



**SINGLE
DAD
CENTER**

A DATING A DENVER DRAGON NOVEL

LATISHA SEXTON

Single Dad Center

Latisha Sexton

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This one is for those who are afraid
to love ...

SINGLE DAD CENTER

Dating a Denver Dragon Novel

LATISHA SEXTON

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One

Veronica

How do I get my anger out? By blasting Skillet in my car while I scream as loud as I can and letting the tears stream down my face.

Okay, maybe it's not the best way to handle my rage, but I'm sure it's better than taking a play from Carrie Underwood's playbook and keying my ex's truck. At least my way allows me to release my pent-up frustration without the threat of going to jail.

Now that I've seen his true colors, I know Buck wouldn't hesitate to make that threat a reality if I actually did key his vehicle.

I'm not gonna lie—the thought did cross my mind as I packed up my desk and walked out the doors of SmartTru, leaving behind my dream job at the app development company. It's the least Buck deserves after what he did.

Anger and hurt burns in my veins at the reminder of his betrayal and everything I've lost because of him. I slam my hand against the steering wheel. “That lying, filthy, good for nothing jerk!” Another tear slips down my cheek, and I swipe a finger under my glasses. How did I ever think I might love him? How could I have been so blind?

The question repeats itself as I pull into my apartment building's parking lot. I sigh as my gaze travels to the third-story windows of my little apartment. I'm going to have to find another job soon if I want to keep this place without getting a roommate, or worse, having to move back in with my dad.

The thought of a roommate or having to move back home with Dad adds another weight to my chest. I love my dad, but I've always been pretty independent and enjoy having a place that's just mine. Plus, most people can't handle my disorganized mess. It's why my neat freak of a best friend, Chantelle, and I have never lived together. I'm not sure our friendship would survive if we were roommates.

Getting out of my orange Jeep Wrangler, I collect the box with my meager belongings from my office and trudge into the building and up the three flights of stairs. The walk only infuriates me further, as I use each step to come up with another PG-rated name for the guy I've wasted months of my life with.

I'd even asked myself last week if I would give up my never-getting-married stance if Buck ever popped the question. It was an immediate answer. No.

Bile rises in my throat and I scoff out a half-sob, half-laugh. Married? To Buck? How could I have ever possibly considered—no matter how briefly—marriage to that sleazebag of a man? Honestly, now that the blinders have been removed, I see that he's more of a man-child. Things that I let slide now come into crystal-clear focus.

How many times did Buck talk down to me, all with a patronizing smile plastered on his face? How many times did I blow off my friends to go hang out with him and the team from SmartTru? When was the last time he and I actually did something *I* wanted to do?

Buck always picked the restaurants. The movies. The activities we did or the events we went to.

And I let him. Every. Single. Time.

I don't have a problem with letting a guy take the reins. There's something about a man who is decisive and knows what he wants that I've always found attractive. But that wasn't how it had been with Buck. I see that now. It was always about control, and I hate that I could have saved myself a lot of heartache if I'd only seen it sooner.

I scan the hallway leading to my door, praying that my slightly crazy neighbor, Mrs. Anderson, isn't around. When I see that the coast is clear, I breathe a sigh of relief and scurry down the hall. Mrs. Anderson is convinced her apartment has been bugged by the FBI and that they're watching and listening to her every word and move. If she were anyone else but a sweet seventy-year-old lady who spent the majority of her life on a ranch in a small town, I might believe her. Ever since she found out I work in tech, she started cajoling me into helping her find the bugs in her home. If she finds out that I'm officially unemployed, she'll probably be showing up every day to ask for help.

Closing my apartment door behind me, I set the box on the kitchen counter just as my phone rings.

Chantelle's name flashes across the screen and I groan. I love Chantelle. She's the closest thing I have to a sister, but I already know how this conversation is going to go—with a big fat *I told you so*.

Still, I can't not answer. She'd just show up at my door.

"Hey, chica," I say, trying to infuse my voice with more enthusiasm and pep than I actually feel.

"Uh-oh. I know that tone. Spill."

My shoulders deflate, but I try to bluff my way out of it. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't make me come over and force it out of you," Chantelle threatens. "You know I'm going to find out either way."

Sighing, because there's no point in trying to hide it, I reply, "Well ... I quit my job."

"What? Why would you do that? You loved working there."

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. “Yes. I did. Until ...” I trail off, the sting of Buck’s betrayal hitting me anew. “He stole my idea.” A sob breaks through, and I sink to the couch.

“I’ll be there in thirty.” Chantelle hangs up before I can protest.

Thirty minutes later, I hear Chantelle use her key to let herself in. I still haven’t moved from my spot where I’m curled up on the couch, letting every moment of my relationship with Buck play through my mind like a highlight reel. She sets the two tote bags she’s carrying on the counter and begins unpacking them.

“I brought ice cream, fudge, and Oreos.”

“Definitely necessities.” My voice comes out raw as I sit up and run a hand over my face.

Chantelle is quiet—which is never a good thing—as she scrummages around in my kitchen. Blessedly, she says nothing about the sink—and counter—full of dirty dishes, though I know it’s taking all her willpower not to comment on the state of my apartment. I’ve always wished I could be a little more put together and tidy like her, but my brain just doesn’t seem to work that way. Give me letters and numbers and I can organize those bad boys into program codes all day long. Organizing my tiny apartment into some semblance of order, though? Yeah, not happening.

She miraculously finds a couple of clean bowls, and I watch as she scoops our ice cream into them, pours fudge over top, and then sticks two Oreos on the sides. She grabs a couple of spoons and walks to the living room.

I straighten as she hands me a bowl and sits down beside me. She cringes slightly at the laundry dumped in a heap beside the couch—hey, at least it’s clean—and my mess of tech magazines, books, and candy wrappers strewn across my coffee table. To her credit, she doesn’t start folding clothes or straightening up like she normally does. She’s probably saving all that energy for what she’s about to say to me.

“So ...” she begins, “want to tell me exactly what that jerk boyfriend of yours did?”

“What makes you think I’m talking about Buck?” I huff out. It stings that she’s right.

Her hazel eyes narrow as she takes a bite of ice cream. “Do you really want me to answer that?”

I sigh. She’s not going to let me off the hook with this one. Twirling my spoon around in the bowl, I avoid eye contact. “Remember that idea I had for the restaurant app?”

“Yes.”

I swallow over the lump in my throat. “Buck and I were talking about a new app the team is working on and I mentioned mine ...” I trail off, remembering how Buck’s eyes lit up as I explained the concept behind the app. I wanted to create a go-to app that would let the user search for a meal, allowing them to add any food allergies or restrictions. The app would give them a list of surrounding restaurants serving those meals, along with prices, so the user could make an informed decision on where they wanted to dine. It would even have an option for restaurants to opt-in to price match if the user showed them the same meal at a cheaper price somewhere else. “He was really interested and kept telling me what a great idea it was. I thought it would be my big break, ya know?”

“What happened?”

Anger bubbles in my chest just thinking about it. “I walked into our team meeting today, and Buck started off by telling them about the new idea the board had agreed to go with. *My* idea. I-I was so excited. I thought he’d gone to the board and pitched my idea for me. But—”

“He told them it was his,” Chantelle spits out, her eyes flashing with the same level of anger that’s coursing through my veins. I nod, then bury my face in my hands. “Please tell me you dumped his sorry—”

“Of course I dumped him!”

“About time,” she mumbles, then meets my eyes. “Ronnie, you have some sort of documentation to show this was your concept, right?”

I bite my lip and avert my gaze. “I, uh ... may have written it on a napkin. Buck asked to keep it so he could help me, and I, like the good, trusting girlfriend I am, let him take it. He must have been up all night working on it because he had a decent presentation going when I walked in. When I confronted him, he had the nerve to act oblivious. As if it was his idea alone.”

Chantelle scoffs. “That slimy thief. He never deserved you. Want me to key his truck? I bet we could get the guys in on it. They could bring their hockey sticks.”

This brings a small smile to my lips. Being friends with the guys from the Denver Dragons minor league hockey team is pretty much like having two dozen overprotective brothers. With Chantelle’s dad being the coach and my dad the team’s scout, the guys have been like our family for years and would drop everything to come to Chantelle’s or my aid.

“Believe me, I’ve already thought about it, and as much as I would enjoy it, I don’t know that it’s worth the legal ramifications.”

“He stole your idea, Ron!”

My shoulders sink, and I stuff another bite of ice cream in my mouth to give myself a moment. “I know,” I finally say.

“What are you going to do? What did your dad say?”

I shoot her a glare. “He doesn’t know.”

“Yet?”

“I’m not sure I’m going to tell him. At least not until I have another job and he doesn’t have to worry about me. Even then, I don’t know that I should mention Buck’s hand in it.”

“Ron ...” she drags my name out.

“Chantelle, you know how Dad is. He’ll flip out. He never liked Buck to begin with—”

She cuts me off with a snort. “No one did.” I send her another glare and she grimaces. “Sorry. But you know it’s true. He wasn’t good for you, and this is proof.”

“Yeah,” I mumble, setting my now empty bowl on the coffee table.

“Did you go to the board? The CEO? Someone? I swear, Ronnie, I will go down there if I need to.”

I chuckle at her defensiveness as my head falls back against the couch. “I went to my supervisor, Gage. But he didn’t believe me.”

“That’s because Buck is stuck up his butt every day.”

I sigh. She isn’t wrong. Buck is—was—my team leader, and he was always kissing up to Gage to ensure he kept his position as head of the team. “Yeah, well, regardless, it’s my word against Buck’s, and since he went home and wrote it all up, he’s the only one with documentation.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“What can I do?” I shrug, an ache settling in my gut. “I already quit.”

Chantelle shakes her head. “I really hate that you had to quit. You were great at that job.”

Rubbing my temple, I reply, “I know. But I can’t stay there and help develop an app that has Buck’s name all over it when it’s mine.” My eyes meet hers. “More importantly, I can’t work at a place where my loyalty for the past three years means nothing to them. Gage should have believed me. Or at the very least questioned Buck. But he didn’t.” Tears build behind my eyes, and I blink rapidly to keep them at bay. Buck wasn’t the only one who betrayed me. My supervisor and entire team did too.

Chantelle stands quickly, grabbing my arm and pulling me up with her. “Come on. Go hop in the shower and get ready.”

I blink, startled by this change in conversation. “What? Why? Where are we going?”

Tucking a strand of black hair behind her ear, she gives me a saucy smile. “The game, of course. You need a distraction. And what’s a better distraction than watching a bunch of hot hockey players in their element?”

I snort. “I thought you weren’t interested in any of the guys.”

“I’m not. But I have eyes, Ronnie, and these eyes tell me that those men are hot. Objectively speaking, of course.”

“Of course,” I reply, my lips tugging up into a smile.

She gives me a push. “Now, go get ready.”

Two

Archer

“**B**ut I wanna go with you,” Indy whines as I try to detach her from my neck while the nanny stands to the side, watching me with disapproval. Indy’s clinging to me like a baby sloth, and as much as I love having her in my arms, I’m going to be late for my game. Which is not a good look for the captain of the team.

My throat feels thick as I try to swallow the guilt and worry. I hate being away from her, especially when it’s the first time she’s been with a new nanny. “I know, sweetie, but Daddy has to work. Okay?” Though she knows I play hockey, I’ve learned that telling her I have to go to work instead of using the word “game” helps her understand I’m not leaving her for something fun. “Can you promise to be good for ...” I trail off for a moment, trying to recall my newest nanny’s name. “Ms. Wilma.”

Indy snuffles, burying her little face in my neck, and I squeeze her tighter. This happens almost every time we part ways. Most people would blame me for not putting my foot down with her, but I just can’t bring myself to do it. She’s my entire world, and I never want her to feel like I’m prioritizing something above her. Even my job.

Pressing a kiss to her cheek, I gently pry her off. “Daddy,” she wails, sending a wave of guilt crashing over me. If it were up to me, I’d never leave her.

“Now, Indigo, your father has to leave,” Ms. Wilma says as she reaches for Indy’s hand. Indy jerks away, sending the woman a glare.

I attempt a smile at Ms. Wilma, praying she doesn’t take too much offense at my spunky four-year-old daughter. Not many can handle Indy’s energy, and I cannot afford to lose another nanny. Ms. Wilma came highly recommended from the hiring agency, and though she’s much older than the other nannies I’ve had, I’m hoping that will work to my advantage. At least she won’t be trying to hit on me all the time. Or sneaking into my bed. I shudder at the memory of that particular nanny. Thank God she didn’t try to turn the story around and make up a bogus charge against me.

“Cupcake,” I say, turning my attention back to my daughter. “I’ll be home later tonight, and I promise we will have that tea party. Okay?”

Indy sniffs, her eyes slightly narrowing. A pinch in my chest has me shoving away the grief. She looks just like June right now. “Promise?” Her little voice wobbles on the word.

Smiling, I kiss her forehead. “Promise.”

Thankfully, that seems to satisfy her enough to allow me to make my escape. After running through the list of emergency numbers with Ms. Wilma for the fifth time, I grab my gear and head out the door.

I use the drive to work to run through the plays in my head to try and distract myself from wondering how Indy is faring with Ms. Wilma. I’m honestly not too worried about the game itself. I’m fairly confident we’ll crush the opposing team. I’m more worried about getting home in time to keep my promise to Indy.

If she’s already asleep, I’ll just wake her and do the party anyway. She’d love that.

My lips lift for a moment until an image of June flashes in my mind. An instant ache settles deep behind my breastbone. It's been two years since I woke up in the middle of the night to find my wife having an epileptic seizure, but it was too late. Even having the doctors tell me repeatedly that there was nothing I could have done ... I still struggle to squelch the guilt. I should have been able to do something, anything, to save my wife.

I attempt to shake off the bitterness and anger, but by the time I arrive at the rink, the regret has seeped into my bones. I'm glad there's a game tonight and not just practice. It means I can take my anger out on the puck and opposing team instead of my teammates. They have to deal with my moods enough as it is.

When I walk into the locker room, Aiden Doyle, the alternate team captain, lifts his chin in greeting, then cocks an eyebrow. "How's she cuttin'?" I thought you were gonna bunk off." A couple of the newer guys glance in Aiden's direction, their brows furrowed as they try to decipher the Irishman's words.

"You know I don't skip games, Doyle."

Aiden eyes the clock, letting me know just how close I was to being late. "Lá breithe shona duit, Cap." *Happy birthday.*

"Thanks," I mutter.

Aiden has been on the team almost as long as I have, so I've picked up on most of his Irish sayings, though a few still catch me off guard. But every year, he says the same thing on my birthday—*Lá breithe shona duit*. I'm hoping no one asks what he said and they've forgotten it's my thirtieth today. I don't feel like celebrating. Haven't felt like celebrating anything since June died. Plus, I already promised Indy that I'll be home as soon as the game is over. And I never break a promise to her.

More of the team trickles in, and we run through the plays one last time as we gear up.

We walk through the tunnel toward the arena, and the guys' heads swivel to the club lounge, where some of them have family and friends screaming their names. I don't bother to look. My family is back home in Montana. They try to come to two or three games a year, but Mom and Dad are getting up there in age, and my two older sisters, Keira and Sonya, are busy with their own families. I get it. But I do miss looking up in the stands and seeing June's smiling face cheering me on.

Bridger Baros, one of our defensemen, nudges me as we get ready to hit the ice. "Look up there," he says, pointing toward the stands with a soft smile on his face. My gaze follows the direction, and I pick out Greer, Evan's fiancée, and Freya, who is Bridger's fiancée, before snagging on two figures who are wearing my number.

Chantelle, Coach Pratt's daughter, and Veronica, the daughter of Art Reynolds, the Dragons' scout, are both screaming as the team takes to the ice. Chantelle spots me first and stands, pumping her fist into the air. Veronica's head turns to me, and then she's jumping up and joining her friend.

"See, Sullivan? You're not as alone as you think." Aiden's Irish brogue comes out thick as he clamps a hand on my shoulder.

I bristle a little, and he drops his hand. Is it that obvious how detached I've become since June's passing?

