluggers, but now that I do, the magic I was expecting . . . it isn’t there. “Um. I’ve been coming in early to sand down the bar in sections, adding new varnish. Another couple of days and I should be finished. Riggs is going to love it.”

“Why?”

“He’ll be able to see his reflection in it.”

Sumner chuckles.

“The old register is gone too—I put in a POS system so we’re not handling as much cash. We’re officially a twenty-first-century bar.”

He visibly turns that over in his mind. “I’ll kind of miss the cranking sound of the old register, but that’s great, Britta. Necessary.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you.” Hearing the hint of wistfulness in my tone, I backpedal slightly. “Without the money.”

“Right.” A muscle slides up and down in his cheek. “I knew what you meant.”

I swallow hard, wishing things were easier between us. As much as I crave being around Sumner, there is this invisible knot between us tying tighter and tighter. I have no idea when it’s going to snap, but there’s a whisper of warning in the back of my head saying *soon*. But instead of being alarmed, my sex constricts, moistening me, and I dig my toes into the leather sole of my cowboy boots to counteract the rush of need. It doesn’t help.

“What else do you need done at the bar, sweetheart?”

I don’t really feel like talking about the bar, which isn’t like me. At least, it didn’t used to be. I could talk about potential improvements for hours. Now, the topic causes the back of my neck to strain. “Nothing I can’t do myself.”

“What else?” Sumner persists. “Me and the guys can help out.”

“That’s okay, Sum. I know practices are getting ready to start again.”

Briefly, he tips his head back, as if the ceiling might help him figure me out. “Britta, the guys would swim to the bottom of the ocean to find a lost earring for you. All you’d have to do is ask. Trust me, I know, because part

of me hates how much they like you.”

“Please,” I scoff. “They treat me like their sister.”

Sumner grumbles something under his breath.

I poke him in the ribs. “What was that?”

He gives me a dark look. “I said, that wasn’t always the case.”

It takes me a moment to decipher his meaning, but when I do, the events of the last twenty-one months come flying back in a series of moving frames. “Wait . . . yeah. A couple of them *did* ask me out a while back, but I said no.”

“Why did you say no?”

“Uh-uh. You tell *me* why they stopped asking me out.”

“I’m guessing because they wanted to keep their nut sacks attached to their bodies.”

The pieces are coming together *quickly*. “Sumner, what did you do?”

He has the nerve to look proud of himself. “Made you off limits, Britta. It’s a rule that is rarely invoked among the group. But once it’s done, it’s fucking done.” He leans over until our foreheads are a breath apart. “If you don’t like it, then stop being my dream girl.”

His mouth is warm and parted, our lips stroking sideways in the barest of touches, but it’s enough to shoot a zing down to my navel. “I should be angry at you. Calling dibs on me like I’m the last french fry.”

“You’re more like filet mignon, sweetheart.”

“The metaphor isn’t the issue. It’s the tactic. Toxic, macho—”

“I didn’t make you off limits because I was feeling competitive. Off the ice, I don’t care if I outdo anyone. I wasn’t in control of myself *at all*. We were in the locker room. I’d been thinking about you all fucking day with your big beautiful eyes and the way you treat customers like they’re family. The way you mother some people and give tough love to others. How protective you are of the other women, how they look up to you. How your laugh is better than any music. And the words just came out of me. ‘Touch her, and I will end your life.’ Simple.”

I’ve never actually felt the pupils expand in my eyes before.

Or my heart ripple.

But that’s what happens while his words hang in the air like big marshmallow clouds.

“There was nothing simple about that,” I whisper.

His mouth presses more firmly to mine. “Don’t I know it.”

He’s waiting for me to make the first move. I can sense it. Feel it. He’s

offering me a kiss, and all I have to do is take it. I want to take it.

Maybe even need. *Desperately.*

“You want to kiss me, Britta. Do it.”

“I . . . but . . . we . . . It’ll just be a kiss. You can’t read anything into it.”

He grinds his jaw. “Done. Fine.”

SUMNER

I’m going to regret conceding in the morning.

You can’t read anything into it, she warns me, while stuttering and blushing and all but climbing into my lap, her heart in her eyes. This girl feels something for me. She’s lying to me and herself if she believes otherwise. I shouldn’t let this kiss happen, because she is slapping a disclaimer on it, which will allow her to deny it meant something afterward, but dear God, I am weak when it comes to her. My body is starved; my heart is sick over her—and I can’t pull away.

“Done. Fine.”

The lights go out in the arena, and the crowd begins to scream for the opening act. The first few guitar strains of a song emerge from the darkness, and the volume of the cheers increases, but we’re looking at each other. Like adversaries who want badly to be on the same side. And Britta, my wife, she finally sips at my mouth, lets out a shuddering breath, then suctions onto me, drawing on my upper lip first, then my lower one, before easing her tongue into my mouth and stroking mine. Whispers my name like she’s scared.

Someone sticks my heart in a blender and hits the puree button.

Any remaining desire I have for self-preservation goes speeding away on a go-kart, and I kiss my wife like I was born to do. I sink my fingers into her hair, tilting her head for me while I ride her mouth with my own, circling our tongues, reeling from the sweet taste of her. She explores me with increasing enthusiasm, her fingers twisting in the front of my shirt, our teeth nipping, tugging, mouths surging back together. A moan comes from deep in the pit of my stomach, and she answers it without shyness. And speaking of my stomach, my erection is mashed up against it, trapped in my jeans, but it feels kind of incredible because it’s the pressure I haven’t been able to apply

for the last few days.

God, I would give anything in the world to stand her up and walk her forward to the waist-high mezzanine wall, flip up her dress, jerk her panties to the left, and bury myself in her cunt. It's a good thing we're surrounded by an audience, because I wouldn't last three seconds in there. I am an athlete in peak physical condition, and I *need* to jack off at least twice a day. Right now, the backup down there isn't a joke. Like even thinking about her pussy is triggering my balls, squeezing them up into my stomach. They've never been so stiff.

"Uh . . . Britta. Sweetheart." I pull back with a grimace, shifting in my chair and making it ten times worse. "Believe me, I want to kiss you forever, but I have a problem."

I can't help but feel a kick of pride when it takes her a full five seconds to focus her glazed eyes. "What p-problem?"

"You know how my wrist is sprained?"

She nods.

I give her a meaningful look that is no doubt brimming with pain.

She sucks in a breath. "How long since you've . . . ?"

"Three days."

Her looking down at my lap and biting her lip doesn't help matters whatsoever. "Um. Okay. That's unusual for you?"

"Severely."

Her eyes are slow to leave my lap, and when they do, they're a little unfocused. "Your left h-hand doesn't cut it, huh?"

"It's like buttering toast with a spoon, if that makes any sense." Don't look at her mouth. Or her tits. Too late, I'm devouring the sight of both. Holy fuck, *my wife is so hot*. "Bottom line, I'm a little too keyed up to be kissing you in public."

What is that expression on her face? "How much longer until you can . . . ?"

"About a week," I say thickly. "If I live that long."

"Oh." Abruptly, Britta sits back in her seat and crosses her legs, delicate muscles shifting in her throat. That's when I notice how fast the pulse is beating a few inches above her collarbone. Her dress is too thin to hide her puckered nipples, too, and I nearly crush my knees to death to keep from reaching for them.

"That kiss made you horny, didn't it?"

“Why do hockey players have to be so blunt?”

“Have you seen a hockey net? There is barely a sliver of daylight between it and the goalie. You can’t hesitate when you see opportunities. There is never time for finesse. Hence the tendency to be blunt.”

“That’s a game. This is real life.”

“You’re right, I’d use a lot of finesse with you, if given the opportunity.” My head falls back, the agony in my nether regions still very much alive and kicking. “But there wouldn’t be any finesse tonight, believe me. I’d probably snap your headboard in half.”

She moans.

The very distinct sound cuts through the crowd and pops my head up like rye bread in a toaster. Is that a tremble flowing through her thighs? What is going on with her? Sure, I’m going through hell, but we stopped kissing a few minutes ago, and she’s still out of breath. Sure, the swimsuit edition in the trash was a strong hint that Britta is attracted to me, but something more specific is going on here.

“It turns you on to know I’m one stroke from blowing up, doesn’t it?”

Pink drenches her cheeks. “*Sumner.*”

“Tell me I’m right.” I reach over and settle a hand on her thigh, even though it makes my situation worse. “You love that I’m down bad, don’t you?”

“I-I don’t know. This kind of thing has never turned me on before.”

“It’s okay that it does. I’m just wondering why.”

Eyes downcast, she starts to answer and stops. “I don’t know.”

I turn slightly and lower my mouth to her shoulder, kissing the soft skin beside the strap of her dress. “Because you’re the only one I get hungry for. And you know it.”

Her hips twisting sensually in the seat. When she attempts a laugh, it’s shaky. “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to seduce me.”

That sentiment is still hanging in the air when the house lights in the arena drop even lower, and everyone stands, screaming. The headliner is walking out onto the stage, guitar in hand, his backup band throwing themselves into the first song. It’s rock music, but it’s a little smoky, with a drumbeat in the rhythm of a heartbeat. A lot of bass.

If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were trying to seduce me.

Those words continue to ring in my head. I’d never consider myself seductive. Not on my best day. Seduction is for women, isn’t it? It’s for

Britta. Not a giant, like me. Her very existence is seductive. No one has ever used that word to describe a six-foot-five hockey player. But I remind myself of the swimsuit edition she threw away. I think of the way she kissed me. I hear her moaning over the fact that I'm stiff as nails. And I start to wonder if I might be able to seduce her after all.

On a scale from one to ten, how much heartache would that cause me?

They don't have a scale big enough to measure it. Because sex wouldn't change the fact that she doesn't want a real relationship.

She'd hold her ground. And I'd want to put myself *in* the ground.

Britta takes a few minutes to drain her drink before finally standing, like the rest of the crowd. Her movements are fluid and sensual, her hands smoothing extra slowly down the front of her dress, palms sliding over the curves of her ass, presumably to get out the wrinkles.

Lord have mercy.

Before I can ask her why she hates me, a new song comes on that sends the audience into a tailspin. A hit, maybe? Britta seems to like it if throwing her arms up over her head is any indication. The way she begins to circle her hips without moving the upper half of her body rekindles the fire in my stomach that we stoked earlier with that kiss. She tips back her head, and light from the stage spills over the smooth curve of her throat, her cleavage, those hips still working, grinding. And her hands in the air means her skirt is too high on her thighs for my sanity. When she moves a certain way, I can see the outline of her thong through the material, and my dick throbs in response.

I'm sure this makes me a caveman, but I do not like other men seeing her like this. With that blissful look on her face, her hips moving like they might if she was riding somebody. A hot streak of jealousy moves my feet before I register my own actions, and I position myself behind Britta, blocking her from the rest of the mezzanine. And that might handle some of the jealousy, but now I'm looking right down at that ass, that thong outline so close to my dick, her smooth, exposed back, and my hunger elevates to a dire level.

I put a possessive hand on her hip, just in case people haven't figured out who she came with and who she's leaving with. "Whose seducing who now?" I say, just above the curve of her neck, inhaling her cherry-lime scent, my hand beginning to massage her hip.

God, I want to fuck her so bad.

“I’m dancing, Sum.” She blinks up at me over her shoulder with mock innocence. “If I was seducing you, you’d know it.”

I grip her other hip and drag her backward a step, groaning when the tight curve of her ass presses flush against my lap. My cock. “You’ve been seducing me for almost two years, whether you meant to or not.” Those last few words are uttered through gritted teeth because she’s still dancing, giving me all this mind-blowing friction, her flimsy skirt riding up against my denim fly. A standing lap dance that I’m probably not going to survive. “You’re being cruel, sweetheart.”

“No one is forcing you to stand there and take it.”

No one is forcing me to wrap a forearm around the front of Britta’s hips and yank her up onto her toes, her backside more securely to my lap, either, but here we are, and she’s still, still, grinding on my dick, turning my blood to pure fucking fire. “Careful or you’re going to bust me.”

Thanks to our height difference, I’m looking down the front of her body, noting that her tits are starting to shudder up and down. Her head falls back against my shoulder, and she murmurs, “If your fake wife won’t help you out while your wrist is sprained, who will?”

Goddamn. *Help me out*, as in, make me come? Still, the words *fake wife* earn my teeth scraping against the side of her neck, causing her to gasp, her ass jolting in my lap. “Why did you throw away my magazine, Britta?”

“What?” she asks too quickly, her movements slowing slightly. “What magazine?”

I’m not sure if it’s the fact that we’re plastered together so tight that I can hear her thoughts, or if I’ve just been observing this girl long enough to read her mind, but I’m beginning to piece together her behavior. How she likes me being aroused for her and only her. How she doesn’t want me looking at half-naked women in a magazine. Throw in what I know about how her family broke up . . . and I think the idea of monogamy appeals to her more than she’ll ever admit. But maybe she’s scared to hope for it or believe in it.

And maybe it’s about time I *make* her.

“Burn the magazine for all I care.” I rub my mouth in the hair above her ear, wrapping my arms around her tight. “You don’t have to stop me from looking at anyone but you, because I don’t want to look in the first place. Put parental controls on my phone, my laptop, block porn sites. Track my location. Lock my dick in a cage. I’ll do whatever it takes to make you realize

I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here. I'll make you feel secure until you realize it's only ever going to be you."

The pulse at the side of her neck is going a thousand miles an hour.

When she responds, her words are halting. "I'm not . . . asking you for any of that."

"It's all on the table, regardless."

"I think we should go," she whispers, breaking free of my hold. She stoops down and retrieves her purse, eyes landing on everything but me. We sidestep down the row together, past people singing along with the music. Did I say the wrong thing to her? Or did I say the right thing, and she's too scared to accept what I'm offering?

My money is on the latter.

None of that brings me closer to being with Britta for real, though.

Only she can do that.

Chapter Seven

BRITTA

When Sumner pulls up outside my building and puts his truck in park, I unfasten my seat belt and dive out the passenger side door, fumbling my keys with useless fingers. My heart hasn't stopped racing since we left the concert prematurely. The ride home was dead silent, so he must have heard the incessant beating. It's going off like gunfire in my ears.

I reach the entrance of my building and hear the driver's side door slam, too, indicating that Sumner is following me. Walking me home. Like a gentleman. But I really should not let that happen. For one, his unorthodox offer is still jogging around in the forefront of my mind.

Put parental controls on my phone, my laptop, block porn sites. Track my location. Lock my dick in a cage. I'll do whatever it takes to make you realize I'm not going anywhere. I'm staying right here. I'll make you feel secure until you realize it's only ever going to be you.

I'm still in shock over the offer itself, which I would *never* accept, because that would make me controlling. But Sumner *wanting* to give me those reassurances felt like a giant gulp of oxygen. There's no pretending otherwise. And that tells me a lot about myself that I didn't know this morning. I'm scarred from the nature of my parents' divorce and my father's infidelity. I already knew that. But the pure yearning in my chest when Sumner told me it would only ever be me? I didn't expect that. I didn't see it coming.

Have I been harboring a secret hope that I could be in a normal, functioning relationship someday? Or has Sumner created that desire in me?

When I see his reflection approaching behind me in the glass door of my building and a ripple carries through my heart, I'm terrified that I have

my answer.

It's . . . him. It's just Sumner.

Okay. Okay, I admitted it. I'm definitely falling hard for this man. But I need some time to sit with this knowledge before he comes for any more of my vulnerabilities.

"I don't need you to walk me to my door."

"I will always make sure you get inside safely, Britta."

Shaking my head, I unlock the door and stomp inside, through the vestibule and up the stairs, trying very hard not to think about the fact that Sumner could almost definitely see up my skirt as he follows in my wake. In his current state, the view is probably causing him a lot of pain, and I don't put a little extra sway in my hips, because that would be mean.

I'd probably snap your headboard in half.

A pulse between my thighs is beginning to pound with mounting insistence when I reach my apartment door. Do I want to have sex with Sumner?

Yes. Obviously, I do.

It's the commitment he will expect afterward that scares me. Maybe with a little more time and thought, it won't cause me to break out in a cold sweat, but right now, it does. And the idea of hurting his feelings is repugnant.

At the entrance to my apartment, I turn on a heel. "Do you want to come in and get your magazine?"

"Nope," he says without hesitating. "Give me your phone."

"Why—"

My mouth falls open as he steals my purse and yanks out my phone. "Password," he says, holding it up. I narrow my eyes at him for a moment but eventually tap in the four digits, admittedly interested in seeing where this is going. He holds his phone and mine side by side, his big thumbs swiping and tapping at the screens for approximately thirty seconds before he hands mine back to me. "You're going to know where I am from now on."

Just like that, it's hard for me to breathe. "I didn't ask you for that."

"No, but you're getting it anyway. And if you ever want to share your location with me, I wouldn't mind knowing where you are, either," he says in the understatement of the year. He takes one step closer to me, two, propping his forearm above my head on the door. Lowering his mouth until it's a whisper away from mine. "You like the reassurance, Britta, so why shouldn't

I give you something that's so easy? I've got nothing to hide, and I never will."

I'm not sure what comes over me, but I physically cannot do anything but kiss him.

I twist my fist in the collar of his shirt and pull him in close, our mouths muffling the mutual moan we let out, and the kiss goes from flame to roaring inferno in the space of five seconds. As soon as I open my mouth and his tongue sweeps in possessively, I'm flattened between his hard body and the door, Sumner's lips firmly assaulting mine from above, his erection blunt and ready against my belly.

Desperately, I search for some self-preservation, and it's nowhere to be found. There is only his touch, his presence, which is beginning to become more and more of a given in my life. "Come inside," I whisper, tracing the button of his jeans. "Come to bed."

He makes a broken sound against my lips. "Please don't tease me."

"I'm not teasing you." I drag my palm down the thick curve of his erection, stroke, stroke, stroking him through his jeans. "Put this inside of me, Sumner."

"Britta, get the door open," he rasps, reaching for my keys, his hands shaking. "Oh God. I've wanted you so fucking long."

It's those words that wake me up, remind me we're in different places. He's ready to be married for real, and I'm just beginning to test the waters of a possible commitment. I'm not ready to dive into a . . . real relationship without knowing the depth and temperature of the water, am I? Maybe I need to wade in slowly? "Before we go any further, I just . . . I just need to make sure you know that tonight . . . it's not . . ."

He stops, scrutinizing me, his chest dipping low on an unsteady breath. "It's just sex. Is that what you're telling me?"

"Can it just be about sex *this* time?"

A muscle ticks in his cheek. "No."

That single word is like a fireplace poker to the throat. Anger at myself sweeps through my bones, frustration over my inability to trust curling my fingers into my palms. I could keep trying to convince him to come inside, would probably succeed, but I don't want him to regret tonight or be disappointed when I can't cuddle and talk about the future afterward. I have to respect his feelings as much as he is respecting mine. "Okay," I whisper, nodding once. "I'll . . . I guess I'll see you in a few days."

“A few days,” he repeats, staring at my mouth.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “Thanks for coming with me tonight.” I have to stop looking into his expressive eyes, because they’re making me very aware of my heart. How hard it pounds for this man who hides nothing from me. I look down at my keys, finding the one for my apartment, sliding it into the lock, turning and opening the door. “Good night, Sum—”

“Fuck it,” he growls, spinning me around, his mouth swooping down on mine.

It’s a kiss full of frustration and surrender and lust. So much of everything that my knees lose function, and he has to catch me on the way down, hauling me back up against his body.

“Britta?” he says against my mouth, breathing heavily.

“Yes?”

“I was raised not to use my strength against a woman. But I will if you ask me to.”

I’ve never experienced such a raw pull of muscle so low in my stomach. Not in my life. And the pure hunger it leaves behind gives me no choice but to say, “Yes, please.”

With very little effort or exertion, Sumner throws me over his shoulder and kicks open my apartment door, walking straight in like he owns the place.

SUMNER

There are moments during a game, usually when my team is losing at the end of the third period, that I’m able to lock into a higher sense of purpose. I will tell myself, *I’m going to fucking win*, and then I will stop thinking altogether. It’s just action. Motion. Adrenaline. I don’t even know my own name in those moments, I’m so locked into completing the mission.

That’s where I’m at right now while I carry Britta toward her bedroom.

Only the adrenaline and need are about ten times more severe.

And I know I should have left. I should have gone, because Britta is not head over heels for me the way I am for her. Not yet. Maybe not ever. I’m self-aware enough to know that I need her to be. I’m desperate for us to be on

the same page. Fucking her is going to feel so good, but it's going to be a long, hard fall afterward. All she wants is sex.

My dick is in critical condition, though, and my reckless heart is begging me to get close to her now, now, now and deal with the consequences later—and I have no choice, because she has given me the green light to mete out some rough sex, and I'm in her bedroom, which is so perfectly her, my throat starts to ache as soon as I'm over the threshold.

Deep royal blues. Gold-and-white stripes.

A bookcase lit with Christmas lights.

Citrus.

That's all I'm able to process before I throw her down on the bed and start to unfasten my jeans, hands shaking. My balls are so full and heavy, they feel like they're a couple of weights sitting in my stomach, which is another reason I should stop. *Stop*. I'm going to come too fast. This could be my one chance to be inside my wife, and I've got about ten good pumps in me, goddammit. But there's no way in hell I can do anything but plow forward.

Because, holy shit, would you look at her?

As soon as I threw her down on the bed, she sat up and reached back to unzip her dress, her gaze intent on my fly, her cheeks deepening with color. The straps fall loose around her arms, then lower to her waist, leaving her in this black bra that pushes her tits up like two ripe apples, and I almost die. No, I am. I'm dying. I'm going to climax in my pants over the fact that this is happening at all. I'm about to sleep with Britta. My wife. The girl I've been obsessing over since the moment I laid eyes on her.

"Britta, Jesus, you are so fucking beautiful." I leave my zipper halfway down and strip off my shirt, enjoying the way she catches her breath, her fingers twisting in the comforter at what she sees. I'm not vain by any stretch of the imagination, but there's no use pretending I'm not a brick shithouse with enough muscle for three men—and the lust that transforms her expression tells me she likes that. A lot. *Thank God*. "Let's get the rest of your clothes off. Safely. If I start kissing you again first, they're going to get ripped in half."

"Ohhh. Um . . ." She pushes at her dress clumsily, like her hands aren't working, and pride moves in my chest. I'm rattling her. Good. She's been rattling me as far back as I can remember, because I swear to God, my memories start with the night I met her. "Can you undress me?"

“Britta, I’ve been living to undress you.”

A shudder goes through her, those incredible tits swelling against the black silk of her bra. “I didn’t know it was possible to get wet from dirty talk,” she says haltingly, arching her back and reaching behind herself to unsnap the undergarment—and I watch in absolute awe as she shows me her bare breasts for the first time, two cherry-tipped miracles that make me throb *everywhere*. “Why doesn’t it sound cheesy when you do it?”

“I . . . what?” My hands move on their own, taking her dress the rest of the way off and then throwing it to the floor. Now she’s in a thong. She’s in *nothing but a thong*, and I’m growing less and less confident in those ten pumps. It might be closer to five. “I can’t think straight enough to answer your question, sweetheart. Have you *seen* you?”

“*You’re* gorgeous,” she blurts, sitting up slightly, curling a fist in my waistband and tugging me down on top of her, which takes very little encouragement. “You’re so, so gorgeous, Sumner,” she murmurs, those words ending on a moan when I settle my weight fully on top of her, and we start to kiss, my hips rolling forward between her thighs, her fingers tracing the slopes of my shoulders, the hockey-sore muscles of my back. We kissed at the concert, but there was restraint involved that is gone now. Long gone. I’m stroking my tongue into her perfect mouth the way I want to stroke my cock into her body, humping her through my jeans and her panties, the urgency building to a fever pitch within seconds.

“Britta.” I look down into her face while dry fucking her, memorizing the sound of her whimper, the way she digs her knees into my sides. “I’m going to eat your pussy until you scream. Just lie there and take it.”

It’s like her whole body starts to hum, teeth sinking into that lush bottom lip, vibrations passing through her. “If you insist.”

“I’m not going to be neat about it. You have a problem with that?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“You will.”