Still, a sliver of peace starts to work its way into my heart. I know there's truth in his words. I'm not alone. I have God, Indy, my family, the Dragons ... and the two women who are currently screaming my name.

I shake my head, my shoulders relaxing as my lips twitch. Those two are the team's biggest cheerleaders, and they take it upon themselves to alternate which player they support at games. Especially when a player doesn't always have family or friends attending.

That thought instantly rids me of the warmth that seeing their support brought me. I'm grateful to them, truly. But it still hurts that it's not June up there.

I give the girls a small wave and a smile—though I’m sure it comes out as more of a grimace—then step into the arena, where I lose myself in the familiar and comforting movements of my blades sliding along the ice.

Pouring all my emotions into the game, I play hard, showing no mercy as my gaze constantly moves between the puck, my teammates, and our opponents. I scan for an opening before sending the puck sailing to Aiden. It passes between a few of our guys until one of the other team’s players steals it—from me—and makes a slapshot, landing a score for Chicago. Frustration mounts in my veins as I train my focus back on the puck. Bridger sweeps in, stealing the puck, and after that, the Dragons dominate the ice.

We play a tight game, each of us in tune with one another. Though I may have dreamed of making it to the major leagues when I was younger, my love for this team has caused that desire to ebb over the years.

The Dragons are my family, and I pray I’ll be with them until I’m forced to retire.

We’re at the end of our final period when Aiden gets a breakaway and scores the winning goal. The crowd erupts as Bridger, Evan, and a few other guys dog pile onto Aiden. After several rounds of celebratory pats on the backs, we make our way through the tunnel to the locker room, where we immediately change and hit the showers.

About twenty minutes later, there’s a call from the doorway. “Everyone decent?”

Chantelle barely waits for a response before charging in, heading straight for Kade Turner, one of our forwards. Poor guy. She doesn’t waste a moment and starts giving him advice on how to improve his form and what he could have done differently. Bridger snickers from beside him, earning a glare from Chantelle.

“Don’t think I’ve forgotten about you,” she tells Bridger, pointing her finger in his face. Bridger straightens but listens attentively.

“She could run the whole team,” Aiden leans in and whispers to me. I can only grunt in response because it’s true. Chantelle knows this team as well, if not better than, her dad. As much as the guys tease whoever she’s giving advice to at the moment, we all listen when it’s our turn. Her assessments are almost always correct.

Movement catches my eye as Veronica walks toward me, tucking a strand of orange hair behind her ear. The rest of her hair is black, but every few months, she changes the colors of the sections framing her face.

“Good game, Sullivan,” she says with a smile.

I dip my head. “Thanks.”

She assesses me as she tilts her head. “You seemed a little off though.”

“Are you trying to take Chantelle’s spot?” I ask, motioning toward her friend who has now turned her sights on Doyle.

Veronica chuckles and shakes her head. “No. No one could do that.” She opens her mouth as if to say something more when Kent Moore drapes an arm over her shoulder.

He looks down at her expectantly, waggling his eyebrows. “You doing anything tonight?”

Veronica rolls her eyes, removing his arm. “Not with you.”

Kent winces and clutches his chest dramatically. “Ouch. That hurts, Ron.”

“Get lost, Kent,” I say, giving him a light shove. “She has a boyfriend.”

“Had,” Veronica corrects me immediately. “I *had* a boyfriend.” There’s a bit of venom in her tone, and my brow arches, but I don’t press.

Kent grins. “So that means—”

“That means you’re still going home alone,” she interjects firmly, but her lips twitch like she’s holding back a laugh.

He shakes his head sadly as if Veronica has just made the worst decision of her life. She only snorts as he walks away.

“You okay?” I ask as I pull my coat on.

Veronica blinks, her eyebrows dipping behind her large, white-framed glasses. “Okay?”

“Yeah ...” I trail off, wondering why I even asked about her relationship status. Clearing my throat, I continue. “Since you ... uh ...”

She crosses her arms. “Dumped the dirty, lying scumbag that I called a boyfriend.” Her nose wrinkles and she makes a gagging sound.

“Yeah. That,” I say with a strained chuckle.

Veronica smiles brightly. “I’m fine. Peachy. Perfect, actually.” My gaze narrows. She does not sound fine at all, but before I can question her, she bumps my shoulder with hers. “Enough about me. How does it feel to be the big three-o? You’re practically an old man now,” she says loudly enough that a couple of the guys glance over at me and begin eavesdropping.

I barely hold back a groan. “Yup. And this old man is heading home.”

Boos fill the locker room, and a few of the guys throw their sweaty shirts at me. I manage to knock them all away before they hit my face.

“Come on, old man. You didn’t even tell us it was your birthday. You gotta let us take you to Brokedown or Cooper’s,” Evan says. Several of the others agree.

Aiden stares at me with a mixture of amusement and anticipation on his face.

I grab my bag and sling it over my shoulder. There’s nothing these guys can say or do to make me cancel on Indy. “Sorry, guys. But I have a date.”

The room goes quiet for a moment as everyone’s heads swing in my direction. After a slight pause, the air fills with whooping and hollering as the guys talk over one another to ask me who the lucky girl is. Everyone, that is, except Aiden, who is shaking his head, disappointment flickering in his eyes.

“Come on, Cap. You gotta give us more than that,” Evan says, a wide grin on his face.

My lips lift slightly, and I rub a hand over the short beard covering my jawline. “Well, she’s sweet and funny. But has a lot of sass”—a couple guys whistle at that—“sandy brown hair, big puppy dog brown eyes with glasses, and is about three-and-a-half-feet tall.” Grumbles echo throughout the room. I chuckle, though it sounds hollow to my own ears. “See you tomorrow.” I wave a hand and walk out, ignoring the calls from my teammates. They mean well, but not being with Indy when I don’t have practice or a game to keep me away from her feels wrong.

Still, as I climb into my truck and pull out of the parking lot, I can’t quite stop the ache in my heart from spreading until my entire chest feels tight. I rub at the spot as I take the familiar route home.

I park in the driveway and stare at the house June and I bought together six years ago. Over the past two years, I’ve thought many times about selling it and finding another place where June’s memory doesn’t whisper to me from every corner. Where the ghost of her voice doesn’t echo within the walls. But those memories are also the reason I haven’t been able to sell it.

The band around my chest tightens as I walk toward the house and the reminders of everything I lost when June left us. When I open the door, I’m met with a frantic Ms. Wilma. Her face is flushed, her shirt ruffled, and her gray-streaked hair is sticking up in random places. I inwardly cringe as I glance around for the little hurricane I know is responsible for the nanny’s current state.

Indy comes running to me, her purple tutu bouncing with each step. Various shades of pink, purple, and blue eyeshadow cover her face. Glitter eyeshadow, to be precise. Her lips are smeared with bright red lipstick, and there’s a princess crown on top of her head.

“Daddy!” She jumps into my arms, and I squeeze her tight, the band around my chest finally loosening.

“Hey, Cupcake.” I offer Ms. Wilma a placating smile. Turning back to my daughter, I say, “You look beautiful.”

Indy smiles wide, revealing the red lipstick that made it onto her teeth. “Ms. Wilma said it didn’t look right.” She pouts, sticking her bottom lip out.

The older woman huffs, placing her hands on her hips. “I was only trying to tell her that eyeshadow goes on your eyelids. Not your entire face.”

“But I like it on my face. It’s pretty. Right, Daddy?” Indy looks at me with wide eyes through her glasses.

“It’s the prettiest,” I whisper. “But,” I add more firmly, “you should apologize to Ms. Wilma for not listening.”

Indy glances at her nanny. “Sorry.”

Ms. Wilma gives a shaky smile and nods. Running a hand down Indy’s hair, I tell her to go get her room ready for tea while I talk to Ms. Wilma.

“I’m sorry for the ...” I trail off, not knowing what to say.

Surprisingly, Ms. Wilma sighs and smiles and places her hand on my arm in a motherly gesture. “It’s okay. She’s a child. It’s just been a while since I’ve had to wrangle one that little ... and with that much energy.”

Relief floods my veins, and I feel like maybe, just maybe, we’ve finally found the right nanny for us. After seeing Ms. Wilma out, I make my way to Indy’s room where she has all her makeup laid out across the bed.

She sends me a big, gap-toothed grin and picks up a makeup brush as I sit down. “I’m gonna make you bewtiful, Daddy!”

I smile as she chatters and makes me *bewtiful*, and I know I made the right choice by coming home instead of going out with the guys.

Three

Veronica

After Archer leaves, Bridger shoots Aiden a look I can't quite decipher. Aiden just shakes his head sadly, which is an unusual look for him since he's usually the one trying to make everyone laugh.

"Ahh ... come on guys, don't let Sullivan bring you all down," Davis McCoy, one of the newer guys, says. "He's being a killjoy." Bridger, Aiden, Evan, and Cyrus stiffen.

"Watch it, McCoy," Aiden warns in a deep voice.

"What?"

"The man just wants to be with his daughter for his birthday. Leave him alone." This comes from Shane, one of the only other guys on the team with kids.

Davis mutters something under his breath and turns away. I glance at Aiden, Evan, Cyrus, and Bridger. "He still hangs out with you guys though, right?"

Bridger shakes his head, a divot forming between his brows.

Aiden sighs. "Only once every few months. Just enough to keep us off his back. He's not been the same since ..." He trails off, but we all know what he means. Since June passed

away, Archer has become a shell of himself, putting all his energy into his daughter, Indy, and crushing it on the ice. I didn't realize it had gotten so bad though. I'm not sure I can blame him. June had been his entire world since high school.

"I told you"—Evan turns to Aiden—"he needs an intervention."

I quirk my eyebrow. "You think he's that bad?" I'd become so engrossed with work and Buck that it's been a while since I've truly been around the team. I've noticed Archer's absence after games, but I always assumed it was just a coincidence. It makes me sad to know that he's stopped doing anything with his friends.

Everyone's expressions grow grim. "It's been bad for a while," Aiden finally says in a worried tone. "We don't see or talk to him except for practice and games."

A heaviness settles over me as I recall the haunted look in Archer's eyes, all while he was forcing a smile and trying to tease the guys. I glance at the door Archer walked out of moments ago.

While I've never dealt with losing the love of my life—and doubt I will since I'm not even sure I believe in love—I'm painfully familiar with the gaping hole caused by living without someone who is supposed to be a staple figure in your life.

My thoughts jump back to Archer. It feels wrong that he's celebrating his birthday without his friends. Without being reminded that people do care about him, that he isn't alone, and that he doesn't have to sacrifice his friendships to be with his daughter. I haven't seen Indy in a long time—probably since June's funeral—but I'm sure she'd have the guys wrapped around her little finger.

The heaviness continues to press on me as everyone piles out of the locker room and into the parking lot. I can't shake the feeling that I need to do something. But what? I'm not sure. All I know is that I can't ignore it.

Feigning a headache, I look at Chantelle. “I’m going to go home.” Not a lie. I will go home. Eventually. “I’ll call you tomorrow.”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Are you sure you don’t want to come?”

“Yeah. I’ll join you all next time.”

“Do you want me to ditch the guys so we can have a girls’ night in?”

I smile. It would sound nice, if it weren’t for this overwhelming pull to do something for Archer. Because I know what it feels like to be missing someone during important moments in your life, and maybe I can do something—no matter how small—to ease that pain for him. “Nah. It’s okay. Maybe we can get together in a day or two.” This seems to appease her, and after a quick hug, we part ways.

Hopping in my Jeep, an idea hits me. It’s simple and hopefully won’t come across as weird. At least, I pray it doesn’t as I drive to my favorite bakery, The Screaming Peach, with the hope that they still have some cupcakes left. When I walk inside, I deeply inhale the rich fruit and cake aroma.

“Well, what do we have here?” Mrs. Woodhouse, the owner, asks when she sees me. “Did you have a late-night craving?”

Smiling, I step up to the counter. “They’re not for me this time. Though if you have one of your chocolate bomb cupcakes, I wouldn’t say no.”

She chuckles. “I might have one left with your name on it. What else you need?”

“Do you have any of your peach cupcakes left?”

“How many?”

“Half dozen? And maybe a half dozen of your chocolate and strawberry ones?”

She gives a crisp nod and winks at me. “I got you, boo.”

Thirty minutes later, I’m pulling up to Archer’s house, my heart beating rapidly as doubts plague my mind. I’ve known

the man for almost ten years now. Heck, I've even been to his house. But never unannounced and not since June's memorial service.

"Oh, this is so dumb, Ronnie."

What if he's already gone to bed? Glancing at the clock, I see it's only a little after eight. Surely, he wouldn't be asleep already. "I hope not," I mumble to myself as I gather my courage and step out of my vehicle. After grabbing the cupcakes, I walk toward the door, trying to practice what I'm going to say to keep it from getting awkward.

"I just wanted to drop off some cupcakes for your birthday," I say quietly under my breath.

"Cupcake delivery service!" Ugh, too lame.

"Did you know cupcakes are a staple for every birthday celebration?" Shaking my head, I wrinkle my nose. No. That won't do either.

"Peaches or strawberries?"

Pasting a fake smile on my face, I hold the box up and infuse my voice with more zeal. "Look! Cupcakes!

"I watched a documentary once on the history of cupcakes. It was fascinating. Did you know that cupcakes were invented in the late 1700s but weren't given the official name *cupcake* until about thirty years later?" Wow. That is the worst one yet.

Groaning, because I still have no idea what to say that doesn't make me sound like I'm off my rocker, I stop in front of the door. I try to swallow, but my throat is suddenly parched. Pressing the doorbell, I hold my breath. Maybe he's gone and I can just set the cupcakes on the porch. I'm about to do just that when I hear footsteps approaching.

I'm feeling incredibly stupid at the moment, holding a dozen cupcakes for a man I've known for years, yet don't really know at all. Just because the thought of him celebrating his birthday alone made my heart ache.

Then the door swings open and every insecurity flies out the window as I take Archer in from his tiara-topped head, glitter-

makeup covered face, past the blue tutu around his hips, and all the way down to the bright pink of his toenails. I cannot help the laugh that bubbles up from inside me and spills out of my lips.

Archer's eyes bulge for a moment. Crossing his arms, he shoots me a glare. Which, let's be honest, doesn't look nearly as threatening as he probably thinks it does when he's covered in glitter and wearing a tutu. "Ronnie, what in the world are you doing here?"

I try to reply, but I can barely breathe as another laugh bursts free. Wordlessly, I shove the cupcakes into his hands, and then I'm bending over, laughing so hard that tears pour down my face.

When I glance up, Archer is staring at me like I've lost my mind, even though he's the one who looks like a rainbow glitter bomb exploded on his face. His eyelids are painted with pink, purple, and blue glitter eyeshadow. It's also on his cheeks and lips, and his short beard is full of stray specks of colorful glitter.

His glare deepens the longer I laugh.

"Don't look at me like that," I wheeze out. "I'm not the one dressed"—I motion toward his attire as I fight back another laugh—"like that."

He opens his mouth but doesn't get a chance to reply because a small face appears beside him. She looks at me through her bright purple glasses, her little button nose wrinkling. "Who are you?"

Smiling, I bend down to her level. "Hey, Indy. You've gotten so big since I saw you last." Archer has always been super protective of his daughter, even more so since June's death. After that, he stopped bringing Indy around. I don't think any of us have seen her since the funeral. "I'm Ronnie. A friend of your daddy's." She doesn't say anything, just studies me intensely behind the thick frames. My smile falters slightly. "I brought you guys some cupcakes for his birthday." I glance up at Archer and see the muscle in his jaw twitch.

Feeling completely uncomfortable with Indy's serious scrutiny and Archer's obvious annoyance at my presence, I stand and wipe my hands down my jeans. "Well, I hope you guys enjoy them." I turn to go but am interrupted by a small voice.

"You have glasses," Indy says. "Just like me."

Turning back around, I nod. "I do. But I like your purple frames better. Maybe I should get that color next. What do you think?"

A toothy smile appears on her face and little dimples pop on her cheeks. "Yeah! Or bright green with rainbow polka dots!"

Smiling back at her, I reply, "Those would be so awesome."

She tilts her head, looking me up and down. "You're wearing Daddy's number."