I kiss her mouth one more time, then pull back, looking her in the eye while I circle a hand around her throat, making sure she’s okay with it. And damn, she is. Her eyelashes flutter, and her thighs tremble a little, putting me even further on edge. Holding her there with just enough pressure to get her excited, I finally, *finally*, get my mouth on her tits. I lick both firm little globes until they’re covered completely in my spit, taking a moment to admire them, before tapping the flat of my tongue against her nipple, flicking

it, then sucking deeply, drawing until I can feel her swallow thickly against the palm of my hand, followed by a gasp.

“Sumner.”

“Hold on, I’m apologizing for the way I’ve treated them in my dreams.” I lick to the opposite nipple and take it into my mouth on a groan, because the taste of her is actual milk-and-honey-flavored heaven. “I’ve done some very bad things to these tits in my head, Britta.”

Her fingers slip into my hair, twisting, her body writhing with a little more insistency every time I suck deep. “Like what?”

I shake my head, mentally admonishing myself for bringing this up. “Shit a man doesn’t do to his wife.”

“Tell me,” she whispers.

“No.”

“You’re holding my throat, and I wouldn’t have expected that from you.” She fits a hand over mine, and we squeeze her there together, her pupils dilating in the darkness. “And I like it.”

We’re down to three pumps, ladies and gentlemen. “Britta, please . . . ,” I groan, moving my hips faster, slapping hard between her thighs. God, oh God, I’m not even inside her yet, and my life is flashing in front of my eyes.

“Sumner, you’re going to do these things with me . . .” She wets her lips, her words releasing in a harsh exhale. “Because if you do them to someone else, I will have to murder them with my bare hands.”

At first, I’m not sure I heard her correctly. But . . . did I?

I did.

My wife is possessive.

Part of me wants to laugh out loud because the very idea that I could even *consider* another woman is so far outside the realm of possibility, she has no idea. What women? Where? I’m blind to every last one of them. There’s only Britta.

Mainly, however, I’m fucking outraged that she might spend a single second feeling jealous. My wife? Jealous? No. *Never*. I enabled her to track my location on her phone as a formality, but deep down, I didn’t think she needed it with any kind of immediacy.

I drag my open mouth up her throat and fasten it over hers, suctioning her into a hard kiss before pulling back an inch, leaving our foreheads pressed together. “I’ve never thought of spitting on and slapping another woman’s tits. Only these.” I massage her breast in my hand, listening to her

breath stutter in and out, gratified to see wonder instead of hesitancy. “Mentally, I’ve pushed these sweet things together and fucked them so many times. Come on them. Made you lick it up—”

I’m not even finished yet, and she’s shoving my jeans down, leaning up to snag my mouth in a frantic kiss. Together we work my pants down below my hips, followed by my briefs, but I catch her wrist before she can attempt to fist my cock.

“Next time, Britta, I’ll let you play with my dick as long as you want. But tonight, I’m barely going to hold it together long enough to give you head. And I really, really need to get my tongue in it. If you think I’ve been fantasizing about doing filthy things to your tits, it’s nothing compared to how nasty I’ve been licking this pussy.” I kiss her hard, nip at her chin with my teeth. On my way down her body, I stop at her tits, and looking her in the eye, I spit on each of them once, rubbing my saliva everywhere with my fingertips, then slap at them gently. Harder, sharper, when she arches her back and moans to encourage me.

Son of a bitch, she’s into it. Nails digging into my shoulders, hips refusing to stay still as I smack those beauties and watch them bounce, shake for me. I’m rubbing my erection against her thigh, and the friction is making me see double.

Get down there and make her come.

I’m running out of time, and there is no way on God’s green earth that I’m leaving this bedroom until she’s not only satisfied but convinced she just had a religious experience. But I can’t keep my hands off her tits, even as my open mouth skates down her belly, laps at the soft skin there, then takes bites out of her sexy hips. I press my face into her mound and inhale deeply, letting the honey scent of her soak into my fucking bones.

“I’m taking your panties off now, Britta.”

“Yes,” she rasps. “Okay.”

“Damn.” I bite her through the damp cotton. “My wife is fucking soaked.”

She tears at the comforter. “Sumner. Please.”

“I’m getting there.” I slide my fingers into the waistband of her thong and begin peeling it down, revealing inches of golden skin. “Just want to enjoy these final few seconds before everything else in life is ruined for me.” Glistening bare flesh. Completely bare. I’m not expecting it. I don’t have a no-hair preference; I just have a preference for my wife—and this is what she

looks like. Smooth and aroused and mine to satisfy. “God *damn*, Britta. *Fuck*. Look at that pretty fucking cunt. I can’t believe I get to have it.”

I bury my face in her inner thigh and squeeze my eyes closed, inhaling and exhaling, attempting to get myself under control. I cannot, under any circumstances, rub my tortured dick against the edge of the mattress, even though my nuts are demanding release, my body imploring me for friction. I can’t or this is over.

Digging deep for the final dregs of my stamina and willpower, I turn my face into her pussy and rub my mouth against her, parting her lips and, *oh Lord*, just writhing my tongue around in all that moisture. Exploring all those different valleys with long, groaning licks, while my hands shove her thighs open. Yes, shove. Because I’m pretty sure the taste of her is turning me into an animal, my upper lip peeling back in a snarl when I find her clit and get my first kiss. That’s how I greet that swollen bud, with a gentle pressing of my lips, before I quite honestly lick the sweet hell out of it. I know my fucking job, and I perform it, spreading her hot legs wide and tonguing that creamy wife pussy until I forget to breathe. Who cares about breathing when she’s pulling on my hair by the roots, hiccuping my name once, then full-on screaming it.

And I keep going. I want more. More screaming. More of this sugary taste. More of her thighs trembling in my hands, wetness dripping down my chin. I rake my tongue down to her hole, twist it in as deep as I can, before moving back up to her clit and worshipping it. Light, rough, light, rough, her hips wiggling around beneath me, her hands pulling me closer, closer, like I need any encouragement to get as close to this pussy as possible.

“Sumner!” she’s screaming. “Don’t stop. Don’t, don’t, *don’t!*”

I’m sweating, moaning, I can’t get enough. “So fucking sweet,” I slur against her flesh, pushing two fingers inside her entrance, my cock seeping liquid as soon as I discover what she feels like. Hot and tight. Clenching around my knuckles. Poised to orgasm. Fuck yes. I twist my fingers around, thanking God for making them long, finding that rough spot inside her and tickling it fast, so fast, while my tongue exploits her clit between my tongue and bottom lip—and she blasts off, a stick of dynamite that has reached the end of its fuse.

“Ohhhh my God!” She shakes like a washing machine on the spin cycle. “*Sumner!*”

I lap up everything she gives me like a greedy dog, gratification

washing over me like a golden wave, because I've finally made my wife come, but I'm also highly, highly aware that it's time to fuck. There's no help for it. This is the most turned on I've ever been in my life; she's wet and ready, and my heart is in my throat, reminding me it's my first time with Britta, and I can't stem the tide of emotion that rushes into my chest, like a dam has burst.

Aroused, heartsick, desperate, I climb on top of her, push her legs apart, and guide myself to the only place I want to be. Need to be. "Do I need a condom, sweetheart?" I ask raggedly in between rough kisses of her mouth.

"No. I'm good, I'm good," she pants. "And I'm on the pill."

"Me too. I mean . . . I'm good health-wise. Not on the pill."

She breathes a giggle against my mouth, and I fucking fall in love with her. I mean it. I fall dead in love with my wife, because laughing with her when we're this intimate is the most perfect thing imaginable. I'm connected to her in this way that's almost terrifyingly deep—and I know she connects to me in the same way, because her smile slips away, and she looks vulnerable. No, I won't allow her to feel anything but good and strong and safe with me, so I seal our mouths together and drive my cock into her snug body, the oxygen immediately disappearing from my lungs, thanks to her being so perfect. So perfectly mine.

"You're incredible," I manage to say when my head stops spinning, my hips rolling in a cautious but thorough way that makes her let out a strangled cry against my lips. "You're warm and wet and beautiful, and you fit me so well, Britta. God, I *knew* you would feel like this. Like my last woman. I found you." I pull out almost the entire way, then power back in, deep, holding, looking into her eyes. "You are my *last*. I'm not going anywhere. Do you understand me?"

"Sumner . . .," she says unevenly, conflict in her eyes but not a trace of it in her body.

No, she has her thighs spread wide for my cock, fingernails digging into my ass and urging me on, so I pin her down rough and give it to her. The conflict fades from her expression, replaced with bliss, and she screams in my ear, grinding her hips up to match my ungodly rhythm, my sex entering her with damp blows, a sound that fills my ears, the tempo turning faster, *faster*.

"Fuck! I'm sorry. I'm being too rough," I grit out.

"No, you're not," she gasps, clenching her sex around me and making

me moan loud enough to shake the windowpanes. “Feel how much I like it?”

“Yeah.” I bear down harder, my mind blown when she mewls in response, clearly loving the aggression, the frantic pace as much as I am. “Wanted to end the night on your back, didn’t you? It was going to happen soon as you wiggled that ass in my lap at the concert.”

“Yes! I wanted you to take me home . . .”

“You told your husband, fuck the rubber and give it to me raw, didn’t you, sweetheart?”

She whines my name, stops breathing, and begins to shake, pussy cinching up around me like a belt, another climax chasing itself from the top of her head to her knees, shaking them around my hips. *God yes.* A thing of beauty. But I’m only a couple of minutes into the best sex of my life when my balls start to quicken, and everything clenches up tight, ready to let go.

I’m starving for relief.

“*Britta,*” I grit out, scooping her ass up with both hands, get my knees underneath me, and pummel her inexcusably, my stomach muscles tightening like barbed wire around a fist. “That’s your husband’s cock. Learn to love it.”

“I do.” Her eyes are glazed, voice hoarse. “I love it. *I love it.*”

I stroke into her a few more times like this and flatten her to the mattress, yanking her knees up to her armpits, then lifting and dropping my hips, so I’m driving down into her from above, hips humping up and down while my forehead remains glued to hers. “Learn to love me too,” I demand, in my own vulnerable state where my head and heart and lust are in a jumble, and I have zero control over what comes out of my mouth. “Love me like I love you.”

My body lets go of the immense tension, and the enormity of the bliss fucking blinds me. I dig my face into her neck and use my feet as leverage on the mattress to grind myself deep, deep, deep, spurting into her warmth, the monstrous pressure that has been building not only for the last few days but since the second I met this girl, rippling out of me in a torrent of relief. I’m roaring in gratitude and pain, but it’s the best kind of pain, because there is an end on the horizon.

At least physically.

As soon as I collapse on Britta and my brain comes back online, I know I messed up.

I said too much way too soon.

She told me at the door that this would just be sex, and I respond by

saying I love her? Am I fucking crazy? Her body might be pliant beneath me, but she's eerily silent, apart from her labored breathing. She's not going to say it back. *Of course* she's not.

Hot embarrassment sweeps me. Irritation at myself for letting my lust and my mouth get the better of me before it was time. She's been open about her fear of commitment, and she has a very good reason for that fear . . . and I didn't respect it enough. I wasn't sensitive enough to consider these reasons she confided in me. I blew it.

My chest feels like it's full of broken glass, and I will not be able to withstand the talk she's about to give me. Where she lets me down easy. Or tells me to give her space. Her silence is saying all of it loud and clear. I love someone who isn't prepared to return the feeling—so I just need to go. That's what she wants. Giving Britta what she wants is what I should have done tonight, instead of turning this into a feeling-fest.

Just in case I'm misjudging the situation, I lift my head and look down into her eyes—

And she's a deer in headlights.

"I'm going to go," I mutter, pulling out of her with a wince and rolling off the bed. It's so silent in the room that my zipper coming up sounds like a rocket launch. "I'll . . . we'll talk."

"Sumner, I'm sorry—"

"You have nothing to be sorry about, Britta," I say firmly, finding my shirt on the floor and then pulling it on, shoving five fingers through my hair. "Are you . . . ?" I stop at the edge of the bed, hating the fact that she's now hiding her naked body behind a pillow. "Was I too rough at all?"

"No," she whispers emphatically, searching my eyes. "I loved every single second—"

I don't have time to savor the relief that I wasn't overly aggressive with my wife. "Britta, I don't need to hear the 'but.' Okay? Not tonight."