Glancing down, heat rushes to my cheeks. Oh, hockey sticks. I had totally forgotten I still had Archer's jersey on. No wonder Archer seems frustrated that I'm here—besides the fact that I caught him dressed as a princess. Of course, he already saw me in it at the game, but it's different showing up at a man's house at night unannounced and wearing his number. Oh, this looks so bad. Bad, bad, bad. He probably thinks I've turned into some sort of lovesick jersey chaser.

Clearing my throat, I reply with a strained voice, "Yeah, I guess I am." I don't dare make eye contact with Archer.

Indy purses her lips, then nods. "Okay, you can join our tea party."

"What!?" Archer and I ask at the same time.

I chuckle nervously, praying that Archer doesn't think I came here for anything more than just a cupcake delivery. "Oh no, sweetie. That's okay. I was just dropping off the cupcakes."

Her bottom lip pops out in a pout. "But—"

"Indy," Archer interrupts her firmly. "Why don't you tell Ms. Ronnie goodbye?"

“Will you come back and see me?” she asks instead, her eyes pleading with me.

Her unexpected request leaves me momentarily at a loss for words. I bite my bottom lip, glancing at Archer for guidance. But he’s looking down at his daughter with a puckered brow, seemingly just as startled as I am. Kneeling, I meet Indy’s dark brown eyes. “I’m sure we’ll see each other again. Okay?”

She sighs, her shoulders deflating a bit. “Okay.” The one word sounds so dejected that I want to take back what I said and promise that I will absolutely come back to see her.

Before I can open my mouth, Archer steps inside. Setting the cupcakes down on the entryway table, he rubs his hand over Indy’s hair. “All right. You go make us some more tea and I’ll be in there in a minute.” Once she’s out of sight, Archer steps toward me. “Uh. Thanks for the cupcakes.”

I tuck a strand of my orange-colored hair behind my ear and adjust my glasses, thankful he hasn’t mentioned the jersey. “You’re welcome. I just thought you should have something nice for your birthday,” I say quietly, feeling a little unsure of myself.

His lips lift in the corners, the movement barely noticeable through his short beard and the pound of glitter makeup on his face. “Well, yeah. Uh ...” He trails off, rubbing the back of his neck. “Listen, can we keep this”—he waves his hand over his body—“to ourselves?” His words come out with a hint of vulnerability, and my heart softens.

Still, I can’t help but tease him. Just a little. Smiling, I lift an eyebrow. “Afraid I’ll let it slip that the big bad captain of the Dragons plays dress up with his daughter?” The look he gives me is not one of amusement, which only makes my grin stretch wider. It’s been a while since I’ve spoken one-on-one with Archer, and the familiarity of joking with an old friend is comforting after the long, emotional twenty-four hours I’ve experienced. At least it is for me. Probably not so much for Archer since I’m laughing at his expense. Patting his arm, I say, “Don’t worry, Princess. Your secret is safe with me.”

He drops his head against the doorframe and groans. “Please don’t ever call me that again.”

I throw my head back, cackling. “Oh, I dunno. I think it has a nice ring to it. Don’t you?” I tilt my head, letting my smile break free.

“Ronnie,” he practically growls, and the oddest thing happens. My stomach swoops, and a prickle of awareness works its way up my spine. I barely refrain from shuddering as warmth crawls up my neck and into my face once more.

Archer’s dark gaze slices to mine and narrows. “You okay?”

“Yup.” It comes out way too squeaky. Archer studies me more intently, making me squirm. I have no idea what is going on, but I need to get out of here. Pronto.

“Okay ...” he says, dragging it out. Straightening, he motions with his thumb over his shoulder. “Do you want a cupcake before you go?”

I shake my head. “No. I’m good. You and Indy enjoy.” I take a small step back, trying to quell the sudden sensation—that is most definitely not butterflies—that hits me whenever Archer’s eyes meet mine. “Happy birthday,” I call out as my feet touch the sidewalk. “Princess,” I add, unable to keep the laughter out of my voice.

Archer groans again as he steps inside and closes the door.

I smile all the way back to my Jeep, and when I pull into my apartment building’s parking lot, I realize I’m still smiling.

No, Ronnie. You will absolutely not get any fuzzy feelings for Archer; I scold myself. You literally just dumped Buck.

That’s it. I’m probably just feeling vulnerable because of Buck and because having the attention of a good man for two seconds has messed with the wiring in my brain.

I’m still lecturing myself when I step into my apartment and set my bag down. Exhaustion hits me hard as I wash my face and change into my pajamas. I should probably go to bed, but even though my body is tired, my brain is firing on all cylinders.

I'm hurting. I know marriage and love aren't for me, but I still wasted months of my life with someone who only used me. Anger swells inside me, but my anger toward Buck is just the tip of the iceberg. Because I'm even more angry at myself. How did I let him fool me for so long?

Tears sting the backs of my eyes, but I force them down. I've wasted enough tears on Buck Jackson.

When I'm not thinking about my sorry excuse of an ex, my mind keeps bouncing between two pairs of brown eyes. But I'm not sure if it's Archer's sad eyes or Indy's curious ones that called to me more this evening.

Shaking away the thoughts, I walk into my small kitchen, ignoring the pile of dishes in the sink. They'll be there tomorrow. I need to watch some mindless TV so I can stop overthinking everything. I'm too drained right now to make heads or tails of my tumultuous thoughts and emotions.

After making some tea and grabbing a plate of shortbread cookies and chocolate, I curl up on the couch, ready to watch my comfort show—*The IT Crowd*.

I'm about ten minutes into the episode when Dad calls.

"Hey, Dad."

"Hey, Pumpkin. How's my favorite girl doing?"

Smiling, I snuggle deeper into my chair, pulling my warm fuzzy blanket up to my chin. "I'm good," I lie, hoping it sounds convincing enough.

There's a long pause. "What's wrong?"

I sigh and lean my head back on the couch. "How do you do that?"

Dad chuckles. "I've had over twenty years of learning all the little inflections your voice makes and what they mean. So do you want to tell me what's bothering you?"

Worrying my bottom lip, I decide I might as well tell him now instead of having him drag it out of me or hear it from someone else. I already let it slip to the team, and some of

those guys are worse gossipers than women. “Buck and I broke up.”

“About time.”

I snort. “You and Chantelle.”

“She’s a smart girl.”

“And I’m not?”

He sighs. “You’re brilliant. But ...”

“Buck wasn’t good for me.” I absently twirl a strand of hair between my fingers. “I know I ignored all the red flags with him.”

“I just want to see you happy.”

“I know, Dad,” I say over the tightness in my throat. His job meant he traveled the country more often than he was at home, but Dad’s spent my entire life making sure I was happy after the woman who gave birth to me left us when I was just a few months old. When I was younger, I wished I could at least remember her, but that wish died a long time ago. I finally realized that a mother who didn’t want to be a mother wasn’t worth the time or energy I was giving her.

If only Dad felt the same way.

It’s been the only thing that has led to massive arguments between us over the years. Especially after I found out in middle school that he had been looking for her ever since she left. Why did he want someone who didn’t want us? Thank God, he finally gave up trying to find her when I was a junior in high school.

“Are you okay? Did something else happen?”

Inhaling a deep breath, I reply, “I quit my job too.”

He’s quiet for a beat. “Because of Buck?”

I won’t lie to my dad, but also he doesn’t need to know the entire truth. Not yet, at least. It’ll only upset him more. “Yeah.”

“Ron—”

“Dad, I just ... I couldn’t work there with him.” I wince inwardly. I’m not even lying to him but feeding him half-truths has my stomach twisting in knots. He and I have always been open with one another, but I’m just not ready to go into all of this with him. It’s still too raw.

“That’s understandable. I just hate that he took your job away from you.”

He has no idea. “Yeah, well, that just means I can find an even better job. Right?”

Dad chuckles. “That’s my girl. Always looking on the bright side.” He pauses for a moment. “Say, why don’t you come scouting with me tomorrow? It’d be just like old times.”

My lips tug up into a smile. “Miss me?”

“Of course I do.”

“Where are you headed?”

“Cheyenne. There’s a college and high school game I want to catch tomorrow. Then our guys are playing there the night after. Figured we could go show them some support.”

It’s been a long time since Dad and I have taken a road trip together, and Cheyenne isn’t that far away. I haven’t even started looking for jobs yet, but if something were to miraculously come up, I could just get a ride back to Denver. “Okay. Sounds great.”

“Perfect. I’ll pick you up bright and early in the morning.” I can hear the smile in his voice. My responding groan makes him laugh. He knows I hate early mornings.

We chat a bit longer, then say goodnight. And even though I’m still jobless and have no idea where I’m going to go from here, my heart feels lighter.

Four

Veronica

By the time we reach Cheyenne, my spirits have lifted. Spending time with Dad was just what I needed, though he did end up dragging the full story out of me about why I quit. I've never been good at keeping secrets from him anyway.

I'm not sure I've ever seen him as angry as he was after he found out what Buck did. He threatened to call the CEO himself, but that's the last thing I need. I love Dad, but he can't fight all my battles for me. Besides, I had no desire to continue working at a place where no one trusted me. Dad did give me an idea, though. I've been thinking about which companies I want to apply to once we get back to Denver, but honestly, the thought of having to work my way back up the ladder to where I was at SmartTru is daunting.

Which is why Dad suggested I freelance. Being a freelancer never occurred to me. I've always been more of a team player. I thrive in a creative environment where, as a team, we can bounce ideas off each other. But those things don't sound appealing to me at the moment. The betrayal still stings. Not just from Buck, but also from the rest of my so-called team. No one had my back. No one believed me.

Freelancing sounds better and better.

Now that Dad has planted the idea in my head, I've been thinking about reaching out to my friend, Rafe Thomas. He's a freelance app developer I met playing video games online. Once we got to know one another—and I was fairly confident he wasn't some stalker serial killer—we started talking about our personal lives and found out we were in the same field.

I'll pray about what to do while we're out today and then send Rafe a message this evening if it still feels like a good idea.

Dad and I catch the high school game first. There's a goalie he's been following, and I don't blame him. The kid is good. Like... wicked good.

After the game, I chat with some of the teenage girls waiting for their boyfriends to come out of the locker rooms while Dad talks to the goalie. I doubt he's going to offer him a position just yet. But I can tell Dad wants to put the Dragons on the kid's radar so they'll be his first choice when the time comes.

Once Dad finishes talking, he takes me to a fancy Italian restaurant for dinner. I'm munching on breadsticks when Dad clears his throat in that way he does when he has something serious to say.

My eyes flick to his, noting the worry wrinkling his brow. "What's wrong?" I can't help the fear spreading through my body.

He only hesitates a moment. "I found your mom."

Everything around us slows, and Dad suddenly seems like he's far away. My vision blurs, and the only sound I hear is the erratic pounding of my heart. It takes a moment for everything to clear and for me to find my voice. "Wh-what?" I ask weakly.

Wiping his mouth, he folds his napkin on the table. His gaze softens as he watches me. "Veronica," he says slowly. "I found your mom."

The bite of breadstick sours in my stomach as I break eye contact. "I don't know what to say." I force the words through my tight throat as moisture builds behind my eyes.

Dad reaches over, wrapping his fingers around mine. “I know it’s a lot to take in. I can barely believe it myself.”

I twirl the pasta with my fork, still unable to look at him. What kind of response does he expect from me? Should I be happy? Because happy is definitely not the word that describes what I’m feeling.

Finally, I drag my gaze from my half-eaten food to meet Dad’s hopeful blue eyes. My throat tightens with emotion. I’ve known for a long time that Dad never remarried because he hoped Mom would come back to him ... to us. And I’d hoped he’d made a step forward when he gave up looking for her and that it was a step forward in his healing. I see now how wrong I was.

“You told me you had given up. So have you been looking for her this whole time?”

Guilt flickers across his face as his lips thin. “I had to,” he replies softly.

I shake my head, a burst of anger and disbelief flaring inside me. He lied to me. “Dad ... you promised.” Hurt permeates my voice. Buck’s betrayal is nothing compared to Dad’s.

His fingers tighten around my hand. “I know, and I’m sorry for that. I never intended to hurt you. But it’s real this time, sweetheart. I’ve already gone to see her.”

My mouth drops open. This can’t be happening. “What? You’ve seen her?”

Rubbing his free hand over his face and beard, he sighs. It’s laced with so many things. Guilt. Heartache. Regrets. “She’s my wife. I had to go. To make sure it was really her.”

“*Was* your wife.”

Dad averts his gaze, a muscle twitching in his jaw. “Ronnie, I never filed for a divorce.” The words hit me like a cannonball to the chest.

“What?” I shake my head, my forehead wrinkling. “I don’t understand.”

“You assumed your mother and I were divorced, and I never corrected you.”

Scoffing, I reply, “You lied, you mean.”

He winces, his eyes meeting mine. “I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner.”

“And that’s why you’ve searched for her all this time?”

Nodding, he lets out a heavy breath. “I always felt responsible. Like I could have done more to get her to stay.”

Shaking my head, I squeeze his hand. “No, Dad. She made that choice. Not you.” Blinking back tears, I drop my gaze. “Is she ...” I trail off, not knowing what to ask. So many questions tumble around in my mind that I don’t know where to even start.

Is she going to run again?

Is she healthy?

Is she happy?

“She wants to see you,” he says, gently squeezing my hand.

I tug free and Dad sits back. My heart races, the sound vibrating in my ears. Anger tightens my throat, pushing up until it erupts in a sarcastic, bitter laugh. “Well, you can tell her she’s twenty-five years too late.”

“Ron—”

“No, Dad,” I interject, meeting his eyes. “I don’t want to see her.” His face falls, and his jaw tightens. “Look, I’m glad that you found her. That you can get closure or ... whatever it is that you’ve been wanting. But I can’t. Okay?” The last word comes out in a strangled cry, but I force the tears and all the emotions back down.

I don’t want to be angry at Dad. But I am. I’m angry at the entire situation and that one person’s selfish choices have caused both of us so much pain.

Dad studies me a moment, then gives a crisp nod. “Okay.”

He doesn't bring her up again, and by the time we get back to the hotel, my stomach is twisted in so many knots, I feel like I might throw up. Dad drops me off at my door, and I force a smile, though I know it won't fool him. He pulls me into a hug, but I'm stiff in his arms. Letting out a sigh, he presses a kiss to the top of my head and then walks to his room.

When I'm finally alone, the tears come. I wipe them away with a shaky hand, drawing in shuddering breaths so I don't have a complete breakdown. These rooms have thin walls, and Dad's room is right beside mine. I don't want him to know how upset I am.

Years of bottled-up pain rises to the surface, bringing with it a fresh wave of anger and bitterness. How can Dad ask me to see the woman who abandoned us—abandoned *me*—before I was even old enough to remember her face? Or to recognize the sound of her voice?

How can he be so forgiving? Doesn't he care about all the pain she's caused us? Why does she need to be a part of our lives? He and I have always been a family without her. Why isn't that enough anymore?

I suck in a fortifying breath, my resolve strengthening. I won't do it. She had twenty-five years to make things right and she didn't. I've had a good life, even with her absence. Dad gave me everything I could ever want. He provided for my physical and emotional needs. It's why we're so close, even when we fight. It's why I can usually talk to him about anything.

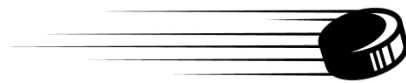
Except when it comes to Mom. He's always had a blind spot where she's concerned, and now I know why. Because they're still married.

Sighing, I get ready for bed, trying to forget about Dad's news as I drift off to sleep. But my dreams are full of a vaguely familiar woman with dark hair. I can only catch glimpses of her face, and every time I try to get closer to her, she runs off laughing.

When I wake up in the morning, it's like I ran a marathon in my sleep. My limbs are heavy, and I'm emotionally and physically drained.

Dad is his normal, chipper self during breakfast, but I can't seem to pull myself out of the funk. When I blink, I see the woman from my dreams. I hear her teasing laughter, which leaves a hollow ache in my chest.

It takes three cups of coffee and a heaping stack of French toast before I'm finally able to shake off the eerie feelings the dream left behind.