She looks down at the twisted comforter. "You're just going to make love to me like *that* and leave?"

"I'm not leaving *you*. I never would," I half shout. "Just the apartment."

Does she . . . *want* me to stay? Am I misreading everything and letting the unthinkable possibility of her cutting me off rule my behavior? Maybe? I start to ask her what she would *like* me to do, but she launches herself off the bed, and now she's standing on the opposite side of the room than me. "Go, then!"

No. Why does she look so exposed? That's the opposite of how I want to make her feel. I want her to feel protected with me at all times. She might as well be ripping my heart straight out of my chest.

"Go," she whispers again, no longer looking at me.

I take a big step in her direction out of instinct, suddenly desperate to go back two minutes in time, wrap my arms around her in that bed, and tell her everything is going to be fine. That she doesn't have to love me back, that I will stay and stay and *stay* regardless. In my humiliation and self-pity, have I lost my chance to do that? The answer seems obvious when she steps backward, away from me, her back hitting the wall of her bedroom.

The sight of her retreating is almost the final blow, the thing that sends me stumbling out there with my bloody heart in tow, to go lick my wounds.

Except I told her I was going to be permanent in her life—and I meant it.

"I'm not taking back what I said. I love you. I'm *immovable*, Britta. I'm not moving. And I'm not going anywhere." Observing her closed-off body language, I swallow what feels like a mouthful of metal scraps. "But I can see you want space right now, so I'm giving it to you."

A tear rolls down her cheek. She swipes it away quickly, but I can see her relief.

That I'm giving her space or that I'm not giving up on us?

As if I ever could.

"My family is coming to visit in a week. My birthday is the day before our season opener, so they decided to kill two birds with one stone." I pause for a breath, terrified I'm about to ask too much. I already told her I love her, though, so what do I have to lose? "Come meet them. Come be with me. God knows I'm already with you."

Leaving her apartment when she looks so vulnerable is the hardest thing I've ever done, but it's my only option. All I can do is pray that my patience pays off.

I haven't even made it to my truck when I get a notification on my phone.

Britta has shared her location with you.

I'm still reeling from shock, joy, and disbelief, when I get the best text message of my life.

Britta: I'll be there.

Chapter Eight

BRITTA

One week later

I lift the lid off the pot, giving the steam a wary sniff.

I, Britta, made broccoli cheddar soup.

From scratch. For my husband's birthday party tonight.

Who am I?

I got the recipe off a reputable website, but I've never made it before, and it probably tastes like hot garbage, though I'm too afraid to taste it and find out. I'll probably just leave it in the car and not bring it inside where actual people, a.k.a. Sumner's entire family, can try some. No one wants to go to the emergency room tonight with food poisoning.

For the eight hundredth time, I jog into my bedroom and look at myself in the full-length mirror, still not sure if the outfit I chose is in-law-meeting material. Ankle boots, a soft, snug T-shirt tucked into a loose flowery skirt. It took me an hour to locate my curling iron, but my hair is lying in soft waves; my makeup is done. I'm a little overdressed, but I want Sumner's family to know I made an effort.

I want them to know that I think their son is worth an effort.

Because he is.

If the last week alone has taught me anything, it's that . . . I can't stand being without Sumner anymore. How can I feel the absence of Sumner so profoundly when he's only been in my bed once? I don't know. But I do know that . . . I want him there. I want him to stay next time, hold me, sleep beside me. And these are desires I never expected to have in my lifetime.

It is this specific man that changed my mind, my heart. Sumner.

I run nervous fingers through the waves of my hair one final time, then

transfer the soup into the biggest Tupperware container I have, using two oven gloves to transport the still-hot liquid to the back seat of my car, where I secure it with a seat belt.

Nerves snap and crackle in my fingertips and belly on the short drive to Sumner's house, and when I arrive, I sit outside in the driver's seat, staring in through the illuminated window at the merriment within. I can see the faces of an older man and two women, presumably Sumner's father and some of his sisters, plus a couple of husbands, and they look so . . . joyful. Just to be together. Their body language speaks of love and fondness.

This is a family. The forever kind.

Since the moment my father dropped the bombshell on me and my mother, I've lived with the belief that such a painful tragedy can happen to anyone. At any time. That letting people close meant opening myself up for an eventual blow that I won't see coming. They *will* eventually choose someone else over me. They will decide to move on, and I'll be left lonely and reeling, wondering if I was the problem.

Watching Sumner's family through the window, seeing the visible proof of how much they cherish each other, isn't enough to disprove my lifelong theories . . . yet. But I am willing to watch and see. Maybe they will prove me wrong. And allowing for that possibility means I've come a long way already.

One of the women in the window rubs some of the condensation off the glass, spying me sitting in my idling car at the curb. She turns to the room, gesturing wildly—and then the front door of the house quite literally bursts open, and adults and children spill out onto the lawn. I briefly consider putting the car in drive and flooring it, but a second later, I realize something. These people definitely would have chased me down.

"Hi, Britta!" calls a young woman, a child sitting on her hip.

"Holy shit, she's beautiful," remarks another one of the sisters.

"Not as beautiful as you, dear," drones a dutiful husband, who is promptly fist-bumped by one of the other husbands.

"Hey." Sumner's mother knocks on the windshield. "What are you doing sitting out here in the cold, honey? Get inside!"

"Oh, um . . ." I fumble with my seat belt, desperately searching for Sumner in the throng of people. "Oh boy," I whisper to myself. "I guess this is happening."

I take a gulping breath and climb out of the car, trying to pretend like

my pulse isn't pumping like a jet engine. "Hi. I'm Britta." I stick a clammy hand out toward the closest sister for a shake, and I'm pulled into a back-slapping bear hug instead. "Oh!" I manage, though my windpipe is being crushed. "It's so nice to meet you."

"I'm Syd. The one holding the kid is Chrissy. We've got two more sisters back home, but one is too knocked up to fly, and the other just started a new job. They're demanding pictures of you, so don't get alarmed if I start snapping away like a stalker."

"Oh, no, I don't mind—"

"Out of the way! Let me get a look at my daughter-in-law," booms Sumner's mother, elbowing her way into the fray and then jerking me into a swaying embrace. "My son hasn't stopped talking about you since we arrived."

"Mom," complains Sumner from somewhere in the group, but everyone is crowded too close for me to see him. "Enough. You're scaring her."

"I own a bar where half the clientele are hockey players," I mutter, craning my neck to search for him. "I don't scare that easy."

Everyone laughs.

"What is that in the back seat?" inquires Syd. "Looks like food."

"I love food." This, from one of the husbands.

"It's . . . nothing. Really." I block the rear window with my body, self-doubt creeping into my throat. "I forgot to bring it inside last night. From the bar. A customer brought it in—"

"Nope. Looks hot."

"Oh, well . . . you know how powerful Tupperware can be . . ."

"Soup." Sumner's father inspects the container through the window and nods, making eye contact with everyone. "That's definitely soup."

All right, I have to own this. Why didn't I taste it, though? Huge oversight.

"Okay. Yes." A swallow gets stuck in my throat, but it dislodges when Sumner finally moves into view, his chest lifting and plummeting when he sees me. Several emotions roam across his features. Relief, yearning, possessiveness. *Britta*, he mouths, coming toward me while glancing between me and the back seat. "I guess I made . . . like, I don't know. It's broccoli cheddar soup?"

There is a collective gasp from the assemblage.

"Oh God. What?" I search the faces of the group. "Did someone else

already make it?”

“No.” Sumner’s mother sniffs and draws me back into a hug. “You made my son’s favorite food, that’s all. It’s appreciated.”

“That soup is a bitch to make,” points out Chrissy, looking impressed.

“That’s like ten thousand brownie points,” says one of the husbands. “Respect.”

Sumner has been walking toward me slowly, as if in a trance, and now he blocks everyone and everything out with his ridiculous size. I inhale the sight of him, this man who has occupied my every waking thought since the last time I saw him, standing in my bedroom looking so fierce and frustrated and . . . sure of me. Sure of *us*. “You made me soup, sweetheart?”

It is a powerful thing, the way my heart begins to hang glide around my chest as soon as he’s close to me. “It’s probably terrible.”

“You remembered. And you made it. There’s no way it’s terrible.”

“Why is everyone so quiet?” I whisper.

Sumner reaches up and tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “My grandma used to make broccoli cheddar soup. No one has made it since she passed. It was her thing.”

“Now it’s your thing,” said Sumner’s mother. “Britta’s famous broccoli cheddar.”

“This calls for a live taste test,” Syd yells. “Someone go get a spoon.”

“On it, honey,” sighs a husband, turning for the house and returning less than thirty seconds later with a fistful of spoons. “Here we go.”

“Oh, no. Really?” My voice is muffled when Sumner pulls me up against his chest, wrapping his arms around me and kissing the crown of my head. “Can’t we wait until everyone is drunk?”

That gets a round of laughs out of the family, but no one heeds my suggestion. Sumner’s sister opens the passenger side door and unbuckles the soup, then drops the container unceremoniously on the trunk of my Honda. Pops off the lid.

“Should I go first?” she asks.

Sumner drags me in that direction, still locked in his arms. “No way. My wife made that soup. I get the first bite.”

I bury my face in his chest, groaning. Therefore, I sense, rather than see, someone hand Sumner a spoon. I use one eye to peek as he dips the utensil into the still-piping hot broccoli cheddar soup, bringing a giant-size bite to his mouth. I’m momentarily mesmerized by his long corded throat and how it

flexes when he swallows, but then I'm zipped back to reality, because he's laughing.

And I can't help it. I kind of start laughing, too, because it's a relief to have a verdict either way. Not to mention, this whole scene is bananas. I'm standing in the street with my in-laws, who I was never supposed to meet, but they have now become a broccoli cheddar soup focus group, and the fact that this meeting is so unconventional is easing my nerves in a way I couldn't have expected. "It's that bad?" I ask him, still laughing.

"No. It's that *good*, Britta." I'm so shocked by this statement that I'm not prepared when Sumner tosses the spoon onto my trunk, draws me up onto my tiptoes, and plants a kiss on me, right there in front of his entire family.

They cheer, whistle, and bang on the roof of the car.

"Happy birthday," I stammer against his lips when he draws back, my pulse going haywire over the look in his eyes. It's . . . affection. The deep kind that I've never experienced.

"It's more than happy." He picks me up and carries me toward the house, locked tightly against his chest. "It's my best birthday yet."

Chapter Nine

SUMNER

Don't get me wrong, I love watching Britta get to know my family. I could lean against the living room wall and witness their bond form forever—and I damn well plan on it. The way she starts laughing easier and easier with my sisters. How she answers my mother's nine thousand questions about Sluggers, how we met, and if she wants babies someday (also, how many?). The patience she employs with my father when he launches into the intricacies of the Canadian economic system.

Britta is . . . fucking dynamite.

And they adore her. Just like I knew they would.

Just like I do.

My wife made me soup. I'm not sure I've ever been so close to tears in my life. And I wasn't lying, the soup was an eleven out of ten. It doesn't taste exactly like my grandmother's, but that's one of the things that makes it perfect. It's uniquely Britta's, and it's not here to replace anything. It's Britta's spin.

Speaking of Britta and spins . . .

I really, really need to take her for one.

In case that wasn't clear, I need to get her underneath me. Or on top of me. Or bent over something, just anywhere and any position, goddammit. It has been one hellish week since the last time I was inside this girl, and I'm about to lose my mind. Coming inside her once wasn't even enough for one *night*, let alone a week.

There is one very big problem, however, and that is my parents, two of my sisters, their husbands, and three kids are crashing here on various couches and air mattresses tonight. Even if Britta slept in my bed and we locked the door, the sounds would travel. Especially considering I plan to

fuck her like the survival of the planet depends on her having an orgasm.

“Hey,” I say, trying to sound as casual as possible. “It’s, uh . . . getting late. Britta, you’re staying here tonight. Aren’t you? In my . . . room.”

Thankfully, my wife doesn’t catch the not-so-subtle looks my sisters send me.

The ones that say, *Wow, dude, try and sound a little less like a horn dog.*

“I mean, no, I didn’t really plan on it. You have a game tomorrow.”

My lips twitch, because I see where this is headed. “Yeah . . .”