My throat tightens as I watch one of the Cheyenne players tackle Archer. Dad jumps up, yelling, and I'm right behind him. The Dragons are better than their team, which must be why Cheyenne is playing dirty tonight.

Bridger and Aiden skate toward Archer, but thankfully, he's already shaking himself off and waving them back to the game.

I swallow down some of my anxiety as my airway opens back up. Archer has been off his game tonight. Chantelle's going to give him an earful when we get back home. She's already sent me half a dozen texts asking me what's going on with him.

Archer skates around his opponent, attempting to steal the puck, but the other player passes it to his teammate, who sends it sailing. Evan misses the block, and the other team scores.

"Ah ... come on guys," Dad says, plopping back down on the bleacher as the horn for intermission sounds. The teams skate off the ice toward the locker room. I say a quick prayer for the guys to get it together before telling Dad I'm going to grab a pretzel.

As I wait in line, I attempt to push away my haunting dreams from last night and the fact that not only has Dad seen Mom, but they're still married. Knots form in my stomach,

and I try to focus on anything else. Of course, that leaves me picturing Buck's idiotic face and remembering his betrayal. I have decisions to make as soon as I get back to Denver. I've only got so much in savings, and if I want to keep my apartment, I'm going to have to get a job soon.

"Ronnie!" a little voice cries out. I turn around and see Indy running to me, followed by an older woman whose widened eyes appear slightly frantic.

Indy throws herself at me, clinging to my legs. "Hey, sweetie. What's going on?" I pry her off so I can kneel to her eye level.

She blinks back tears, pushing her glasses up her nose. "I want my daddy," she cries in a wobbly voice.

The woman is suddenly standing over us, working to catch her breath. "Indigo. You cannot run away from me like that. Please come here."

Indy presses deeper into my side. I pick her up as I stand. The woman is eyeing me warily, so I offer her a smile. "Hello, I'm Ronnie. I'm a friend of Archer's."

She doesn't relax at the reassurance that I'm not a stranger to Indy as her eyes move from my brightly colored hair, across my face, and land on my nose ring. There's the slightest brow raise when she glances down at my tattooed arm that's wrapped around Indy. I refrain from rolling my eyes.

"Yes, well, I am Indigo's nanny, Ms. Wilma, and responsible for her care."

I nod. "Of course." I try to hand Indy back to her nanny, but the child is clinging to me so tight, I can't pry her off. "Indy, we can visit later," I promise in what I hope is a soothing voice.

"But I want Daddy."

Ms. Wilma glances around, her shoulders sagging. "I *was* trying to find Archer. Is the game still going on?"

"It's intermission, so he's in the locker room. They still have two more periods to play."

“I see.” She fidgets for a moment, her eyes filling with tears. “I really need to talk to him. I’ve had a family emergency.”

“Oh.” I bite my bottom lip. “Okay, come with me. I’m not sure what I can do but we’ll see. Okay?”

Ms. Wilma relaxes a bit, though her eyes are still misty. At least she no longer seems to mind that Indy refuses to let go of me. I doubt I’ll be able to go to the locker rooms since the security here doesn’t know me, but hopefully ... well, I don’t know what.

Just like I suspect, security stops us from going any further. And they’re no help at all when I ask them to get Coach Pratt or Archer. By the way they keep looking at me, I sense they think I’m just another crazed fan. I send a text to Dad, hoping that maybe he followed the team to the locker room, but he doesn’t respond.

“Listen, if it’s a real emergency, I can watch Indy,” I offer as Ms. Wilma shifts anxiously beside me.

She shakes her head. “Oh, no. I can’t do that while she’s under my care.”

Nodding my understanding, I pace in front of the door, trying to figure out how to help. When the door swings open, security jumps a little in surprise. Archer takes in the scene, his brow furrowing. “Art said you needed to see me.”

“Daddy!” Indy yells, and I don’t even have the chance to reply as she leaps out of my arms and into Archer’s.

Archer smiles tenderly, kissing her cheek. “Hey, Cupcake. What’s going on?” He swings his gaze past me to Ms. Wilma.

“I need to leave,” she states simply, though there’s a bit of anxiousness in her voice.

“What do you mean *leave*?” Archer frowns.

“My sister was in a car accident, and I’m not sure how bad it was. They’re not telling me anything more than that.” Her voice catches slightly, and my heart goes out to her. “Normally, I wouldn’t do this, but my sister needs me.”

“Oh.” Archer sighs, rubbing a hand over his face and beard. He glances at the door behind him, his shoulders sagging with defeat. He’s got to get back or he’s going to be late hitting the ice. Even though he’s been off tonight, the team still needs him. “I don’t—“

Taking a step forward, I place my hand on his arm. “Archer, I can watch her for you.”

Five

Archer

My eyes snap to Ronnie. “What?”

Her hand falls off my arm as she lifts a shoulder. “I’ll watch her. It’s not a big deal. She seems to like me and you know I won’t let anything happen to her. She can finish watching the game with me and Dad.”

I hesitate. “I don’t know.”

Ronnie crosses her arms, her eyes narrowing. “Don’t you trust me?”

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I reply, “I didn’t say that.”

“Then I see no issue with it.”

“What if she gets tired and whiny and you need to take her back to the hotel? What about her car seat?”

“Oh, here are your keys.” Ms. Wilma hands Ronnie the keys to my truck as if the decision has already been made. “The hotel room key is on there too. I’ve already called a ride to take me back to Denver.”

Ronnie flashes me a triumphant grin as she shakes the keys in front of my face. “See, Princess? It’s fine. Indy and I will watch the game together, and if she starts getting tired, I’ll

take her back to the room.” Glancing down at the key ring, she says, “Looks like Dad and I are staying at the same hotel, so it works out perfectly.”

I want to argue with her, but I honestly don’t have time. Besides, she’s right. I know her enough to trust her with Indy until the end of the game. “Okay, fine.” Turning to Ms. Wilma, I say, “I really am sorry about your sister. I’ll be praying for her.”

She blinks in surprise. “Thank you. I’ll update you once I know more.”

I nod and watch as she rushes away. Then I look at Indy. “All right, Cupcake. You’re going to go watch Daddy work with Ms. Ronnie. Can you be a good girl for her?”

Her eyes widen. “I get to see you work?”

“Yup. Will you be good for Ms. Ronnie?”

She nods, and I give her a quick kiss and hand her over to Ronnie. “I owe you one.”

Ronnie props Indy on her hip as if it’s the most natural thing in the world and gives me a wide grin. “I’ll remember that, Sullivan. Now go get your head in the game,” she orders, sending me a wink.

I shake my head and chuckle. “Yes, ma’am.”

When my skates hit the ice five minutes later, there’s an electric energy surrounding me, and I know it’s because my little girl is watching from the stands. She doesn’t understand the game, but that doesn’t mean I won’t give it my all so she can be proud of her dad.

That energy has me playing harder than I have in years as I steal the puck from the opposing team and send it sailing right past the goalie, scoring the winning goal.

Aiden and Evan charge me, laughing, and my lips spread into a wide smile as I scan the crowd for Indy. Ronnie is standing with her, pointing at me, while Indy claps and cheers. My lungs expand as pride and peace spread throughout my body.

The locker room is loud as the guys celebrate another win. We remove our gear and hit the showers. I rush, eager to get to Indy and relieve Ronnie of babysitting duties so she can get on with whatever plans she had for the night. I really do owe her one. If she hadn't been here tonight and bumped into Ms. Wilma, then I would have been forced to sit out the rest of the game and we may have lost.

Art steps into the locker room just as I'm zipping up my bag. He offers me a smile and strides toward me, his hands in his pockets. "Good game, Sullivan."

I dip my head, sensing there's more he wants to say.

"Could have been better in the beginning," he adds, earning a grimace from me.

"I know."

He studies me a moment. "Anything you want to talk about?"

It takes all my willpower to refrain from groaning. Why does everyone suddenly want me to open up and talk?

"Not particularly," I reply honestly. "Anyway, I need to go get Indy."

"About that. Indy got hungry, so Veronica took her to get something to eat and said she'd take her back to the room."

I tense for a second before forcing myself to relax. As much as I try not to be a helicopter dad ... I am totally a helicopter dad. Plus, I can't help but be a little disappointed that Indy won't be waiting for me right outside the doors.

"Thanks for letting me know. I'm grateful to her."

"Indy's a sweet kid. Veronica had fun with her." His expression clouds. "She needed some fun after the week she's had."

"Everything okay?" I ask, wondering if Ronnie's taking her breakup harder than she let on.

A bone-weary sigh leaks out of him. "I'm just worried about her since she quit her job." He gives me a sidelong look. "You

know how it is. Dads and their baby girls.”

I grunt in agreement. I want to ask why Ronnie quit her job, but it’s none of my business. “Ronnie’s smart. And a go-getter. I’m sure she’ll find something in no time.”

Art’s lips thin, but he only nods.

I call goodbye to the rest of the guys and head out. The hotel is just a few blocks away, so it doesn’t take me long to arrive. I’m right outside the door to my room when I hear a loud squeal that sends my overprotective dad heart racing.

Swiping my card, I swing the door open, already mentally preparing for the worst-case scenario.

Am I going to have to call 911? Will she need stitches? Did she break a bone? Will blood be covering the room?

I can make out just enough in the darkened room that my body sags with relief as my racing heart slows. I step fully into the room, shutting the door behind me.

“Um ... what’s going on?”

The comforter is stretched over top of the bed, tucked into the headboard on one end and draped over a chair on the other. Veronica must have pulled the chair up to the edge of the bed. I hear Indy’s muffled giggles coming from underneath the fort they’ve made.

“Shh ...” Veronica whispers. “He’ll find us.”

Another giggle from Indy has my lips pulling up into a smile. “Hello? Is there an adorable little girl named Indigo anywhere in this room?”

The bed shakes as Indy wiggles around.

“Maybe she’s under the desk?” I feign looking under the desk and give a dramatic sigh. “Nope. Not under there. Maybe I’ll find her behind the curtains.” I go through the very limited places she could be hiding before loudly proclaiming, “Okay, I give up.”

No sooner have the words left my mouth than Indy lets out another squeal and bursts out from underneath the comforter.

“I’m here, Daddy!”

Placing a hand over my heart, I pretend to stumble backward. “Oh, Indy. Where did you come from?”

She laughs and twirls around. “I’m invisible,” Indy whispers as Veronica pushes her way out of the comforter, brushing her hair out of her face.

Veronica’s laughter joins mine as she runs a hand over Indy’s hair. “You were the best hider ever.”

I lock eyes with Veronica, hoping she knows how grateful I am for her help. “Thank you.”

She shrugs. “It was no big deal. We had fun.” Glancing down at Indy, she winks. “Didn’t we?”

Indy nods enthusiastically.

“Ok, Cupcake, tell Ms. Ronnie thank you.”

“Thank you,” Indy replies. “Are you having a sleepover with me and Daddy?”

I almost choke on my own spit. Thankfully, Veronica is composed enough to answer. “Oh no, sweetheart. I have to get back to my daddy or he might get worried about me.”

Indy’s little brow furrows. “Mr. Art?”

Veronica nods. “Yup. But I’ll see you again. Okay?”

“Promise?”

Veronica glances at me, a hint of uncertainty in her eyes, and suddenly, I’m slammed with so much guilt. Before June died, Indy was at every game and every team get together the Dragons had. When she just started learning how to run, she would zip back and forth between all the guys, begging to be picked up. As soon as one would reach for her, she would run to another, cackling all the way.

After June died, I stopped bringing her around. I tried having the first nanny or two bring her to a game, but all they wanted to do was flirt with the players—on both teams—and it became a safety concern for Indy.

It doesn't excuse the fact that I haven't joined any of the team's cookouts or family events in the past two years. I could have taken her ... but it just hurt too much.

June would be disappointed in me. She wouldn't want our daughter to be isolated from so many people who care about her. No wonder Veronica isn't sure how to answer Indy's innocent plea for her to promise to see her again.

Seeing how well Indy has taken to Veronica is proof that I need to make some changes. As much as part of me wants to shelter my little girl from everything that could possibly harm her, I can't keep her all to myself forever.

Clearing my throat, I smile at Veronica and then Indy. "Yeah, Indy. Ms. Ronnie promises." The words send Indy happily bouncing around the room.

Veronica smiles at her, gathers her bag, and then turns a thoughtful gaze to me. "You're a great dad, Archer." She pauses a moment, then says softly, "June would be proud."

The words work their way into my heart as I dip my chin in acknowledgement and walk her to the door. I want to believe them, but as I lie in bed later listening to Indy's soft snores beside me, all the fears and insecurities come flooding back.

Six

Veronica

The tension surrounding Dad and me dissipated during the ride back to Denver when he turned on Elvis and started singing loudly. It's hard to stay mad at him when he's delivering the worst impersonation of the singer I've ever heard. We spent the rest of the drive singing to Skillet—my choice—or Elvis—his choice. It felt good to be back on solid ground with him. I hate it when we argue and are unbalanced.

I hoped it was a sign that we had put the entire your-mom-who-abandoned-you-decided-she-wants-to-clear-her-conscience-and-see-you-now conversation behind us. Unfortunately, my dad doesn't give up so easily.

When we arrive at my apartment, Dad hops out to get my bags. He's got a plane to catch late tonight, so he's going home to sleep for a few hours instead of coming in as he normally would. Taking the bag from him, I wrap my free arm around his waist.

"Ronnie," he starts, and I know by his tone that he's going to bring *her* up again. "Will you do something for me?"

"Dad ..." I drag his name out in a warning.

“No, seriously.” He grasps me by the shoulders, giving me a pleading look that I can’t ignore.

Swallowing over the stone lodged in my throat, I nod. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Pray about meeting your mom.” He glances away for a moment, then back at me. “Not for her sake, Ronnie. Not even for my sake. But for yours. I believe it would help you heal and get closure.” My shoulders stiffen. Heal? Closure? I have closure. I don’t have anything I need to heal from. “I’m not asking you to build a relationship with her. Just pray. Okay?”

The hope in his eyes is too much for me to refuse.

“Okay, Dad. I’ll pray about it.” I know I never want to meet her, but I can at least promise I’ll pray about it since it means that much to him.

Relief washes over his face, and with a kiss on the forehead and a final squeeze, he releases me and gets back in his vehicle.

God, I can’t do it. You know I can’t see her, I pray, as I watch him pull away.

I’m sure it isn’t the prayer Dad had in mind, but it’s all I’ve got at the moment.



The emotional toll from the last couple of days must have hit me hard, because the next thing I know, I’m being jerked awake from a deep sleep by pounding at my door.

I groan as I sit up and throw my covers off. Slipping my feet into my fuzzy slippers, I grab my glasses from the nightstand and trudge to the door, frustrated at having my nap interrupted.

“For the last time, Mrs. Anderson, there are no bugs in your —” My words die as I pull the door open and come face to face with a frazzled looking Archer.

Indy is in his arms, and as soon as she sees me, she smiles wide. “I like bugs!”

I blink a few times, trying to make sense of what is going on. “Yeah,” I say, finally finding my voice. “I like bugs too.” Though the kind of bugs Mrs. Anderson thinks are in her apartment aren’t the cute little critters Indy is likely thinking of.

Archer clears his throat as he shifts from one foot to the other. That’s when I notice he’s holding his hockey bag in his other hand. “I’m so sorry, Ronnie. I didn’t know what else to do.”

My eyes snap to his. “What’s wrong?”

“My nanny, Ms. Wilma, called and is going to be out for ... well, I don’t know how long. Her sister is in critical condition, so it may be a few weeks. I thought I had time today to find someone, but Coach called a mandatory, last-minute meeting for today.” His words rush out, barely giving my sleep-addled mind time to process.

He’s watching me attentively as my mind replays everything he said. “Oh ...” I drag the one syllable word out as the pieces fall into place.

“I didn’t know who else to call. Your dad mentioned that you quit your job, and I really am sorry, but—”

I hold up my hand, cutting him off. “It’s okay. I can keep Indy.” I can’t say no to the poor man. He’s wild-eyed and clearly panicking. Besides, Indy is a sweetheart. Sure, I’ve spent a very minimum amount of time with her, but having been raised by a single father myself and knowing how hard that was for my dad, I can’t bear to not do something to help ease Archer’s mind.

A relieved expression washes over his face. “You sure?”

I nod, wrapping my arms around myself to stave off the cool air from the hallway. Which is when I realize I’m only wearing a spaghetti strap top and my little pajama shorts. Heat creeps up my neck and face. Why didn’t I grab my robe before opening the door?

To his credit, Archer’s eyes have been glued to my face the entire conversation, but I still feel self-conscious.

“When do you need me to watch her?”

His eyes shift to the side then return to mine. “Now?”

Oh. Duh. Of course, he means now. He’s standing at my apartment door, unannounced and looking all disheveled, with his daughter in his arms and lugging around his hockey gear.

Forcing myself to not glance behind me at my disaster of an apartment, I offer him a smile that I hope looks genuine. I breathe a sigh of relief that I don’t have any bras or panties strewn around the living room. At least, I sure hope I don’t.

Man, I really wish I would have put laundry away and done dishes before I went to Cheyenne. Or done them when I got home.

“If it’s a problem—” Archer begins, but I interrupt him.

“No, really, it’s okay. I promise. ” I step back, holding the door open for him to come in.

He drops the bag in the doorway and sets Indy down, his eyes darting around my apartment and landing back on my face.

I let out a nervous laugh. “Sorry for the mess.” Tucking a strand of hair behind my ear, I watch as Indy slides her backpack off and rummages through it. I can’t bring myself to meet Archer’s eyes.

Goodness, I am *the* hot mess express here.

Archer’s probably already regretting asking me to watch his child. I take a quick glance around my apartment and cringe. Yeah, I would too if I were in his shoes.

“I’ve put some snacks in her bag,” Archer says, ignoring my pigsty of an apartment. Okay, it’s not that it’s filthy. But there are definitely dirty dishes stacked in the sink and on the counter, a pile of laundry that I meant to fold dumped on the couch—thankfully, I do not see my bras or panties anywhere—and tech magazines scattered on just about every surface.

Clearing my throat, I finally bring my gaze back to Archer. His dark eyes are full of uncertainty, but I’m not sure if it’s because of me, my apartment, or just the single-dad struggle in

general. Whatever it is, it's enough to push away any lingering embarrassment.

“Get to your meeting. Indy and I will have tons of fun.”

Archer lets out a deep breath and hands me his keys. “If you need to, just take my truck since her car seat's in there. Aiden is swinging by to pick me up from here.”

Placing my hands on my hips, I tilt my chin, a small smile playing at my lips. “That confident I'd say yes, huh?”

A sheepish grin tugs on his mouth. “I was *mostly* confident.” I chuckle as Archer wipes a hand over his face and beard. “Man, Ronnie, I really do owe you.”

Smirking, I pat his arm. “Oh, don't you worry, Princess. I'm definitely going to make you pay.”

His gaze drifts to my hand on his arm, then trails up my arm to the phoenix and cross tattoo on my forearm. “I didn't know you had a tattoo,” he murmurs to himself.

“Really? I've had it for like five years.”

Lifting his eyes to mine, he gives a small shrug. “You sure you're good?”

I place my other hand on his arm, guiding him to the door. “Yes. We'll be fine. Get to your meeting before Coach makes Aiden captain.”

Indy runs over, wrapping her arms around Archer's leg. I won't deny that my heart melts at the adorable sight. Just like it did watching them play together last night at the hotel. “Daddy, kisses!”

He smiles and scoops her up, showering her face with kisses. “All right, Cupcake. Daddy's got to go. Be good for Ms. Ronnie, okay?”

Indy beams at him. “Okay, Daddy!” She wiggles her little body until he puts her down, then she returns to playing with the toys she brought.

I smile, but it fades when I glance up and see Archer frowning, a crease between his brows. “What's wrong?” I

whisper.

He blinks and shakes his head. “Nothing. Just ... she’s usually much clingier when I leave.”

Nudging his shoulder with mine, I grin. “That’s because she likes me. See? Nothing to worry about.”

He mumbles something under his breath, and with one more lingering look at Indy and another thank you to me, he picks up his bag and is out the door.

Closing it after him, I turn around to find Indy holding up makeup brushes with the cutest little grin on her face. “Ms. Ronnie, I gonna make you bewtiful!”

Seven

Archer

Clenching my bag's handle, I walk away from Ronnie's apartment and out to meet Aiden. The whole morning has been a huge pain in my rear.

I'm not sure why Coach is calling a meeting when we were supposed to have a free day. My muscles are aching from the hits I took last night, and I'd planned to hang out with Indy today. It'd be nice to just relax for once.

And what the heck was that back there? Indy barely batted an eye about me leaving. Her typical clinging is a little much, but I expected at least some reluctance.

I sigh heavily. It shouldn't bother me. And I am truly relieved that Indy has connected with Ronnie so quickly, but it does make my heart pinch just a smidge to know that she may not need me with her all hours of the day the way I think she does.

A horn blasts me out of my musings. I glance up to see Aiden pulling toward me in the rusted Mustang clunker he calls a car.

After tossing my bag in the back, I slide in, shaking my head. "You know this thing is going to fall apart any day now,

right?”

Aiden tsks, rubbing his hand reverently over the dashboard. “Don’t listen to him. Yer a right bonnie lass.”

I roll my eyes and huff out a laugh. “You’re crazy.”

“Just showing her the appreciation she deserves.”

Snorting, I cross my arms and lean back as Aiden pulls out of the parking lot. “So, what’s so urgent that Coach had to call us in on our free day?”

Aiden’s lips press into a firm line in as he scratches the scruff on his jawline. “Eh . . . wee bit ogeous handling.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

He responds with a shrug as he makes a right at the light.

“Uh. Rink’s the other way.”

“It is,” he replies slowly, his eyes on the road.

“Then why are we going in the opposite direction?”

“Never said we were going to the rink.”

“Aiden,” I warn in a low tone. He ignores me, making another turn. I groan when I realize where we’re headed.

“Come on, friend. It’s not that bad.”

“Why are we going to the tavern? Coach never has meetings there.” His silence is answer enough. “Coach didn’t call this meeting, did he?”

Another shrug.

“Take me back.”

“Can’t do that,” he replies, pulling into the parking lot of the Brokedown Tavern.

Frustration ripples off me in waves. I can’t believe I let Aiden dupe me into coming here. “I’ll call a ride,” I huff, sliding my phone from my hoodie pocket.

Aiden swipes it from me, tossing it over his shoulder into the backseat.

“Not cool, Doyle.” I turn, trying to see where my phone landed.

“Leave it.”

A growl rumbles through my chest. “I can’t leave it! I need it in case something happens to Indy.”

Aiden studies me for a minute. “I’ll get it. But it’s staying with me.”

There’s no point arguing with him. Once he finds it, I’ll tackle him and get it back. I’m not sure what’s going on, but whatever it is, I want it to end. Now.

“You know, I could’ve been home spending time with my daughter,” I snap as I get out of the car, slamming the door behind me. Aiden’s bent over, searching for my phone. “If you broke it, you’re buying me the newest model.”

“Found it,” he says triumphantly, slipping it into his back pocket and shutting his door. He walks around the car, giving me a wide grin. “I’ll keep it safe, I promise.”

I shoot him a glare. “What are we doing here?”

Ignoring me, he turns and walks inside the tavern, knowing I have no choice but to follow. It’s typically pretty quiet during the day since most of the younger crowd only hangs out here at night. My jaw clenches as I glance around the parking lot and see some familiar vehicles. It’s not just members of my team that are here. The group of old men that frequent the tavern are inside as well.

Inhaling a deep breath, I make my way toward the entrance, ignoring the uneasiness twisting my insides. Might as well get whatever this is over with so I can get home to Indy.

Pushing open the door, I’m flooded with an array of scents—coffee, fresh baked bread, and seared Philly steak—that waft through the air, causing my stomach to rumble. Probably should have eaten something when we got home earlier, but after making sure Indy was fed, I started washing laundry and cleaning the house and completely forgot. At least I’ll be fed, though I’m not sure if that will even be worth it, depending on what Aiden has up his sleeves.

In the low tavern lights, I see the Dragons in the large round booth in the back corner that we normally share. It's been a couple months since I've been here, and that was only to keep the guys off my back.

I dip my head in greeting to the old guys sitting at a table across from the team. A couple of them crack a smile at me while a few watch me with narrowed eyes and a scowl. It's not an uncommon greeting from the ragtag group. But it doesn't do anything to help ease the tension in my shoulders as their gazes follow me. It feels as if they're in on whatever crap my teammates are pulling.

Each step toward the booth feels as if it's bringing me closer to the edge of a precipice and I'm not sure I'll survive the fall.

Cyrus, Bridger, Evan, and Aiden glance up at me as I take a seat.

"Someone care to explain what is going on here?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest and leaning back into the seat.

Before anyone can answer, Nan, the tavern owner, walks over and interrupts. "What's it gonna be today, boys?" She looks down at us through her black-framed glasses, notepad in hand.

Cyrus opens his mouth, but I cut him off. "Actually, Nan, we're going to need a few minutes." I give her a stiff smile.

Her gaze darts between us. "All right, then. Just let me know when y'all are ready." She leaves us and heads toward the old men. A few of them straighten to attention.

Turning my gaze back to my so-called friends, I level each of them with a heavy look. "So?"

"It's an intervention," Cyrus announces, a smug smile on his face. At least his eyes look clear today instead of glassy from his usual hangovers.

My eyebrow quirks. "An intervention? For what?"

"For you, Cap. You need to go out. Date a little." Cyrus says. Bridger smacks him on the back of the head. "What?"

Cyrus glares at his best friend. “Isn’t that what we said?”

“No, you eejit,” Aiden says. “We said he needed to get out more. With friends.” Rolling his eyes at Cyrus, he fixes me with a look. “We’re not trying to set you up on some blind date. We just think you need to stop isolating yourself from your team and friends.”

A frustrated huff escapes my lips. “I make it to every practice, every game, and most gym days. I come here and hang out. What more do you want?”

Evan gives me a sympathetic look. “We want you to loosen up. Have some fun.”

“I have fun,” I protest. I mean, if fun is princess tea parties followed by dance parties with Indy every day.

“Name the last time you’ve done something for yourself that we didn’t force you to do,” Evan challenges me.

Running a hand down my face and short beard, annoyance bubbles beneath my skin, but it only takes me a moment to realize they aren’t wrong. But they aren’t exactly right either.

“Listen, guys. I appreciate that you’re trying to look out for me or whatever, but it’s not as easy as what you’re making it out to be. I have a daughter to think about. I can’t just abandon her to go gallivanting around.”

“No one is suggesting that. But friend, you don’t even bring the lass around. You and June—” I cut Aiden off with a glare. Clearing his throat, he continues. “You used to come to team parties, cookouts, or just hang out on Sundays after church. You stopped doing all of that. You don’t even bring Indy around us or let her come to your games. You’ve secluded yourself. You’ve stopped living, a chara.”

I stand abruptly, anger pulsing through my veins. “When you’ve lost the love of your life, then you can come back and tell me how I should handle it.”

A shadow crosses over Aiden’s face and his jaw works back and forth. “Sit down,” he orders in a tone that’s never been directed at me. Maybe it’s why I listen and return to my seat. Though I’m still fuming.

How dare anyone tell me how I should or should not grieve losing the love of my life.

“No one is claiming that you haven’t been through hell over the last two years,” Bridger says quietly. “We just don’t want you to lose sight of the good things in life.”

“Just think about it,” Evan adds. “We aren’t saying you need to become a social butterfly and do all the things. But hanging out with your friends every now and then is good for you.”

“And you can bring the wee one along. Most of the guys know how to behave, and if they don’t, they can deal with me.” Aiden offers me a smile, but I don’t have the heart to return it. Each word they’ve said has hit my heart like a dart.

Shuffling comes from beside me and I look up to see one of the older guys, Ivan, standing there. His expression is thoughtful as he studies me. “Son,” he says softly, “take it from someone who also lost the love of his life ... you don’t want to taint your wife’s memory by not living. I’m sure she wouldn’t want that for you. Or your daughter. Would she?”

The weight of his gaze has me averting my own. I swallow over the lump in my throat as I stare absently at a groove in the table.

Ivan raps his knuckles on the table. “You’ve got a good head on your shoulders and good friends who want to help you. You’ll be okay,” he says, then returns to his seat.

I want to punch something. To run out of here and ignore the way my friends are watching me. They probably expect me to storm out. I can feel the tension flowing between us. Well ... if they’re going to insist on me hanging out with them, the least they can do is buy me a meal.

“Who’s ready to order?” I ask, glancing around the table.

Eight

Veronica

I've managed to not only keep Indy entertained but also clean my tiny apartment. After she dumped half a pound of glitter makeup on my face, we played dress up. I got dressed while she tried on whatever outfit of mine she wanted.

She begged to help me fold laundry and wash dishes, and even though it took twice as long—and made an even bigger mess before it was actually clean—we had fun. Her cute little giggles filled the room and made me forget all about my problems.

For a few moments, I forgot about my ex-boyfriend stealing my idea so he could move up in the company. I even forgot that Dad's still married to the woman who abandoned us, and that he asked me to give her a chance.

While Indy watches a cartoon, I shoot Rafe a message, asking for his input. I have some ideas bouncing around for a new project, but nothing solid yet.

Glancing over, I smile when I notice that Indy has fallen asleep on the couch. I grab a blanket and place it over her, gently removing her glasses and setting them on the coffee table. I brush the hair back from her chubby face. She really is a sweet kid. And feisty. Archer definitely has his hands full

with her. I haven't been around small children much, except for when I've volunteered in the church nursery. I always wanted a little brother or sister, but since Dad never remarried ... well, I guess he couldn't have remarried since he was still married to my mom.

I shake my head to remove those thoughts. I'm trying to move past it, but I'm still so hurt and angry. Knowing he's lied to me for years sours my stomach.

"This is why I'm never getting married," I mumble to myself. I hate the idea that I could be so attached to someone that if I lost them, I wouldn't be able to truly move on.

Sighing heavily, I straighten the magazines on the coffee table and look around the apartment. I should invite Chantelle over tonight. She probably wouldn't know what to think seeing my place this clean.

I'm so lost in thought that it takes me a moment to realize I hear knocking on my door. Hurrying over, I open it. "Shh." I put a finger up to my mouth and motion toward the couch where Indy is softly snoring.

The corner of Archer's lips lifts as he steps inside. "Everything go okay then?" he asks quietly.

"Yeah. She was great." I walk toward my small kitchen. "Want something to drink?" I ask, glancing over my shoulder at him.

Sticking his hands into the pockets of his joggers, he follows me. "Coffee would be great."

"Lucky for you, I just put a pot on." I pull out a couple coffee mugs and place them on the counter. "You take it black?"

Scoffing, he replies, "Black is for weaklings trying to prove that they're a man. Not me. Give me all the creamer and sugar."

Smiling, I open the fridge and pull out the creamer. "I'm surprised you get away with it since they've got you on a strict diet."

“Nothing comes between me and my creamer.”

I laugh as I pour creamer into both our mugs. “How’d the meeting go?”

Archer groans and runs a hand through his wavy hair. It’s longer than he normally wears it, hanging just past his ears. It suits him though. Especially with his short, scruffy beard. “It was a ploy.”

My brow furrows. “The meeting? What do you mean?”

Leaning a hip against the counter, he takes a sip of coffee. “I believe Cyrus’s exact words were, ‘It’s an intervention. You need to date.’”

I wince. “I take it that didn’t go over well with you.”

He makes a humming sound in the back of his throat, and we both fall into comfortable silence as we drink our coffee. Finally, he sets the mug down, crosses his arms, and stares at me. “Growing up, did you ever feel like you were ... missing out?”

I stare down at my mug. “Because I didn’t have a mom?” I ask softly, my eyes drifting back to his.

He grimaces. “I’m sorry. That was—”

“What do you know about what happened with my mom?”

“Honestly, not much. Only that they’re divorced and she was never around.”