“You need to get a good night’s sleep, right?” Everyone in the room snickers in response, and Britta’s cheeks turn pink as a result, followed by her backpedaling. “Not that you *wouldn’t* get a good night’s sleep if I were here. For whatever reason. That’s not what I meant.”

“It kind of was, though,” Chrissy says, patting Britta on the shoulder.

“You should stay. Have breakfast with us in the morning,” I say, casually sipping my soda, which I switched to from beer two hours ago, for this very reason. “I can drive you home real quick for a change of clothes. Your toothbrush.”

“She doesn’t have a toothbrush here yet?” my mother, who did *not* make the switch from beer to soda, asks.

“She will,” I say, giving Britta a meaningful look. “Let’s go get your stuff. Sound good?”

A flicker of awareness in Britta’s eyes tells me she knows exactly what I’m doing. Trying to get her alone, so I can scratch this never-ending itch I’ve got for her. “Maybe in a few minutes . . .,” she murmurs, winking at me. Crossing her legs in slow motion.

I’m sweating, ladies and gentlemen.

Will there ever be a time when I’m not a desperate, lust-fueled mess for my wife?

Nope. Definitely not.

“Well, even if you’re not here for breakfast,” my father starts, pushing the glasses higher on his nose. “We’ll see you at the game tomorrow night, won’t we, Britta?”

“Yes! You’re sitting with us in the family section, right?” adds my mother.

Britta jolts a little before setting down her drink on the coffee table. “Oh, um . . .” She looks at me for help. “I’ll watch on TV, but I don’t really

go to the games.”

“The bar is busiest during the games,” I say, trying to help. “She has to be there.”

“Right. Crowd control.”

A few surprised/curious glances are exchanged around the room, but everyone lets the subject drop and goes back to talking about fifteen different subjects at once, kids toddling through, drinks being spilled. Britta and I stare over the top of the pandemonium at each other, and I can see she’s conflicted about not coming to the game—and I don’t want that. Would I love her to come? Absolutely. With every fiber of my being. I also understand why she can’t.

Eventually, she stands up and comes toward me. “Can you bring me home now to get my things?” she asks, a troubled groove between her brows.

I smooth that line with my thumb, slipping my fingers into her hair and tugging her forward into a kiss, holding her there and whispering, “Don’t worry about it.”

“They’re wondering why I never go. Should I . . . tell them?”

“Not until you’re ready. Not unless you want to.”

She nods, giving me a grateful look. “Okay.” I release a pent-up breath when the worry on her gorgeous face dissipates. “I really like your family. A lot.”

Don’t break into a victory dance. “They really like you, too, sweetheart.”

The hope in her eyes traps the breath in my lungs. “Yeah?”

I nod. “Never had a doubt.”

I’m not prepared when her gaze falls to my mouth, and she drags that full bottom lip through her teeth, slowly, her index finger drawing a circle just above my navel. “Are you driving me home just to get my toothbrush, Sum? Or was there something else you wanted?”

“Britta, it’s not funny. I’m *aching*.”

“So am I,” she whispers.

“Toothbrush,” I shout at the room, backing my wife out of the room. “We’re going to go get her toothbrush. Be back . . . when we’re back.”

My sisters don’t even bother to hide their amusement.

The husbands are slow clapping as we head out the door.

We barely get the door to her apartment closed before I'm yanking her skirt up.

Shoving the soft material up to her waist and getting down on my knees, shoving my face into the V of her thighs and groaning over the sugary scent of her, the way the material is a little damp from anticipation, showing off the incredible shape of her cunt. I want in. I want in *so bad* that I'm on fire, but I'm going to fuck her hard—and that means making her ready first.

"Can you come with me on the road, Britta?" I suck her flesh through the thin material of her panties. "And can you bring this with you?"

"I never travel without it," she gasps.

"I'm trying not to fuck this up like I did last time. I'm trying not to say a bunch of shit too soon, so I'm just going to focus on your body."

"You're going to objectify me. Is that what you're saying?"

"Dead ass."

She's giggling as I pull her panties down to her ankles, but she stops pretty quickly when I drag my thumb through the wet split of her sex, pushing down easy on her clit while tilting my head back to make eye contact. "Did you take care of this for me while we were apart?"

Her eyelids are beginning to sag, tits heaving. "M-maybe once or twice."

"Mmmm." Still looking her in the eye, I spit on her pussy, watching heat build in her expression when I lean in and tunnel my tongue into that slick valley, using my saliva to drench her, to give her friction where she needs it, on that swollen little bud that makes her gasp, her fingers spearing into my hair, her hips jerking and tilting. "What about your nipples? Did you play with those while you were thinking about me bending you in half?"

Her right hand leaves my hair, the palm sliding down over the mound of her tit, and she nearly kills me when she pinches her nipple through her shirt, leaving it hard and pointed. "A little. Mostly I thought about how much you liked sucking them."

"*Britta*," I say raggedly, delving my tongue a little rougher now, sawing it wetly over her clit, my fingers trailing up her inner thighs, so I can press my middle and index ones inside her, *deep*, making her whimper, a shuddering passing through her midsection. "Get them out. Let me see how bad they want to be sucked on again."

It's almost like her arms are too heavy to function—and I can relate. So badly. I don't know how I'm going to get my legs to work well enough to

stand up and fuck her, but this is where it's happening. Right here against the door, come hell or high water.

God bless America and Canada alike, because she strips off her tight shirt and unsnaps her nude-colored bra, those pretty tits bouncing out, and I go for them like a hungry animal, lunging to suck those rosy nipples while she moans my name, holding my head close, my fingers pumping in and out of her drenched cunt, and I'm so hard, my zipper is going to break before I get the chance to pull it down.

I was born to fuck this girl. I require nothing else as long as I live.

"Sumner," she says haltingly, pulling on my hair to make me look up. "I want to get on my knees for you too."

Lust zigzags through the lowest region of my stomach, deep and sharp. A vision of Britta sucking me off pops up into my head, and I banish it immediately. Too much. "No."

"Why not?" She slides down the door, half-naked, like some kind of mind-blowing siren, purring, "I really, really want to . . ."

I'm actually starting to shake thinking about it. "Britta, no."

"Stand up." Her knees hit the ground, and she starts to work on my fly. "If you take your shirt off, I'll suck it harder."

Maybe later I'll be embarrassed about the hoarse grunt that comes out of me. Or the way I stagger to my feet and rip my shirt off over my head. Right now, though, I'm not. I'm just grateful to be alive. I'm also not confident whatsoever that I'll be able to last ten seconds in her mouth without climaxing, especially after she just said the words *suck it harder*, so this is going to be interesting—and *oh, God*, it's out, she's stroking me in a fist, on her knees, wetting her lips, nipples all perked up.

Don't look.

You have to look.

"Britta, I really don't think you should . . ."

"Shhhh," she says against the head of my cock. "Have I told you it's beautiful?"

Christ. I can't even name the muscles that are flexed right now.

"Ten, fifteen seconds tops, I mean it."

"We'll see . . ."

She takes me in her mouth in one long, slow glide, and my neck loses power, a hot, silk fist twisting in my belly, exhilaration making my scalp prickle. In the space of ten seconds, I begin panting, sweat breaking out

across my forehead, collarbone, spine. Her tongue is magical, and it's not leaving any part of my cock undiscovered. She teases my slit, rakes it down to my balls, and sucks on those as well. Kisses them, no idea they are throbbing like the devil.

But it's when she wraps her lips around my shaft and hums, taking me back, back to her throat and holding me there, swallowing, that I know this has to stop.

She lets me go with a gasp but keeps pumping me in her fist, breathing hard.

My world tilts dramatically, my vision fuzzing at the edges.

I'm married to a goddess. I need to be inside her, as close to her as possible.

"It has been a week since I was inside you, Britta, you can't just . . ." She takes me to her throat again, those delicate muscles flexing around me, and my balls squeeze in a level-ten warning. "Oh fuck, get up. *Up, up, up.*" I don't wait for her to follow instructions, especially because she is proving more and more that she won't. I hook my shaking hands beneath her armpits and heave her up, skipping the part where her feet touch the floor, throwing her up against the door, and then wedging myself in between her incredible thighs instead, because it's motherfucking business time. I'm not playing around anymore.

"Did you like that?" she has the nerve to whisper breathlessly while I'm guiding my miserable, aching dick to her entrance. Sinking into her hot pussy, groaning against her mouth as she accepts every inch.

I get both hands beneath her skirt and grip her ass hard, gratified by the excited flash in her eyes when I knead those tight cheeks. "Not going to answer," I say thickly. "Just going to show you."

"Please . . ." That word turns into a gasp when I pull out and ram deep again, rattling the hinges of her apartment door. Rattling *myself*. My composure, my emotions, my foundation. Being inside her is more than sex; it's an experience that could never be matched or even explained. "Oh my God," she whimpers. "Sumner, yes."

Her visible enjoyment of my dick is like a shot of testosterone that hits me everywhere, and I lose the ability to be polite. I'm just an eager, aching mess, and she's the cure, and that's the beginning and end of it. "You feel that? You feel what being without you for a week does to me?" I'm banging her, vicious stroke after vicious stroke, up against the door, my teeth bared

against her ear. "I'm in fucking pain, Britta."

"I'll take it away."

"Yeah, you will." Flesh smacks between us. Slap, slap, slap. Those tiny but powerful muscles of her pussy tightening and releasing around me. Making me insane. Making me drive harder, my grip on her backside bruising, my hips frantic. "You're the only one I'll ever give it to, tight girl. And you take it so good. You take it, take it, take it. *Fuck.*"

"Harder, baby," she whines, her head falling back against the door, her thighs spread so wide for my thrusts, I start to see double. "*Sumner.* I'm . . . I'm close."

It's so hard to control my body's response to her, I have to grit my teeth and roar into the slope of her neck, my hips continuing to drive upward, rolling and punching, because that's what she needs, and I give my wife what she needs or there's no use carrying on with my life.

The problem with being half-delirious is that I can't control my mouth. Again.

Every thought, every feeling inside me comes pouring out, compensating for the orgasm I'm holding back. "You know how proud I was introducing you to my family? That's *my* fucking wife." I plaster our foreheads together, kissing her lips roughly, catching her hiccups of breath every time I pump. "My. Wife. *Mine.*"

It's not my imagination that her pussy clamps, wet and tight, around me, harder than before. "I was proud to be your wife." She barely makes it through that statement without her teeth chattering, her back arching between me and the door. She's really close, *thank God.* "Sumner, please . . ."

"Don't worry, sweetheart, I'm not stopping until you come." I lick my tongue up the smooth curve of her neck, catching her mouth in a hectic kiss, the pace of my thrusts picking up naturally, out of necessity. I can't stop, she feels so motherfucking good, and now the doorknob is rattling, along with the hinges, both of us rasping each other's names, moaning as the friction does its job, making her sex quicken, cinch up tight, tighter, tightest. "Tell me you need me," I demand in between frenzied kisses of her mouth. "Tell me, Britta."

"I need you," she says on a rushing exhale.

"For more than this. For everything."

She looks me in the eye, and my heart tumbles down the side of a mountain. "I do," she whispers. "I need you for everything."

“I need you too. For everything.”

Our mouths collide. Take. “You’ve got me,” she says quietly, but I hear her.

I hear her, and my entire chest, my heart and soul, they know she means it. “You’ve got me too. I’m not going anywhere.”

And it’s like hope has imbued me with another reserve of willpower, because I manage to hold back another few seconds, grinding my cock deep inside her and speaking nasty against her ear. “Knowing I’m fucking my wife makes me so stiff, Britta. You do that.” My middle finger slides down between the cheeks of her ass and jiggles that pucker. “A husband has to earn his wife’s come, huh? Do I earn it?”

“Yes!” she screams, her hips writhing between me and the door, before they go still and trembles rock her, all the way to her sweet knees digging into my hips. “*Sumner. God!*”

A storm tears through me, whipping through my muscles, my gut, my head. I’m caught up in it, and I barely register the movements of my body, I’m just blindly humping her into the door, my finger fully inside that back entrance now, my teeth buried in her neck, hinges protesting, liquid fire leaving some deep well inside me, the utter relief and pain of the orgasm making me moan and shake, using Britta as an anchor. Holding on to her and giving her everything inside me, physical and emotional, and my wife holds me through it all.

We hold each other, shaken, our mouths seeking each other for long comedown kisses that brand themselves on my chest.

She said she needs me.

She meant it. We fought her insecurities and won. We’re going to make it as a couple.

In that moment, nothing can go wrong.

Chapter Ten

BRITTA

I'm in Sumner's kitchen the next morning, having breakfast with his family, when his phone rings. It's weird, the way everyone stops what they're doing. His sister ceases turning over the bacon; his mom pauses in the act of pouring orange juice. It's as though everyone senses that there is something about this 9:00 a.m. phone call that requires everyone's attention. And I'm not sure why, but my heart starts to pound dully, palms dampening.

"Hello?" Sumner turns slightly to observe the sudden stillness of the kitchen with a raised eyebrow. "Yeah, hey, coach. What's up?"

The oil sizzling in the pan might as well be a foghorn blaring over a silent ocean.

"You're serious?" His chest dips, his free fingers plowing through his hair. "They're really bringing me up. That's—"

Everyone moves at once, chairs scraping across the floor, arms lifted in victory. Sumner's mother yelps and does a little dance by the stove.

It's happening.

Sumner finally got the call. He's going pro. Or at least to the developmental league, which would put him right at the precipice. This is it.

Pride bursts in my rib cage like a beer left in the freezer too long. Hot pressure pushes in behind my eyes, and I cover my mouth, locking gazes with him across the celebration in the kitchen. I'm so happy for him, I don't think I could speak if I wanted to, so I just nod. I nod and let the tears roll down my cheeks and soak into the sleeves of my Bandits sweatshirt . . .

But the smile on his face is beginning to wane.

A trench forms between his eyes, the muscles working in his throat.

"AHL. The development team . . .," he says hollowly. "In Anaheim?"

One word. That's all it takes to change the atmosphere in the kitchen.

Every head turns in my direction, but I'm only vaguely aware of the sudden scrutiny, because there's an engine humming in my ears, my stomach tying up into knots. My legs feel like jelly, I couldn't stand on them if I tried, and all I can do is sit here.

Anaheim. Sumner was picked up by Anaheim.

Why did I assume it would be on the East Coast?

That was shortsighted of me. Having him play near where we already live would have been too convenient, and there is nothing convenient about a career in professional sports. He'll be living across the country. On the road constantly. I guess this is it.

I guess this is it.

"Thank you," Sumner says, hanging up the phone. His hand falls to his side, and he's not looking at anyone but me. "Britta, can I talk to you outside?"

"I'm happy for you," I say, letting him hear my pride in every note of those four words, because that is genuine. I am so proud of him. "I really am. You know that, right?"

"Please. Outside."

I shake my head.

He tosses his phone on the counter, takes three big steps, and plucks me up out of the seat, tossing me up into his arms so I'm cradled against his chest.

"Sumner," calls his father. "You were taught better than that. You're not supposed to use your size against a woman, son."

"This is an exception," Sumner shouts back.

And he kicks open the back door, shutting it in the same loud manner.

As soon as we're in the middle of his backyard, a postage stamp with patchy grass in various places, he sets me down, but he doesn't let me go. He stoops down until we're eye level, his big hands settling on my shoulders. "Don't you dare check out on me, Britta. On us."

I'm trapped in a weird place, stuck between elation and dread. "Why can't you just let me be happy for you?"

"Because I know what you really mean when you say you're happy for me. You're telling me goodbye."

"What else am I supposed to do?" I burst out, highly aware of the faces in the window observing the scene between me and Sumner. With an effort, I calm myself back down and speak to him in a quiet, reasonable tone. "We

accomplished what we set out to do. You needed to stay with the Bandits long enough to be signed—and it happened. We did it. *You* did it. It's your dream."

"Yeah? But along the way, Britta, the dream started to include you. All right?" He impresses that on me with an intense look. One that leaves no room for doubt that he means what he's saying. "Maybe my dream has included you since the beginning, but the more time that passed, it started to feel like an actual possibility. You and me, Britta."

I don't know what to say. Or do.

What does he want from me?

I'm afraid to find out.

Nevertheless, a moment later, I do.

"Come with me, sweetheart. Please. I know I'm asking a lot of you really soon. I know I've *been* asking a lot of you—"

"I . . . I can't," I sputter automatically. So cold. I'm so cold. "I can't just pick up a-and move. Leave the bar. I'm an owner now. What would I do?"

"Go to business school, like you've been thinking about. I'll support you and love you through anything. Anything. Don't make me leave you behind, goddammit. Please."

My throat is going to cave in from the pressure. My gut reaction, driven by fear and doubt and the pain of the past, wants me to scream no. But my heart is demanding a yes, and the conflict they're waging inside me is knee-weakeningly fierce. The only option I'm left with is to evade. "I mean, we can't just take a few days and think about this?"

"Tonight is my last game with the Bandits. I have to be on a plane tomorrow." He takes one look at my stricken face and paces away, hands on his head. "*Goddammit.*"

I'm frozen.

Am I the most selfish person in the world that I'm battling tears over this incredible opportunity for him? Am I so self-serving that I want him to stay so badly that my bones hurt at the idea of waking up tomorrow and watching him leave on a plane? I don't know how I'm going to live without the possibility of him ducking beneath the doorframe of Sluggers at any moment. He won't be able to when he's across the country. Maybe when he's on the East Coast, I'll see him. We'll meet up. But more than likely, we won't, because it'll be too hard to keep saying goodbye over and over again.

But go *with* him? To California?

No.

Sluggers is my home. It's the place that shielded and protected me when there was no other constant in my life. It's a huge, scary world out there, and I will be vulnerable in the middle of it trying to chart a new path. Won't I?

"Britta."

I shake my head no.

He closes his eyes.

Blindly, I speed back into the house, stammering apologies and goodbyes while gathering my purse, my phone, and car keys, bundling them to my chest while I head out the front door. But instead of getting into my Honda, I steer toward Sluggers and begin to run.

I'm sitting in the center of the quiet dining room of Sluggers two hours later when Bryce knocks on the locked door. And waits, his breath fogging up the glass.

Eventually, I stand, floating like a ghost to let him in. "Hey."

He studies my face, nodding once. "Hey." There's a wrapped package beneath his arm, and he hands it over, saying, "Don't open it yet."

Weird, but okay. I don't have the brainpower to process anything beyond. Breathing and blinking are about all I can handle. "I'm not really in a talkative mood."

"I know. I'm coming in anyway."

"Suit yourself."

I set the package down and drop back into my seat. My half brother takes one on the other side of the picnic table, folding his hands in front of him. "So . . . he's leaving."

Those words make me want to curl into myself. "Yes, I know."

Silence permeates the dining room.

"I guess you're just going to watch him go."

"I don't have much of a choice," I say with a humorless laugh.

"Nah, there hasn't always been a choice for you, Britta, but there is one now." Bryce shifts side to side. "You've been through some bad shit. I think about it every day. How you must have felt, being on the opposite side of . . . the life I was living. Being left behind like that. I hate knowing that I was happy, hitting pucks around with our father, while you were carrying all this baggage. You have every right to carry that weight however you want."

We talked about the past exactly once—the first time we met in person—and it was the first time I spoke about it with anyone. It's not easy. It's never easy hearing it all out loud. "Thanks," I say hoarsely. "I told you. It wasn't your fault. I don't hold it against you."

"I know. I love you for that, Britta." He swallows. "But I'm also a hockey player, so I'm on the verge of giving you a little tough love. Sorry in advance."

My defenses are screeching to the rescue. "I don't want to hear it."

"Yeah. Like I said, sorry." He exhales, jabbing a finger into the table. "You're too fucking brave to hide in Sluggers for the rest of your life. You are not confined to this place. You are confining *yourself* to it."

Those words hit my chest like bullets. It's impossible to speak.

I want to beg him not to continue, but I can't find my voice.

"You found this way to overcome the past, right? This place became your purpose. You kept people at a safe distance. But now? Now, the past is beating you. It's winning." He drops a heavy fist onto the table. "So *come on*. Don't let it do that."

"I can't just give up everything familiar and move across the country for him. We married so he could stay and play hockey. So he could get his green card—"

"You're lying to yourself, Britta." That pronouncement catches me off guard, because I have no idea what he means. All I can do is wait for him to elaborate. "We all know it was love at first sight for Sumner. Maybe it took you a little longer to fall for him, but there has always been something there. The whole team saw it. You've always smiled more when he's around. You relax. Maybe something inside of you knew you could trust him, even before you loved him. Otherwise, you never would have agreed to the marriage."

I'm beginning to feel slightly dizzy, because snippets of time are playing in my head, and I . . . Is he right? Did I have a thing for Sumner long before I accepted it?

"I notice you're not denying that you love him," Bryce remarks dryly. "Go on, admit you wouldn't have agreed to marry anyone else."

"I wouldn't have," I whisper, staring at the bar and seeing Sumner there. Leaning forward on an elbow and watching me work, oblivious to everything around him. How safe I feel whenever he is around. I'm going to lose that. I'm going to lose him. Unless I take some terrifying leap that I am not even remotely prepared for.

“You love him.”

“Of course I do.” I throw up my hands. “He *made* me.”

Bryce snorts. “What a dick.”

I shoot him a dark look.

“Britta,” he says, corralling the package until it’s sitting in front of me. “Come to the game tonight.”

I force my numb fingers to move, ripping the wrapping paper—and I slowly reveal an Anaheim jersey, tags still attached. My throat tightens like a bow. “I assume . . . *he* is going to be there?”

“Our father.” He doesn’t ask it like a question, because we both know who I’m referring to. “Yeah. He’s coming. But you have just as much right to be there. Or *anywhere*. You matter, Britta. And it’s okay to let someone matter to you. It’s okay to matter to someone else.” He regards me thoughtfully for a second, as if wondering if he could say more but deciding against it. Rising from the bench, he puts a hand on my head, ruffling my hair. “See you tonight, maybe.”

“Maybe,” I croak, still staring down at the jersey. “Either way, Bryce . . . thanks. I guess.”

He smirks, stuffs his hands into the pockets of his jacket, and leaves.

I sit there for a long time. In fact, I remain at the table long after Sluggers is due to open, the teal and white blurring in front of me while I consider everything Bryce said to me. While I replay every moment I’ve spent with Sumner over the last year and ten months, wondering how someone so freaking huge could get under my skin so easily.

Into my heart.

Because that’s where he is. In a deep, tangled way I don’t think I can undo.

Love doesn’t erase the fear of the unknown, though.

I look around the bar, at the divots in the tables, the broken floorboard by the kitchen, the jewel-toned bottles reflecting the early afternoon sun, the brass bell we ring when someone buys a round. Every piece of this place was once so beloved, but my fear is turning it into a prison. And Sluggers is not a person. It can’t love me back.

It’s not him.

With a heavy swallow, I finger the tags of the jersey. I can smell the newness of the thick mesh, and it symbolizes a fresh start for Sumner. Is this . . . a new start for me as well? Is Bryce right, and I’ve been shielding myself

from any further damage by hiding within these walls?
Maybe I *am* stronger than that.
And I'll never know unless I test myself.

SUMNER

I'm here, but I'm not.

I'm standing in the bench area, helmet on. Can't feel the stick in my hand.

A local veteran is singing the national anthem, and though my arm feels too heavy to keep my palm flattened over my heart, I keep it there, trying to focus despite the horrible buzzing in my head.

I shouldn't have let Britta leave.

I'm flying to California tomorrow morning, which gave me approximately twenty-four hours to convince her coming with me is the right choice, but now I'm worried I squandered every minute of today. I was flattened after she left. Then my family convinced me to give her some space to think. That she would make the right decision with a little time and consideration. Now, I'm worried that idea was garbage. I should have gone to Sluggers, carried her into the office, and kissed her until we were on the same page. I should have been more understanding. More patient. I should have, should have, should have . . .

How the hell am I going to play this hockey game with my chest in a vise?

Part of me wishes Britta would make it easier to be in love with her. By loving me back, by following me to Anaheim because she can't stand to be apart any more than I can. But honestly, no. No, I don't wish that. Because knowing that I love her no matter the circumstances, no matter the pain, no matter the indefinite state of the future, means it's forever. *Forever*. And she has no fucking idea how long and hard I'll work to keep her.