Snorting, I place my mug on the counter. “Yeah, sounds like Dad has been lying to everyone.” The bitter words pour out and tears prick the corners of my eyes. “Who told you they were divorced? Did he?”

Archer scratches his jaw, looking a bit uncomfortable. “Maybe? I’m really not sure. I could have heard it from one of the players or Coach, but Art has never said otherwise.” He splays his hands out in a helpless gesture.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I force the tears back. “Yeah, he did the same with me.”

“So, you’re saying ...” Archer trails off.

“Mom did leave us. But neither of them ever filed for divorce. I just found out yesterday.”

Letting out a low whistle, he shakes his head. “I’m sorry, Ronnie. That’s a lot to take in.”

A bitter laugh escapes my lips. “Oh, there’s more.” He inclines his head, waiting for me to continue. “Not only did he finally tell me that he and the mom who never wanted to be a mom aren’t divorced, he also dropped the bomb that he’s found her and she wants to see me.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“What are you going to do?”

I throw up my hands. “I’m not meeting her, that’s for sure.”

“Not even to get closure?”

“I don’t need closure,” I snap. Crossing my arms, I take a deep breath. This isn’t Archer’s fault, and I shouldn’t take it out on him. “Sorry. I’m just a little touchy about the subject.”

“That’s understandable.”

“So, back to your first question. There were a few times growing up that I wished I had a mom. I think it’s only natural for that to happen. But overall, no. I didn’t feel I was missing out on something. I may be angry and hurt at Dad right now, but he was the best father. And Archer, you’re an amazing father to Indy. As long as you’re there for her, she’s not going to feel like she’s missing anything. But—”

He sighs. “There’s always a but.”

Offering him a small smile, I say, “What hurt the most wasn’t so much *not* having a mom. It was seeing my dad hang on to something that was never coming back. My situation is different than Indy’s, but Dad used to spend so much time looking for mom. And I never understood why.” I let out a frustrated breath. “Now that I know they’re still married, it makes more sense.”

“He must really love her,” Archer says, and I bristle.

“It’s a one-sided love,” I retort, annoyance flaring in my chest.

“So you aren’t even a little curious about what your mom wants to say to you?”

“Nope.” Shaking my head, I avert my gaze. “I don’t need to hear anything she has to say.”

“Even if it’s an apology?”

“She’s twenty-five years too late, Archer,” I repeat the words I said to Dad when he told me the news.

“Hmm ...”

My eyes narrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Lifting a shoulder, he replies, “As long as we’re breathing, repentance is never too late. And neither is forgiveness. Don’t you think?” He’s backed me into a corner. He knows I can’t refute him.

“So we should let toxic people back into our lives? Cater to them?” I snort and shake my head.

His brown eyes are sympathetic. “I didn’t say that. But if you don’t give her a chance, how do you know whether she’s genuine or not? Besides, the forgiveness is going to be one hundred percent on you.”

I stiffen at his words, but I can’t deny that he’s right. I *hate* that he’s right. “Geez, no pressure there,” I reply sarcastically. His lips lift up in one corner, and I change the subject so he can’t push any more. “So, the big question is ... do you want to start dating again?”

His jaw works back and forth as he glances over at Indy’s still sleeping form. Turning back toward me, his shoulders sink. “No.” He releases a deep breath and closes his eyes. “I don’t want Indy to miss out on anything, though.”

“Archer, I know you want to do right by Indy, but you also can’t just date or begin a relationship because of her. It has to be something you want.”

A heavy sigh puffs out of him. “Yeah, I know, and that’s the problem. I don’t think I’ll ever want anyone else. June was it.”

My chest pinches at the heartache lacing his voice. Losing June almost broke him. I believe it would have if his faith wasn’t so strong and if he hadn’t had the Dragons supporting him. “Well,” I say, hoping to offer whatever encouragement I can, “I don’t think there’s anything wrong with waiting until you’re ready. But I also don’t think there’s anything wrong if you decide you aren’t ready or don’t even want another relationship.”

A divot forms between his brows. “You’re the first person who’s said that to me.”

Shrugging, I chuckle softly. “I’m not sure if you should listen to me. I’m pretty cynical when it comes to love and relationships.”

His eyes narrow suspiciously and he crosses his arms. “Because of your parents,” he says.

I wince inwardly. “Not exactly.”

Archer shakes his head and laughs dryly. “That entire speech about not missing out, but you have relationship issues?”

Planting my hands on my hips, I reply, “I don’t have relationship issues. I just don’t believe falling in love is worth it. At least not for me. Love and marriage aren’t things I’ve ever wanted for myself.”

A nostalgic look crosses his face as his eyes soften. “When you find the right person, it’s always worth it.” His voice is thick with emotion, and I wish I could take back my words.

My throat tightens as I step forward and place my hand on his arm. “I didn’t mean to imply that June wasn’t worth it, Archer. I know how much you loved each other.”

He stares at the floor for a moment before lifting his gaze and giving me a sad smile. “Yeah. I know.” Tilting his head toward me, his forehead wrinkles. “May I ask you something?”

“Sure,” I reply, dropping my hand.

“If you don’t believe love is worth it, why do you date?” If it weren’t for his curious tone, I’d probably bristle at his question.

“Dating isn’t the same thing as love, Archer. It’s just ... companionship.” I lift a shoulder, in a halfhearted shrug. He grunts in response, and I quirk an eyebrow. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

Archer rubs the back of his neck. “Nothing, really. I guess I just never expected that from you.”

I do bristle at that. “Why’s that?”

“I don’t know. You just seem like someone who is so full of happiness and life that I guess I assumed you’d be a hopeless romantic too.”

Chuckling, I shake my head. “Nope. Not me. But I still stand by what I said earlier. I had an amazing childhood.” The argument sounds weak after admitting my disenchantment with the idea of marriage. “My relationship fears are my own, Archer. And it doesn’t help that I have horrible taste in men.” *Definitely the most recent man, anyway.*

Archer snorts, a teasing glint lighting his eyes. “I could have told you that. You dated Dex.”

My mouth drops open in mock shock, and I slap at his arm. “Dex was a great boyfriend. We just weren’t good together.”

“What about this last guy?”

I groan, pressing my palm to my forehead. “That was most definitely me being a horrible judge of character.” I explain how Buck stole my idea, indignation burning my veins. “So see, Princess? I don’t think I was meant to fall in love.”

“First of all, stop calling me princess. Second of all, you’re what, twenty-two?”

“Twenty-five.”

He waves a hand. “You’re young. You have plenty of time to find the right guy.”

Rolling my eyes, I reply, “We just talked about this. I don’t want one. They’re too much trouble.”

Archer chuckles. “Well, even without getting back into the dating pool, the guys say I need to get out more. Come to team parties and hang out with them outside of the rink.”

I nod. “You should.”

Leveling a look at me, his lips lift in a sly smile. “So we have a deal?”

My brow arches as I blink in confusion. “What? What deal?”

“I’ll hang out with the guys more, even bring Indy along sometimes, and you’ll be open to the idea of love.”

“Why do you care?” I ask, unable to stop myself.

His eyes roam my face for a moment. “Because everyone deserves a chance at love, Ronnie. Even if they don’t think they do.”

He’s so earnest that I find myself caving. “Fine. I’ll think about it.” I’m rewarded with a wide grin that makes his eyes crinkle in the corners, and I can’t stop myself from smiling back at him.

Clearing his throat, he runs a hand through his hair, his gaze darting around before landing on me. “Um ... I actually have something to run by you.”

My eyebrow lifts. “Okay, that sounds ambiguous.”

Giving me a strained smile, he asks, “What would you think about being Indy’s nanny until you find another job or Ms. Wilma returns? Paid, of course. And I’ll pay you for today and last night as well.”

I bite my lip. The idea had crossed my mind earlier to offer, but I wasn’t sure if Archer would actually agree. The fact is, I could use the money until I figure out what I’m going to do about a job. And it would probably only be for a few weeks. Enough to keep me on my feet, but also leave me time to work on brainstorming a new app idea and applying for a more permanent job.

“Okay,” I reply, straightening my shoulders.

Archer’s eyes widen, relief smoothing out the worry lines on his face. “Really? You’re sure?”

“Yeah,” I say with a shrug. “I need a job. You need a nanny. It’s a no-brainer.”

Before I know what’s happening, Archer wraps his arms around me, pulling me into a warm hug. I’ve hugged him in the past. I’ve hugged all the players. Usually after games and usually only a quick, friendly side hug. But this hug is different, and for reasons unbeknownst to me, I have the sudden urge to snuggle deeper into his firm chest. Tension drains from my body as he gives me a final squeeze and releases me. He steps back, leaving me feeling completely unbalanced.

Rubbing the back of his neck, he clears his throat. I swear I can see his cheeks redden, but it’s hard to tell through his beard. “Sorry, I just ... you don’t know how much this will help me.” There’s so much relief and gratitude in his voice that lightness floods through me.

Something is seriously wrong with me.

You’ve had a hard week, I remind myself. That’s all it is. Emotional exhaustion would leave anyone feeling off.

But as I watch Archer gently lift Indy into his arms and wave goodbye, I can’t help but wonder what I’ve gotten myself into.

Nine

Archer

The past two days have been a whirlwind with practice, grocery shopping, and getting Ronnie familiar with Indy's routine, which honestly isn't much of one. It's hard creating a set schedule when games, practices, and gym time vary from week to week during our on season.

I'm feeling pretty drained, so when I had to come in early for a meeting with Cyrus, his agent, Coach Pratt, and the team's owner, it put me in an even worse mood. To say that the meeting didn't go well would be putting it mildly. Cyrus is a heck of a player, but he's got a temper that's fueled by his drinking, and if he isn't careful, he's going to find himself kicked off the team. He didn't seem too happy and needed a private word with his agent, so I left.

Pulling my stuff out of my bag, I start gearing up for our game when Cyrus storms in. Bridger glances up at him, concern etched across his face.

"Everything okay?" he asks.

"Just fine," Cyrus replies, flashing him a stiff smile before turning his back on his friend.

Bridger's gaze shifts to me, and I shake my head sadly. Bridger's helped to keep Cyrus in line since they both started with the team at the same time, but I'm not sure his influence is going to be enough. Cyrus needs to deal with his problems head on, and no one can make that decision for him.

Sighing, I shift my focus to the game, running through the plays as the rest of the team arrives. Fifteen minutes later, Aiden and I have just finished going over everything with the guys when Coach Pratt sticks his head in. "Everyone dressed?" Cyrus stiffens, not looking up.

Glancing around, I reply, "Yeah, looks like it." The last thing I want to do is talk to a reporter or have Freya recording us for our social media account. She's sweet, but I just don't want to have to force a smile right now.

Bridger sits straighter, likely in anticipation of seeing his fiancée, but it isn't Freya's voice I hear saying, "Hey, guys."

My head whips around to see Ronnie standing in the doorway and holding Indy's hand. They're both wearing my jersey, my number is painted on their cheeks, and their hair is styled in matching space buns. The only difference is that Indy is also wearing a black and red tutu.

I blink a few times as they step toward me. "What's going on?"

"Someone wanted to come cheer for her daddy," Ronnie says, smiling down at Indy.

Aiden's brow arches, and I notice a few of the other guys watching us. Ignoring them, I kneel and pull Indy into a hug. "Hey, Cupcake. You going to cheer for Daddy?"

"Yeah," she says excitedly. She points to her cheek. "I got your number." This earns a smile from me and a few chuckles from the guys.

Ronnie takes Indy's hand. "All right, Little Miss, let's go find our seats so your daddy can finish getting ready."

My eyes meet Ronnie's as I stand. "Thank you," I say quietly.

“Just go win the game, Princess.” Her lips lift into a smirk as she winks at me. One of the guys snorts, and from the corner of my eye, I can see Evan holding back a laugh.

I attempt to glare at Ronnie, but honestly, I’m just so excited to have my baby girl here that I can’t seem to pull it off. Ronnie smiles wide, calling out, “Knock ‘em dead, guys!” as she walks out of the locker room with Indy.

Shaking my head, I turn around and see Cyrus watching me with a smirk on his face. “Nicely done, Cap.”

Tilting my head, I frown. “Huh?”

Suddenly, Aiden’s beside me, his burly arms crossed across his chest as his eyes narrow. “You failed to mention that you’re dating Ronnie.” There’s a warning lacing his words.

I refrain from rolling my eyes. “Cool it, Doyle. I’m not dating Ronnie. Indy’s nanny had a family emergency and Ronnie’s just filling in until she comes back.”

Aiden’s eyebrow lifts subtly.

“What?”

“If you hurt the lass, you’ll have us to deal with.” He motions around the room.

I shove him out of the way. “Back off. Ronnie and I are just friends.” The idea that the guys would so easily believe otherwise is laughable. “I told you, I don’t want to date. Now let’s get out there and destroy Houston.”



Houston didn’t stand a chance.

We won five to two, with me scoring the winning goal. The entire team played as if we were part of the same body, able to read one another’s signals in the blink of an eye. Cyrus managed to keep his cool, though there was one moment when I thought he was going to go off on the Houston center. Thankfully, Bridger was beside him and managed to hold him back.

I need to talk to Aiden about him. Maybe we can take him out one day and knock some sense into him. Doubtful, though. He's been on a downward spiral for a while.

After we've all showered and dressed, I'm packing up my bag when Evan comes over. "You coming to the tavern with us?"

"Nope," I reply on instinct just as another, much more feminine voice says, "Yes, he is."

Groaning, I turn around and find Ronnie making her way toward me, but Indy isn't with her. My heart drops to my stomach. "Where's Indy?" I ask, panic sweeping over me.

Crossing her arms, she inclines her head. My gaze follows the direction to find Indy standing in front of Aiden. He's leaning forward on the bench, a wide smile stretched on his face as she chatters away.

"Did you really think I would lose her?" Ronnie asks.

I wince as I meet her eyes. "Uh ..."

Ronnie chuckles. "It's okay. I understand. Anyway, you and Indy are going to the tavern with us."

"I'm not taking my four-year-old to a pub at night."

"Thought you'd say that," Aiden chimes in from beside me, holding Indy's hand. She releases Aiden, rushing to grab hold of mine.

Squeezing her hand, I reply, "Then you should have already known the answer."

Aiden's lips curl up into a smile. "Which is why we reserved the pub. Just the Dragons and a few of the Darlings are going to be there."

He almost convinced me until he mentioned the Denver Darlings. Many of the minor league women's soccer team members are wonderful, like Evan's fiancée, Greer, some of them are borderline jersey chasers. One in particular tries to flirt with me whenever she shows up to games with Greer.

"Yeah ... I don't know about that."

Ronnie clears her throat dramatically, and my eyes dart to her. Tapping her finger to her chin, she says, “Didn’t we talk about this?”

Aiden side-eyes me and I groan. “Fine.”



I always knew Indy wasn’t shy, but I didn’t know just how much of a social butterfly she is. A stab of guilt pierces me. It hasn’t been fair to Indy, keeping her locked away at the house except for church and visits to my parents. Even when she does travel with me for away games, I’ve not allowed her to actually come to the games. I didn’t realize how much she’s been missing.

She’s tugging Ronnie around, making introductions to everyone as if they don’t already know who they both are, while I sit in a corner booth, sipping my coffee. My lips lift as I watch my daughter giggling at something Bridger is saying.

“Wow. What’s a girl gotta do to get that smile directed at her, huh?” a feminine voice asks as its owner slides in beside me.

I suppress a groan and flick my eyes to Stevie, one of the Darlings players. “Hi.” The one word sounds more gruff than I intended, but I’m also not in the mood for her flirting.

“Ah. Come on. You gotta give me more than that.” She smiles coyly, tossing her long black hair over her shoulder and crossing her arms. “I never see you at these things.”

Taking another drink of my coffee, my gaze follows Indy and Ronnie for a moment. I turn back to Stevie. “That’s because I never come.”

“You have a real way with words. Did you know that?” Laughter dances in her eyes, and I sigh. She’s not a bad person, and I shouldn’t be so short with her. But she needs to know that I’m not looking for anything with her ... or any woman.

Before I can figure out how to let her down gently, Indy is running toward me, dragging Ronnie behind her.