I'm going to start my campaign to bring her west as soon as I land in California. I'm going to call her relentlessly. I'm going to visit Bridgeport so often, she'll wonder if I ever left. If I have to spend every dime of my savings on flights, so be it. When she opens her apartment door in the mornings, there

will be flowers waiting in the hallway, just delivered. I'm going to write her name in silver Sharpie on my skates, maybe my helmet, for every game if they let me.

She is *not* done with me.

Someone shoves me in the back.

Turning around and showing any interest whatsoever is difficult, when Britta is all I can or want to think about, but I manage to glare at Bryce. "What was that?" I study his face for a moment, noticing he doesn't look as worried as he did in the locker room before the game. "What are you so smug about?"

A smile spreads across his face, and he jerks his chin toward the crowd.

I'm guessing one of my sisters has made an embarrassing sign about me or put one of the kids in a Mayfield jersey. Through gritty eyes, I search the family section of the stands behind the bench and . . . right away something looks off. Everyone is wearing maroon and white, except for one person. She's in white and teal, sitting smack in the middle of everyone.

My stick clatters to the ground. "Britta."

I'm too stunned to move. She's here. She's at a game.

She came—and God, she's so beautiful that for a moment, I wonder if I dreamed being inside her, sleeping with her in my arms last night. That woman wears *my* ring. Holy shit.

But what does it mean that she's wearing an Anaheim jersey?

And a lumberjack hat. With flaps. Like my grandmother used to wear to games.

The kind I told her I would love to see again one day in the stands.

She remembered.

I'm distracted from a barrage of happy realizations . . . when I see where she's sitting. Oh God, she's three seats away from her father. Bryce's father. I barely stop myself from launching through the partition to get between them. To wrap myself around her like human Bubble Wrap so no bad memories can get within an inch of her perfect heart. But although she looks nervous, a little shell-shocked, she firms her chin and stays seated. She stays . . .

She looks at me with luminous eyes. Blows out a long breath.

And she nods.

A hoarse sound rips out of me, just as the anthem ends. I want to believe that nod means she's coming to California, but if I let myself believe that and

it proves to be untrue, I don't think I would survive the disappointment. And Christ, I can't be greedy. The fact that she's here at the game is huge in itself.

My girl is so fucking brave. She faced her father for me. The person in her life who didn't choose her and made her feel less than, when in reality, she's the ultimate human being.

Well, I choose her. I'll choose her every day for eternity.

The need to show her that immediately is overwhelming. Too big to deny.

I pull off my helmet and let it fall, shouldering my grumbling teammates out of the way until I'm at the entrance to the team bench, but I can't pull it open. "Somebody come unlock this door," I roar, only breathing again when one of the trainers hustles over, fumbling a pair of keys. While he's getting it open, I crane my neck to look through the glass and find my sisters pulling a hesitant Britta out of her seat, dragging her toward me—

And I burst through the exit just in time for her to reach the bench, catching her up in my arms and then wrapping them around her as tightly as they'll go. I'm even taller in my skates, meaning she's over a foot off the ground, but she doesn't seem to mind or notice, because her arms are around my neck and she's holding me just as tightly.

"Britta."

"Sumner. I love you." A sob shakes her. "I really, really love you."

Gratitude unravels inside me like an endless ribbon, along with relief, disbelief, hope, and awe. All of it at once. I stand there, reeling, trapped in a tornado of emotion that only this person is capable of making me feel. "You do?" I manage.

"Yeah. I could make a wall of pictures out of you." She laughs tearfully and kisses my neck, my jaw, my cheek. "And add one every year."

My neck muscles are straining so painfully, I sound like I'm choking. "Does this mean you're coming to California tomorrow?"

She cradles my face in her hands and nods. "Yes. I'm coming. I'm scared, but I'm a lot more scared of staying behind and not feeling this way ever again."

"I wouldn't have let that happen, sweetheart. I would have kept right on loving you until you came home to me."

"I know," she whispers.

And those might be the best two words anyone has ever said to me. Because in other words, she trusts me. She believes in me. Forget going pro;

this is the greatest accomplishment of my life. One that will be a lifetime reward. A daily one. The reward is keeping my wife forever. I'm almost too overcome with happiness to speak, but she needs to hear the words I'm dying to say. "Look what you faced for me, Britta. I'm so proud of you. Humbled." I lay a kiss on her mouth, and the crowd goes wild, cheering and stomping their feet. "If you can do this, you can do anything, okay?"

The hope in her eyes is so powerful, it knocks the breath out of me. "I want to prove that to myself. I need you with me while I do."

"That's a given." I work her mouth in a deeper kiss that makes her purr in the back of her throat. "When it comes to you, I'm always a given. I *am* your given, wife."

I love the fact that her eyes are glassy after one stroke of my tongue. "I'm yours, too, husband," she whispers, giving me one more teasing kiss on the chin. "Now go out there and win."

My voice is thick with emotion when I tell her, "I already have."

Epilogue

SUMNER

New Year's Eve 2024

My wife walks into the party, and my brain cells go tumbling out of my ears.

Forget my train of thought. It's gone extinct.

Who gave her permission to look this fine?

God, I guess. He's the one who handcrafted her, right down to the hips that are currently wrapped in champagne-colored silk. She turns in slow motion, clearly looking for me among the sea of guests, the waves of her blonde hair floating around her in a shiny cloud. When she finally spots me where I stand in a group of coaches and players, the dreamy smile actually causes me to suck in a breath, fumbling for a place to set down my bottle of beer.

"Whoa. You all right, Mayfield?"

"Yeah, I just can't believe that's my wife."

"Neither can we," jokes the team's goalie, shoving me in the shoulder to let me know he's kidding. "You going to introduce us?"

I attempt to roll the tension out of my shoulders. "Give me half an hour."

"Why half an hour?"

Backing away from the group, I tap the breast pocket of my suit jacket. "Finally got her that ring. I want it on her finger when I bring her around you dogs."

When I turn around, several balled-up napkins are thrown at my retreating back, accompanied by laughs, wishes of good luck, and of course, some good-natured bullying, but I only have the attention span for my wife

right now, and the closer I get to my girl, the more convinced I'm becoming that she's going to burn them out of my head.

I reach Britta and wrap her up in my arms like a present, drawing her up onto her toes and then squeezing her out of sheer happiness that she's there. Which might seem like overkill since we live together and I see her every day, but that's life when you're obsessed with your wife. "You could have warned me you were going to show up looking like this," I growl into her neck.

"Like what?" she asks innocently.

"In twenty years, Britta, when our kids ask how they came into the world, I could easily tell them it started with this dress."

I feel a sly smile bloom against my ear. As recently as a few months ago, any mention of starting a family would have made her go white as a sheet, but not anymore. She's able to talk about it more and more, the future becoming solid. Exciting.

The fact that it involves me will never stop being my life's greatest miracle.

We moved to California in October.

I spent one month in the AHL before being signed by the affiliated NHL team here in Anaheim. Signed a nice contract while Britta sat right next to me at the table, visibly overcome with pride. I'm losing count of the "best" moments I've racked up since meeting Britta. The night we got married, the time she showed up at my game in an Anaheim jersey and lumberjack hat, the day we walked into our first apartment together and slept side by side in sleeping bags holding hands.

Tonight is going to be another one of them.

I haven't had the money to buy her the kind of ring she deserves. Every day she has gone without a diamond on her finger has been physical torture. But it ends now.

My rock is finally going to wear my rock.

"Come on, I need to show you the view."

"Lead the way," she murmurs, slipping her hand into mine, the gesture speaking to her trust in me, and I pull her toward the deck of the team owner's house. Earlier, before Britta arrived at the party, I came out and surveyed the beautiful Pacific Ocean in the distance, but it looks a million times better now that she's with me, just like everything else.

She makes life a fucking joy.

I hear her intake of breath as we reach the edge of the deck, but I can't look at the water because I'm mesmerized by the moonlight washing over her skin. Craving more closeness with her, I keep her facing the ocean and wrap my arms around her from behind, kissing the crown of her head, swaying with her as the waves crash below.

"I could have missed this," she whispers. "I was thinking about how easily things could have been different when I left class today. I could have been going back to my apartment in Connecticut alone, instead of our place. Our. Place. With the basil plant in the window and that weird sound the shower makes when we turn it on. The perfect bed. The music we can hear from the jazz club if we open our windows on Friday and Saturday night. I could have missed it."

It's almost impossible to speak. Hearing her acknowledge all those little things out loud floods me with . . . safety. I have a person who notices all the same stuff as I do. There is nothing better. Nothing. "But you didn't miss it, Britta. You're here—and that would have been enough, but you keep amazing me. Enrolling in business school the week after we arrived, making new friends, showing up to every damn game in my jersey and keeping the refs in check." I inhale the scent of her shampoo. "You're not just here; you're outdoing yourself."

She turns around slowly, looping her arms around my neck. "Funny, I could say the same about you, Anaheim's dazzling new rookie."

"Dazzling?" I snort, trailing my fingers through her hair.

"Sorry. Murderous. Intimidating. Fierce."

"Much better."

She laughs, tilts her head back, and we slide into a kiss. Like most of our kisses, things remain tame for under five seconds before our tongues take control, and I'm doing my best to inhale her. My hands itch to jerk up the back of her dress and grip that tush, but that probably wouldn't make a very good impression on my new bosses and teammates. Plus, I've got a goal that needs accomplishing. Now.

As subtly as possible, I check my watch. 8:59.

Fireworks are set to go off at midnight at a nearby marina, but there is a private show that should be starting in 3 . . . 2 . . . 1 . . .

A clap follows a boom in the night sky, and Britta gasps, turning around, away from me, her hands wrapping around the glass barrier wall. I had a vision of how this proposal would go. She would be facing me. I would

get down on one knee and give her the words that might be a formality at this point but that she damn well deserves, nonetheless.

If I've learned one thing being in a relationship with Britta, however, it's that things aren't on my timeline. They're on ours. I adapted to this girl, and she adapted to me. And I'll keep adapting for the rest of our lives, because that's what allowed me to keep her—and that's a success that can't be measured. Keeping that in mind, I memorize the image of her outline surrounded by plumes of white, pink, and silver, and I take the ring out of my jacket pocket.

Out of the box altogether.

I pull her back against my chest with my left arm and speak in a low voice near her ear.

“You know, tonight marks the end of our expirationship.”

I watch her profile as she blinks, breathes a laugh. “It didn't even cross my mind.”

For the briefest of seconds, the terrifying thought of what tonight could have been like, if she hadn't given us a chance, assails me, and I have to close my eyes or get dizzy. “Good, Britta. Because we don't have an end date.”

It's an effort to speak around the heaviness in my throat, but I hold the ring up in front of her, watching fireworks go off in her widening eyes, hearing the sharp intake of her breath. “Oh my gosh.” Her chest heaves up, down, and I see half of the most beautiful watery smile. “Sum . . .”

“But I want to make sure we have the right beginning. The way this started was unconventional, and I wouldn't change a single thing about it. Not a second. I just need you to know that . . . being married to you is the best thing that will ever happen to me.” She holds out her trembling fingers, and heat presses to the backs of my eyes while I slide on the ring. “I need you to remember that we're permanent every time you look at this hand. I need you to know I've got your back, every minute of every hour. You've got a man for life, Britta Mayfield.”

She spins around in a flash and buries her face in my chest, setting loose a happy sob that is almost drowned out by the fireworks . . . and the applause of the people who have made their way to the deck, obviously realizing what's going on. “You've got me for life, too, Sumner,” she says looking up at me with shining eyes. The ones I'll see in my children's faces one day. The ones I'll fall asleep thinking about every night until the end of time. “I would walk through fire to marry you.” She hiccups against my mouth, sending my

heart into a tailspin. “I love you.”

“I love you, too, Britta. But all you ever have to do is walk *to* me. Once you’re there, everything will be right.”

“I know.”

Those words break the dam inside me, and happiness pours out everywhere, just everywhere, and I was right. Spinning Britta around beneath the fireworks while she laughs, my ring on her finger, is another “best” moment of my life . . .

. . . and there are a million more just around the corner.

THE END

For a bonus epilogue featuring Sumner and Britta, plus information on more sports romance to come, join Tessa Bailey's newsletter:
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Prologue

2009

The second Beat Dawkins entered the television studio, it stopped raining outside.

Sunshine tumbled in through the open door, wreathing him in a halo of glory, pedestrians retracting their umbrellas and tipping their hats in gratitude.

Across the room, Melody witnessed Beat's arrival the way an astronomer might observe a once-in-a-millennium asteroid streaking across the sky. Her hormones activated, testing the forgiveness of her powder-fresh-scented Lady Speed Stick. She'd only gotten braces two days earlier. Now those metal wires felt like train tracks in her mouth. Especially while watching Beat breeze with such effortless grace into the downtown studio where they would be shooting interviews for the documentary.

At age sixteen, Melody was in the middle of an awkward phase—to put it mildly. Sweat was an uncontrollable entity. She didn't know how to smile anymore without looking like a constipated gargoyle. Her milk chocolate mane had been carefully styled for this afternoon, but her hair couldn't be tricked into forgetting about the humidity currently plaguing New York, and now it was frizzing to really *accentuate* the rubber bands connecting her incisors.

Then there was Beat.

Utterly, effortlessly gorgeous.

His chestnut-colored hair was damp from the rain, his light-blue eyes sparkling with mirth. Someone handed him a towel as soon as he crossed the threshold, and he took it without looking, rubbing it over his locks and leaving them wild, standing on end, amusing everyone in the room. A woman in a headset ran a lint brush down the arm of his indigo suit, and he gave her

a grateful, winning smile, visibly flustering her.

How could she and this boy possibly be the same age?

Not only that, but they'd also been named by their mothers as perfect complements to each other. Beat and Melody. They were the offspring of America's most legendary female rock duo, Steel Birds. Since the band had already broken up by the time Beat and Melody were born, their names were bestowed quite by accident, without the members consulting each other. Decidedly *not* the happiest of coincidences. Not to mention, children of legends with significant names were supposed to be interesting. Remarkable.

Obviously, Beat was the only one who was meeting expectations.

Unless you counted the fact that she'd chosen teal rubber bands.

Which had seemed a lot more daring in the sterility of the orthodontist's office.

"Melody," someone called to her right. The simple act of having her name shouted across the busy room caused Melody to be *bathed in fire*, but okay. Now the backs of her knees were sweating—and oh God, *Beat was looking at her*.

Time froze.

They'd never actually met before.

Every article about their mothers and the highly publicized band breakup in 1993 mentioned Beat and Melody in the same breath, but they were locking eyes for the very first time IRL. She needed to think of something interesting to say.

I was going to go with clear rubber bands, but teal felt more punk rock.

Sure. Maybe she could cap that statement off with some finger guns and really drive home the fact that he'd gotten all the cool rock royalty genes. Oh God, her feet were sweating now. Her sandals were going to squeak when she walked.

"Melody!" called the voice again.

She tore her attention off the godlike vision that was Beat Dawkins to find the producer waving her into one of the cordoned-off interview suites. Just inside the door was a camera, a giant boom mic, a director's chair. The interview about her mother's career hadn't even started yet, and she already knew the questions she would be answering. Maybe she could just pop in very quickly, recite her usual responses, and save everyone some time?

No, I can't sing like my mother.

We don't talk about the band breakup.

Yes, my mother is currently a nudist, and yes, I've seen her naked a startling number of times.

Of course it would be amazing for fans if Steel Birds reunited.

No, it will never happen. Not in a million, trillion years. Sorry.

"We're ready for you," sang the producer, tapping her wrist.

Melody nodded, flushing hotter at the suggestion she was holding things up. "Coming."

She snuck one final glance at Beat and walked in the direction of her interview room. That was it, she guessed. She'd probably never see him in person again—

"Wait!"

One word from Beat and the humming studio quieted, ground to a halt.

The prince had spoken.

Melody stopped with one foot poised in the air, turning her head slowly. *Please let him be talking to me*, otherwise the fact that she'd stopped at his command would be a pitiful mistake. Also, *please let him be talking to someone else*. The train tracks in her mouth were approximately four hundred pounds per inch, and the teal dress she'd worn—oh God—to match her rubber bands didn't fit right in the boob region. Other girls her age managed to look normal. *Good*, even.

What was it TMZ had said about her?

Melody Gallard: always a before picture, never an after.

Beat *was* talking to her, however.

Not only that, but he was also jogging over in this athletic, effortless way, the way a celebrity might approach the mound at a baseball game to throw out the ceremonial first pitch, the crowd cheering him on. His hair had arranged itself back to a perfect coif, no evidence of the rain that she could see, his mouth in a bemused half smile.

Beat slowed to a stop in front of her, rubbing at the back of his neck and glancing around at their rapt audience, as if he'd acted without thinking and was now bashful about it. And the fact that he could be shy or self-conscious with charisma pouring out of his eyeballs was astounding. Who *was* this creature? How could they possibly share a connection?

"Hey," he breathed, coming in closer than Melody expected, that one move making them coconspirators. He wasn't overly tall, maybe five eleven, but her eyes were level with his chin. His sculpted, clean-shaven chin. Wow, he smelled so good. Like a freshly laundered blanket with some fireplace

smoke clinging to it. Maybe she should switch from powder-fresh Speed Stick to something a little more mature. Like ocean surf. “Hey, Mel. Can I call you that?”

No one had ever shortened her name before. Not her mother, classmates, or any of the nannies she’d had over the years. A nickname was something that should be attained over time, after a long acquaintance with someone, but Beat calling her Mel somehow seemed totally normal. Their names were counterparts, after all. They’d been named as a pair, whether it had been intentional or not.

“Sure,” she whispered, trying not to stare at his throat. Or inhale him. “You can call me Mel.”

Was this her first crush? Was it supposed to happen this fast? She usually found members of a different sex sort of . . . uninspiring. They didn’t make her pulse race, the way this one did. *Say something else before you bore him to death.*

“You stopped the rain,” she blurted.

His eyebrows shot up. “What?”

I’m dissolving. I’m being absorbed by the floor. “When you walked in, the rain just . . . stopped.” She snapped her fingers. “Like you’d turned it off with a switch.”

When Melody was positive that he would cringe and make an excuse to walk away, Beat smiled instead. That lopsided one that made her feel funny *everywhere*. “I should have thought of switching it off before walking two blocks in a downpour.” He laughed and exhaled at the same time, studying her face. “It’s . . . crazy, right? Finally meeting?”

“Yeah.” The word burst out of Melody, and quite unexpectedly, her chest started to swell. “It’s definitely crazy.”

He nodded slowly, never taking his eyes off her face.

She’d heard of people like him.

People who could make you feel like you were the only one in the room. The world. She’d believed in the existence of such unicorns; she just never in her wildest dreams expected to be given the undivided attention of one. It was like bathing in the brightest of sunlight.

“If things had been different with our mothers, we probably would have grown up together,” he said, blue eyes twinkling. “We might even be best friends.”

“Oh,” she said with a knowing look. “I don’t think so.”

His amusement only spread. “No?”

“I don’t mean that to be offensive,” Melody rushed to say. “I just . . . I tend to keep to myself, and you seem more . . .”

“Extroverted.” He shrugged a single shoulder. “Yeah. I am.” He waved a hand to indicate the room, the crew who were still captivated by the first—maybe only—meeting of Beat Dawkins and Melody Gallard. “You might think I’d be into this. Talking, being on camera.” He lowered his voice to a whisper. “But it’s always the same questions. Can you sing too? Does your mother ever talk about the breakup?”

“Will there ever be a reunion?” Melody chimed in.

“Nope,” they said at the same exact time—and laughed.

Beat turned serious. “Look, I hope this isn’t out of line, but I notice the way the tabloids treat you. Online and off. It’s . . . different from how they treat me.” Fire scaled the sides of her neck and gripped her ears. Of course he’d seen the cringe-inducing critiques of Melody. They were usually included in articles that profiled him as well. The most recent one had whittled her entire existence down to the line, *In the case of Trina Gallard’s daughter, the apple didn’t just fall far from the tree, it’s more of a lemon.* “I always wonder if it bothers you. Or if you’re able to blow that bullshit off.”

“Oh, I mean . . .” She laughed too loudly, waved a hand on a floppy wrist. “It’s fine. People expect those gossip sites to be snarky. They’re just doing their job.”

He said nothing. Just watched her with a little wrinkle between his brows.

“I’m lying,” she whisper-blurled. “It bothers me.”

His perfect head tilted ever so slightly to one side. “Okay.” He nodded, as if he’d made an important decision about something. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“Nothing.” His gaze ran a lap around her face. “You’re not a lemon, by the way. Not even close.” He squinted but not enough to fully hide the twinkle. “More of a peach.”

She swallowed the dreamy sigh that tried to escape. “Maybe so. Peaches do have pretty thin skin.”

“Yeah, but they have a tough center.”

Something grew and grew inside Melody. Something she’d never felt before. A kinship, a bond, a connection. She couldn’t come up with a word for it. Only knew that it seemed almost cosmic or preordained. And in that

moment, for the first time in her life, she was angry with her mother for her part in breaking up the band. She could have known this boy sooner? Felt . . . *understood* sooner?

Someone in a headset approached Beat and tapped his shoulder. “We’d like to get the interview started, if you’re ready?”

Unbelievably, he was still looking at Melody. “Yeah, sure.”

Did he sound disappointed?

“I better go too,” Melody said, holding out her hand for a shake.

Beat studied her hand for several seconds, then gave her a narrow-eyed look—as if to say, *Don’t be silly*—and pulled her into the hug of a lifetime. The hug. Of a lifetime. In a millisecond, she was warm in the most pleasant, sweat-free way. All the way down to the soles of her feet. Light-headedness swept in. She’d not only been granted the honor of smelling this boy’s perfect neck; he was encouraging her with a palm to the back of her head. He squeezed her close, before brushing his hand down the back of her hair. Just once. But it was the most beautiful sign of affection she’d ever been offered, and it wrote itself messily all over her heart.

“Hey.” He pulled back with a serious expression, taking Melody by the shoulders. “Listen to me, Mel. You live here in New York. I live in LA. I don’t know when I’ll see you again, but . . . I guess it just feels important, like I need to tell you . . .” He frowned over his own discomposure, which she assumed was rarer than a solar eclipse. “What happened between our mothers has nothing to do with us. Okay? Nothing. If you ever need anything, or maybe you’ve been asked the same question forty million times and can’t take it anymore, just remember that I understand.” He shook his head. “We’ve got this big thing in common, you and me. We have a . . .”

“Bond?” she said breathlessly.

“*Yeah.*”

She could have wept all over him.

“We *do*,” he continued, kissing her on the forehead hard and pulling Melody back into the second hug of a lifetime. “I’ll find a way to get you my number, Peach. If you ever need anything, call me, okay?”

“Okay,” she whispered, heart and hormones in a frenzy. He’d given her a *nickname*. She wrapped her arms around him and held tight, giving herself a full five seconds, before forcing herself to release Beat and step back. “Same for you.” She struggled to keep her breathing at a normal pace. “Call me if you ever need someone who understands.” The next part wouldn’t stay

tucked inside her. “We can pretend we’ve been best friends all along.”

To her relief, that lopsided smile was back. “It wouldn’t be so hard, Mel.”

A bell rang somewhere on the set, breaking the spell. Everyone flurried into motion around them. Beat was swept in one direction; Melody in the other. But her pulse didn’t stop pounding for hours after their encounter.

True to his word, Beat found a way to provide her with his number, through an assistant at the end of her interview. She could never find the courage to use it, though. Not even on her most difficult days. And he never called her either.

That was the beginning and the end of her fairy-tale association with Beat Dawkins.

Or so she thought.

Want more?

Find *Wreck the Halls* here: <https://tinyurl.com/tessawreckthehalls>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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New York Times bestselling author Tessa Bailey can solve all problems except for her own, so she focuses those efforts on stubborn, fictional blue-collar men and loyal, lovable heroines. She lives on Long Island avoiding the sun and social interactions, then wonders why no one has called. Dubbed the “Michelangelo of dirty talk” by *Entertainment Weekly*, Tessa writes with spice, spirit, swoon, and a guaranteed happily ever after. Catch her on TikTok at [@authortessabailey](https://www.tiktok.com/@authortessabailey) or check out www.tessabailey.com for a complete list of books.

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