Indy grabs my hand. “Daddy, come dance with us!”

Ronnie laughs and plops down on the seat. “I’m tapping out. She’s a little bundle of energy.”

Stevie glances between the two of us, and I already know what assumptions she’s making. And honestly, if she doesn’t ask, I’m not going to say anything. Maybe she’ll find someone else to flirt with if she thinks I’m dating Ronnie.

“I didn’t take you for a quitter,” I say to Ronnie as I stand.

“Oh, I’m not. Just encouraging daddy-daughter time.” She flashes me a wide grin and shoos me away with her fingers. “You two go have fun. I’m going to chat with Stevie.”

Shaking my head, I chuckle and let Indy lead me to where Bridger and Freya, and Joel and his wife are dancing, along with a few other people. Lifting her in my arms, I spin her around, the room filling with her sweet laugh.

By the time the song ends, Indy is giggling uncontrollably. I flip her upside down and head back to the booth, her legs kicking my chest while she squeals all the way to our seats. Stevie and Ronnie are deep in conversation as I sit across from them, flipping Indy back over and snuggling her on my lap. Ronnie’s eyes flick up to mine, pink spreading across her cheeks as she glances back at Stevie. “Well, I guess I’m going to call it a night.” Her voice is strained and my eyebrow lifts.

“Oh no,” Stevie says, standing. “I was just leaving.” Turning, she gives me a not so subtle wink. “You two”—her gaze darts to Indy in my lap—“I mean, you *three* have fun!” Then she’s bouncing off, making her way to Greer and Evan’s table.

“What was that about?” I ask.

Ronnie laughs, but it sounds odd. “Who knows. Are you all going to eat? Or head out?”

The tavern is full of my friends’ laughter, music, and loud chatter. Indy wiggles in my arms, her little eyes soaking in

every detail. My chest expands as peace settles over me. It's been too long since I've allowed myself to be surrounded by my friends off the ice.

Turning back to Ronnie, I smile. "You know ... I think we're going to hang out for a while. Want to stay with us?"

Her eyes brighten and the corners of her lips lift. "I'd love to."

Ten

Veronica

Rushing around the apartment, I toss laundry aside, searching for the sci-fi book I was reading. Not that I have much time to read when watching Indy, but one can always hope.

“Aha,” I say when I find it under a bundle of towels. I really need to fold clothes, but since I decided to hit the snooze button on my alarm a dozen times this morning, I’m running behind. Archer will kill me if I make him late for practice.

Jerking open the pantry doors, I groan when I realize that I’m out of Oreos. I rummage around for a minute to see if there’s anything else munchy I can take with me, but come up empty handed. Guess I need to go to the store, too.

I sigh, grab my bag, and head out. I’m going to be thinking about those Oreos all day.

The first day I arrived at Archer’s house, I was dismayed to find the man doesn’t have a single edible thing in his home. As a hockey player, I know he’s on a pretty strict diet, but this was a bit extreme. When I said the same to him, he raised his eyebrow and replied, “There’s plenty of food here. There’s fruit, vegetables, nuts—”

“Unsalted,” I interjected, shuddering dramatically.

Ignoring me, he continued. “There’s dried chickpeas, seaweed—” I made a gagging noise. “What? Indy loves it.”

“Where’s the chocolate, Archer?” I asked, planting my hands on my hips.

“Oh, there’s some chocolate in there.” He pointed to the cabinet beside the fridge. “I usually save it for special occasions.”

Yeah, I’d already checked there and that stuff was most definitely not chocolate. “Ninety percent dark chocolate is *not* chocolate. That’s like eating a straight-up cacao bean.”

Letting out an exasperated sigh, Archer rubbed a hand down his face. “Listen, you’re more than welcome to bring your own food.”

“I know you have to watch your figure, Princess, but a little *real* chocolate every now and then isn’t going to mess with those rock-hard abs of yours.” I patted his stomach and immediately regretted it. Yeah, those abs were most definitely made of steel. Dropping my hand, I tried to push down the heat crawling up my neck. “You need to live a little.”

“And I’m going to do that by eating chocolate?”

I nodded. “And Oreos, fudge, and ice cream. Believe me, it’s the perfect combo.”

“Sounds more like a diabetic coma,” he mumbled.

Smiling at the memory, I pull into Archer’s driveway. It’s only been a few days, but I can honestly say I’ve loved every minute of watching Indy. That child has some major spunk, and it’s been a nice distraction from thinking about what I’m going to do with my life.

After talking it through with Rafe, I’ve decided I want to try my hand at freelancing. Rafe has some contacts and said he’d help put in a good word for me once I have a solid idea and presentation put together.

If only I could think of something, but hours and hours of brainstorming have led to zero ideas and a living room

covered in balled-up paper.

Letting out a frustrated breath, I knock a little pattern on the door before opening it. I set my bag down on the entryway table and glance around. Usually, Indy comes bounding over to greet me as soon as I turn the knob.

“Hello?”

Muffled voices followed by a clanging noise drift from the basement where Archer has his home gym. Here I was worried about being late and Archer’s still working out.

I call out another hello as I take the steps downstairs.

A strained grunt. “In here,” Archer replies, his breathing heavy.

Taking the last step, I smile when I hear Indy’s little voice saying, “Ten more, Daddy.” When my eyes land on Archer and Indy, my heart flutters. Archer is on the ground doing pushups while Indy shouts out instructions from her spot. “No, Daddy. You have to go all the way down.”

Archer drops lower to the floor, the muscles in his bare arms rippling with the effort. I avert my gaze, my throat suddenly dry. “Uh ... hey, guys.”

Indy jumps off Archer’s back, running to me and wrapping her arms around my leg. Laughing, I bend down and give her a hug. Then she’s racing up the stairs, leaving Archer and me alone.

He pushes up off the floor, wiping his hands together, then grabs his water bottle. Tilting his head, he asks, “What are you doing here so early?” He takes a long drink of water, and for some reason that I don’t want to evaluate, my eyes are drawn to the way his throat bobs as he swallows.

Clearing my own throat, I once again find myself trying to look at anything but him. “Early? I thought I was late. You said nine thirty, right?”

“Ten thirty.”

I groan. “Ugh. And here I rushed all morning and didn’t even get to run to the store to get my chocolate fix for the

day.”

Archer shakes his head. “You could go now.” Grabbing his towel, he wipes his brow and then his arms. He’s in a workout tank that shows off every muscle and vein in his bulky arms.

“Nah. By the time I get there, I’d have to rush to get back. I *suppose* I’ll be okay this one time without chocolate.”

He chuckles, tossing his towel into the hamper and stepping closer to me. “You know that you can survive your entire life without having chocolate, right?” His brown eyes crinkle around the corners as he grins.

“What a miserable life to live,” I reply, forcing my mind to focus on something other than the handsome man in front of me. It’s not like I haven’t known he was gorgeous since the first time I saw him. Heck, I even had a teensy crush on Archer when I was sixteen and Dad first recruited him. But he was twenty-one, and most importantly, he had a serious girlfriend.

June.

That reminder snaps me back to reality.

June and I weren’t best friends, not like Chantelle and I are, but we were still friends. Shame heats my face. What would she think about me ogling her husband?

I wish I could hide my flaming face from Archer. Good grief, what is wrong with me?

“Are you coming?” Archer asks from the top of the steps. I jerk my head in his direction, my face burning even more that I got so lost in my thoughts I didn’t even realize he was already walking upstairs.

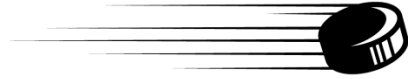
“Oh, um. Yeah,” I reply, but he’s already disappeared around the corner.

I climb the steps slowly, keeping June’s image in my mind. I don’t have feelings for Archer. Nothing beyond friendship, anyway. Finding a man objectively attractive doesn’t mean there’s anything else there. I snort to myself, thinking about the disaster that was my relationship with Buck.

“Case in point,” I mumble quietly.

But when I step into the living room and find Archer sitting on the couch while Indy stands in front of him so he can braid her hair, I can’t stop the way my heart stutters.

Oh boy, I’m in big trouble.



After Archer leaves for practice, Indy surprises me by going to her room and playing quietly. The sound of toys dumping to the floor echoes out to the living room and I sigh. That’s going to be fun to clean up.

A few minutes later, she walks into the living room carrying a few books. “Will you read to me?”

“Sure. Let’s see what you have.”

She picks out three books, and when I finish the last book, she turns her pleading eyes to me. “Just one more?”

“What if we clean up your room first?”

Her face falls and she crosses her arms. “No.”

“I know it doesn’t sound fun, but if your room is clean, we’ll be able to see all your toys to find something else to play with.”

“No!” she screams, and I flinch a little at the sound.

Standing, I reach for her hand, but she jerks away. I bite my lip, trying to figure out how to handle this. “Come on, let’s go clean.” I try to infuse some enthusiasm into my voice.

Indy shakes her head, her eyes filling with tears behind her glasses. “I want Daddy.” Her chin wobbles, and I’m afraid she may be on the verge of a full-on meltdown.

Sending up a prayer, I kneel and meet her eyes. “I know you do, and your daddy would love to be here too. But he has to work.”

She sniffles. “Why?”

“Well, if he didn’t work, he wouldn’t be able to buy food, or this house, or all your pretty tutus.” I pause, allowing a moment for my words to soak in. At least, as much as they can for a four-year-old. “Since you miss your daddy so much, what if we made him something special?”

Wiping the back of her hand under her nose, she tilts her head. “Special?”

I nod. “Maybe we can make him a special art project. Then when he gets home, you can give it to him so he knows you were thinking about him today. Does that sound good?”

Her eyes brighten. “Yeah!”

“Okay. But we have to do something first. We have to clean your bedroom so we can have room for all your art supplies. Are you ready to do that?”

She studies me for a moment, and I wonder what’s going on in that little head of hers. Nodding, she replies, “Okay.”

My shoulders sink with relief.

Once we have her room clean, I help her make handprint paintings for Archer until we move on to bigger art projects.

She asks me to help her draw a farm on her room’s chalkboard paint wall. The barn looks more like a rundown shack that just needs one good gust of wind to turn it into a pile of firewood, but she seems happy with it, so I’ll call it a win. Indy drew some impressive chickens though. At least you can tell what they are. My attempt at sheep looks like cotton balls on sticks.

Leaving Indy alone with her art supplies, I head into the kitchen to see what I can fix for dinner. Archer texted earlier to ask if I could stay a little later since Freya needed to film the guys for promotional videos to post on the Dragons’ social media accounts.

I snicker to myself. I’m sure Archer is loving that.

After a few minutes of pilfering around, I pull out all the ingredients and get to work. I hum as I dice sweet potatoes and toss them in olive oil, thyme, parsley, and some freshly

shredded parmesan. Once they're in the oven, I start preparing the chicken. I coat it with the flour, salt, and pepper and drop it in the awaiting skillet.

I'm interrupted by my daily check-in text from Dad. He doesn't ask if I've decided to visit my mom. He doesn't have to. I can see and hear it in every conversation we've had since he asked me to pray about it. And I have tried praying. I really have. But every time I start, resentment keeps me from uttering anything beyond a *God, help me*.

Shooting him a quick message, I walk down the hallway to check on Indy while the food finishes cooking. She's still drawing quietly, so I sneak back to the kitchen.

I flip the sweet potatoes and put them back in the oven, then add the rest of the ingredients to the chicken. Soon, the delicious aroma of the marsala wine is filling the kitchen.

A tossed salad is the final touch to the meal. I'm feeling pretty proud of myself. Until I turn around and gasp.

"Oh, Indy. What did you do?"

She has a wide, innocent grin on her face as she holds out her right arm that's covered in colorful marker. "I look like you now!"

Gulping, I start to move to her, but then something catches my eye. I glance up and my eyes widen. "Archer. What are you doing here?"

He raises an eyebrow, an amused expression crossing his face. "Pretty sure I live here."

Indy says excitedly, "Daddy, look! I match Ronnie!"

Archer's gaze moves across her arm. "You do." I can't gauge his reaction by his tone. It's so ... matter of fact. Is he angry? Annoyed?

"I have a nose earring too." She points to a pink gem sticker she's stuck on her nose. "Just like Ronnie."

Chuckling, Archer replies, "It's a nose ring. Earrings go in your ears."

“Oh, I have those too,” she says, pointing to matching gem stickers she’s placed on her earlobes.

“I wanna look just like Ronnie,” she declares, twirling around and then planting her hands on her little hips. “Daddy, can I get a real tattoo?”

Groaning, I hide my face in my hands. This is the worst. Can I disappear now? I barely hear Archer say something to Indy and then the pitter-patter of her feet as she runs down the hallway.

I turn quickly to check on the food so Archer can’t see the tears building in my eyes. Why am I even on the verge of crying?

When I see that everything is done, I shut off the oven and stove. I’m too afraid to look to see if Archer has left the kitchen as tears prick the backs of my eyes.

Large hands cup my shoulders, and Archer turns me around to face him. Still, I can’t seem to meet his eyes. He hooks a finger under my chin, tilting my head up until our gazes connect.

“Want to tell me what has you so upset?” His voice is soft and low as his concerned eyes roam over my face.

I’m finding it difficult to form words with him looking at me so closely while his fingers still gently clasp my chin. Swallowing down my nerves, I ask, “Was it permanent marker?”

Archer shrugs, dropping his hand from my face. Why do I feel an ache of disappointment? “Probably.” I cringe, but he only chuckles. “It’s okay, Ronnie.”

I worry my lip. “I just checked on her. She was coloring on paper. Not herself. And she hasn’t even said anything about my tattoos or nose ring. I haven’t encouraged anything. I’m sor—”

“Ronnie, I’m not angry.”

Eyeing him suspiciously, I reply, “Most parents would be at least a little upset.”

“Not me. I don’t care that she likes your tattoos and piercings. She’s four. That doesn’t mean she’s going to want them when she’s older. And even if she does, so what? She can decide when she’s old enough and mature enough to make those decisions.”

I relax at his words. “Thanks.”

He nods once, then peers over my shoulder. “You didn’t have to cook dinner.” His voice sounds gruff, and I worry I’ve overstepped.

Tears threaten once more as I reply, “I know. I was trying to help. And I know you have to watch your figure, but I—”

Archer interrupts me by gently gripping my shoulders. “Please stop thinking I’m upset with you.”

I sigh. “Well, it’s a little hard to tell when you sound so gruff.”

He drops his hands and runs one over his bearded jawline. “Do I really come across that way?”

I lift a shoulder. “Sometimes.”

“I’m sorry. What I meant to say is that you didn’t have to cook dinner, but thank you. And it smells delicious.”

Smiling, I turn back to the stove and grab a fork. Tearing off a piece of the chicken, I spin around and hold it up to Archer’s face. “Chicken marsala. Here, try a bite.”

He leans forward, his eyes locked on mine as he takes the bite of chicken. As soon as he pulls away from the fork, his eyes close and he lets out a contented hum, causing butterflies to take flight in my stomach.

“That’s amazing,” he says, opening his eyes.

There’s a new tension in the air. At least, there is for me. I’m not sure whether Archer feels it. I hope he doesn’t. Shaking the feelings away, I place the fork back on the counter, taking the brief moment to collect my racing thoughts.

“Well, everything is ready. I’ll just grab my stuff and head out. I’ll see you in a couple days.”

Archer halts my retreat with a hand on my forearm. “Do you want to stay?” Clearing his throat, he drops his hand. “For dinner?”

Everything in me is urging me to say yes. He looks so uncertain and hesitant. Maybe even a little lonely. But my reactions to him today have me freaking out. If he would have asked me two days ago, I would have agreed immediately. But now?

I offer him a smile, hoping it’s more convincing than it feels. “Thanks, Archer. But I already have plans.” His eyes seem to flash with disappointment. “Maybe next time?” Ugh. Why did I say that?

“Yeah. Of course.” Stuffing his hands in his pockets, he rocks back on his heels. “Have fun.”

“Thanks.” Giving him one last smile, I tell Indy goodbye, grab my stuff, and rush out the door, praying the entire time.

God, what is going on? What’s wrong with me?

Eleven

Archer

I frown at the bottle in my hand, then glance back at the instructions. Indy wiggles in her seat, waiting as patiently as she can for me to get started. My eyes scan the paper once more, but I'm in way over my head.

"Daddy," Indy whines in exasperation. "Hurry."

"Just a second, Cupcake." I probably should have watched some tutorial videos or something first. "We may have to wait to do this."

Indy swivels around, her big eyes widening and her lips quivering. "But Daddy, you promised." She's trying so hard to hold back her tears, and it breaks my heart.

"I didn't say for sure. I said we might have to. Let me look over this again." I read the words for the fifth time. It's not that I don't understand them ... well, I understand most of them. I'm mostly just terrified of messing it up. "Sweetie, why don't we wait until my next day off so I can be sure to do it right?"

"Call Ronnie! I bet she knows how to do it." She smiles at me triumphantly. "Call her, Daddy."

I sigh, setting the instructions and bottle down. Rubbing my neck, I glance at Indy, who is watching me eagerly. She's been

so excited. I don't have the heart to disappoint her.

Sliding my phone from my pocket, I hesitate. I'm not sure what happened the other day when I came home, but there was this weird energy between Ronnie and me. She'd been so worried that I was angry about Indy's drawn-on tattoo. My eyes flick to Indy, the tattoo still on her arm. Yeah, it was definitely permanent marker.

I'd hoped inviting Ronnie to stay for dinner would ease her worries, and truthfully, I had wanted her to stay. She just makes things ... easier, and I've not felt that in a long time.

I hated the disappointment that sliced through me when she said she had plans. Her tone and the way she tried to smile, though it didn't quite reach her eyes, left a feeling of uneasiness in my stomach. Has she gotten back together with her ex-boyfriend?

Frustration bubbles up inside of me. So what if she has? It's none of my business who she does or doesn't date.

Taking a fortifying breath, I swipe the screen and call her.

She answers on the second ring. "Hey, Princess. What's up?"

My eyes clench shut, and I rub the bridge of my nose. "You are never letting me live that down, are you?" She laughs, and the warm sound has the corners of my lips lifting.

"Nope. Never." She pauses a moment. "Everything okay?"

"Uh ... actually. I could kind of use some help. But I know it's your day off, so don't feel like you have to say yes."

"I'm not doing anything anyway. Chantelle bailed on me to study for a test, so I am all yours." She coughs and gives a stilted laugh. "I mean ... I can help. Sure. What do you need? Did you have another emergency meeting? You need me to keep Indy? Oh no! Is she sick? Are you sick?"

She's rambling now, so I cut her off. "No, Ronnie. We're fine. But I may have gotten in over my head."

"All right. I'm on my way." I breathe a sigh of relief when she doesn't ask for more details.

Indy bounces up and down when I tell her Ronnie is coming. It amazes me how easily she's bonded with her. I just hope she can adjust as easily when Ms. Wilma returns. She texted me again last night to tell me there hadn't been much improvement with her sister, so she wasn't sure when she would be back.

Ronnie arrives a bit later, and I take her to the bathroom and motion toward the counter. "I have no idea what I'm doing," I admit.

Ronnie's eyes widen as she takes in the bottles of hair dye, brushes, combs, and bowls. "What's going on?" Her head swivels to me. "Are you having a midlife crisis, Archer?"

"What!?"

"Because really, if you are, I think a motorcycle would suit you a lot better than this."

Running a hand down my face, I barely suppress a laugh. "It's not for me. It's for Indy."

Ronnie looks genuinely surprised as she blinks at me. "You're dying Indy's hair?"

"Like yours," Indy chimes in as she runs into the bathroom.

My gaze finds Ronnie's, and now she's blinking even faster. "What?" I ask, worried that I've done something wrong.

She looks between me and Indy. There's a suspicious sheen to her eyes as she clears her throat. "You're letting her dye her hair? Like mine?"

I shrug. "Is that bad?"

Ronnie shakes her head. "That's the sweetest thing. You really don't mind?"

"No. As long as the dye I got is the right kind. It says it's safe with no harsh chemicals. But you probably know more about it than I do. Is it okay?"

Sniffing, she turns and picks up one of the bottles, but I notice her brushing a tear from underneath her glasses. I'm not

sure how to respond to that, so I watch quietly as she reads over the bottle and instructions.

“Yeah. This will work.” Her voice is a little shaky. She clears her throat and turns a wide grin toward Indy. “Are you ready, Little Miss?”



Ronnie and I drink coffee while Indy colors at the other end of the table as we wait for the dye to set so we can rinse it out.

Indy was right, Ronnie knew exactly what she was doing and took charge of the situation. She explained everything to me as she sectioned Indy’s hair and applied the dye. I was surprised by how still Indy sat while Ronnie was working on her.

“I’ll pay you for today,” I say before taking another sip of coffee.

Ronnie’s nose wrinkles. “You don’t have to pay me.”

“No, I really do. You took time out of your day to be here.”

Huffing, she sets her mug on the table and leans closer. “You are not paying me,” she says firmly.

“But—”

“No. You don’t pay friends to help you.”

I smirk. “Don’t I pay you all the time?”

Rolling her eyes, she crosses her arms. “That’s different and you know it.”

Holding up my hands, I chuckle. “Okay. I won’t insist on paying you today. But”—I snap my fingers—“you have to let me fix you dinner tonight.”

Her eyes narrow. “I’ll think about it.”

“If you don’t have plans with your boyfriend, that is.” I blurt without thinking and inwardly wince, wishing I could take the

words back. I try to cover my mishap by taking another swig of coffee.

Ronnie's brow furrows. "Boyfriend? I don't have a boyfriend. I told you I dumped that jerk." Something very much like relief has my entire body relaxing. "What made you think I had a boyfriend?"

My neck warms. What *did* make me think that? And why did the thought of her getting back with her ex bother me so much? "I guess I thought you had a date the other night when you didn't stay for dinner. I was just hoping you hadn't gotten back together with that guy." One eyebrow lifts as she stares at me. Clearing my throat, I add, "Because he was such a jerk. Like you said. And you deserve better than that."

Her eyes glisten and she looks down at her mug. "Thanks, Archer." Glancing back up, she says, "I still don't think love is for me, but I'm definitely going to be pickier if I ever do date another guy."

"I thought we had an agreement?"

"We do," she says hesitantly. "And I'm thinking about it."

"Praying about it?"

Biting her bottom lip, she averts her eyes. "Trying to. I can be stubborn."

My lips tip up. "I can see that."

She swats my arm playfully. "Hey, now. You aren't supposed to agree with me."

Smiling, I decide to change the topic. She might not like this one any better, but I want her to know she can talk to me if she needs to. "So ..." I drag out the word. "Have you decided what you're going to do about your mom?"

"Wow, you're not letting up today, are you?" she asks with a small smile.

"Sorry. We don't have to talk about it if you don't want to."

Sighing, she leans back in her chair, her gaze falling on Indy, who's been contently coloring this whole time. Ronnie's

eyes soften. “I’m still praying about that too.”

I make a noncommittal sound in the back of my throat. “What does Chantelle think about it all?”

“I’m not sure since I haven’t talked to her about it.”

My eyes widen. “You haven’t told Chantelle?”

Ronnie shakes her head. “I love Chantelle, and I know she sympathizes with me, but ... she just doesn’t understand. She’s never lost someone so close to her.” Her eyes lock with mine. “You’re the only one I’ve told.”

An odd feeling has me inhaling deeply as her eyes roam across my face. That energy from the other night is back, and I think I’ve finally figured out what it is.

Ronnie is starting to become a true friend. And I haven’t had one of those in a long time.

Of course, there’s the guys, but I’ve been pushing them away for a while now. But Ronnie keeps calling my bluffs and forcing me to confront the hard things. Yet she isn’t forceful or pushy. But I’m finding the more time I spend with her, the more time I want to spend with her, and the more I want to open up to her.

And it feels good. It feels good to have someone to share my concerns with. Someone who isn’t going to force me into an intervention or push me into going quicker than I’m ready to.

I clear my throat. “I’ve been praying you’d know what to do.”

Her eyes widen. “You ... you have?”

“Yeah. I know it’s not an easy decision to make.”

Sniffing, she blinks rapidly, pulling off her glasses and wiping at her eyes. “Ugh. I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m so emotional today.”

I have an idea, but I don’t dare voice it. “Would chocolate make you feel better?”

Excitement brightens her blue-green eyes. “Archer, are you holding out on me? Do you really have chocolate?”

“I do. But not the kind you like.” Her face falls briefly and she scowls at me. “I do have ice cream though.”

She crosses her arms, her eyes narrowing to slits. “Let me guess—it’s some type of high-protein ice cream made of beans and other vegetables that should not be masquerading as ice cream. Wait. If it’s carrot-cake ice cream, I take that back. Anything else ...” She makes a gagging sound and I laugh.

“It’s not high-protein, bean-flavored, or any other type of vegetable. It’s good ol’ old-fashioned cookies and cream with fudge. I’ll get us some after we rinse Indy’s hair.”

Ronnie gasps dramatically, placing a hand to her heart. “Ice cream before dinner? Who are you and what have you done with the real Archer Sullivan?”

A smile stretches across my face as I lean closer and whisper, “I promise not to tell if you don’t.”

“My lips are sealed,” she says, making a zipping motion across her mouth before her lips lift into a smile. My gaze lingers there for a moment. She has a beautiful smile.

Ronnie’s chair screeches as she stands, pulling me out of my musings. Clapping her hands, she looks at Indy. “All right, I think it’s time to rinse your hair.”

Indy jumps up. “Yay!” She runs toward the bathroom, Ronnie laughing as she follows. Meanwhile, I’m sitting frozen in my seat, frowning at the weird trajectory that my brain was heading down.

“Archer,” Ronnie calls over her shoulder as I stand. Glancing up, I catch her smiling softly, and my stomach knots up for reasons I’m too scared to dig into. “Thanks for praying for me. And getting me ice cream.”

“Well, the ice cream was for Indy,” I tease, stopping beside her. She tilts her head up, her eyes locking with mine, and the knots in my stomach tighten.

The air around us sparks, and I suddenly realize we are standing toe-to-toe. Ronnie’s gaze flicks across my face and my heart rate picks up speed.

“Ronnie.” Indy sticks her head out of the bathroom. “Hurry up.”

Ronnie jumps slightly and then spins around. She shakes her head as she walks to Indy, leaving me standing in the hallway staring at her retreating back and wondering what in the world just happened.

Twelve

Veronica

Moving the heating pad off my stomach, I pull my phone off the coffee table. I check the time and groan. Right now, I really wish I had a real job where I could call in sick. Not that I don't love spending time with Indy, but well ... I'm PMSing and just want to curl up and nap all day. And eat chocolate.

No wonder I was all weepy yesterday at Archer's. Of course, he did keep surprising me which added to my heightened emotions.

My lips lift in a smile. I still can't believe he dyed Indy's hair like mine. She looked adorable and was so happy to match me. She even made me take a picture with her. Then she begged Archer to take a picture with all three of us. He looked less than thrilled about that but did it anyway to amuse his daughter. I know he's worried he isn't enough for Indy, but he is such a good dad. Seeing how much Indy adores him proves that.

Taking a deep breath, I sit up and run my fingers through my stringy hair. "Ugh. I'm such a mess." Maybe if I hurry, I'll have time to shower before I need to be at Archer's.

It takes all my energy to shower and dress, but at least the hot water eases some of the cramps and helps me wake up. I opt out of my usual jeans and a cute sweater, instead pulling on a pair of dark blue leggings, a T-shirt, and a gray Denver Dragons hoodie.

When I walk into Archer's, I smell the smoky aroma of fresh coffee and realize that I haven't had a cup yet. No wonder I'm beginning to get a headache.

"Is that coffee for me?" I call, making a beeline to the pot without waiting for an answer.

Indy rushes in, flapping her arms. "I'm a bird, Ronnie!"

I chuckle, pulling a mug down from the cabinet. "I see that."

"Like the bird on your arm," she says, tugging the orange strands of her hair. "See? My hair matches."

"Yes, it does." Pushing my sleeve up to reveal my tattoo, I ask, "Do you know what this bird is?"

Her gaze moves to my arm as she steps closer. "An ostrich?"

Smiling, I brush a finger over my tattoo. "No. Not an ostrich. It's a phoenix."

"Oh." She steps closer to look at it. "It's pretty."

"Thank you."

"I want one."

Tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, I reply, "Well, that will be something you can decide when you're much older. Okay?"

She pulls her long shirt sleeve up to reveal orange and red marker all over her arm. "It's okay. I already did one!"

I bite my lip, not knowing whether I should laugh or cry. "You added more?"

She nods. "I wanted it to look like yours. See the bird?" She points to the orange parts that do look a little like wings, if you squint really hard and tilt your head to the side.

"I see."

Pulling her sleeve back down, she beams at me. “See? We match!” She throws her little arms around my neck and says, “I love you.”

My heart melts completely as I squeeze her back. “I love you too, Little Miss.” I press a kiss to her temple. She wiggles free and dashes back to her room, her little arms flapping the entire time. Longing like I’ve never felt washes over me as I stare after her.

What would it be like to have children of my own someday?

Tears build behind my eyes and I swat the desire away. There’s no point in wanting something I can never have. No matter what I told Archer about being open to the idea, deep down, I still believe that marriage and a family aren’t in the cards for me.

Something grazes my arm, causing me to jump. With a hand to my racing heart, I lift my gaze to Archer. “You scared me,” I scold him but stop from saying more when I see the way he’s staring at me, his expression thoughtful. An emotion I can’t decipher burns in his eyes. All I know is that he’s never looked at me like this. “What? What’s wrong?” I ask over the sudden lump in my throat.

Archer’s eyes flick across my face for a moment before they move to the hallway that Indy just ran down. Rubbing the back of his neck, he says quietly, “You’re good for her.”

My face warms at the compliment. “She’s a sweet kid. I enjoy spending time with her.”

Archer’s eyes fall to the tattoo on my arm. My breath catches as he brushes his fingers over it lightly. It’s just a brief moment. The barest of touches. I shouldn’t react at all.

But I do.

Tingles skip across my skin where his fingers grazed. My mind is short circuiting. Why are the lines of our friendship suddenly so blurry?

“What’s your tattoo mean? I’m not sure I’ve ever seen a cross with a phoenix,” Archer says, pulling me from my thoughts. Thankfully, I recover quickly.

“Oh. Um ... they kind of go hand in hand. I loved phoenixes when I was little. You know, because they represent rebirth and hope? I guess I was fascinated by them because of what my mom did to us and I wanted to show that I’d withstood the ashes her abandonment left behind.” I trace the tattoo with my finger. “The cross represents life and hope, too. And it reminds me that Christ is the One who pulled me from those ashes.” My throat tightens with emotion.

“That’s beautiful, Ronnie.”

I shrug, sniffing quietly as I blink back tears. Ugh. PMS is the worst. “Anyway,” I say brightly, turning my attention to Archer. “Shouldn’t you be heading to practice?”

“Yeah. Just gotta grab my bag.” He motions over his shoulder, giving me a concerned look. “You okay?”

Rolling my eyes, I push on his arm to get him moving. If I am going to have a cryfest, it’s not going to be in front of him. “That’s sweet of you to ask, but I’m fine. Now get going so you’re not late.”

Archer chuckles. “All right, I’m going.” After saying goodbye to Indy and grabbing his bag, he heads to the door, pausing with his hand on the handle. “There may be something waiting for you on the coffee table.”

My eyes widen. “For me? What is it?”

His lips hitch up on one side. “Go check it out. I think you’ll enjoy it.” He winks and walks out the door.

As soon as he’s gone, I rush to the living room and find a large wicker basket on the coffee table. Sitting on the couch, I reach for it. There’s a card sticking out of the corner of the basket with my name written in Archer’s manly handwriting.

Setting the card aside, I gingerly look inside the basket. Tears blur my vision as I pull out a fuzzy blanket, warm socks, a heating pad, trail mix, herbal tea, more chocolate than I could eat in a week, and ...

Heat rushes to my face. *Oh my goodness.* Archer Sullivan made me a PMS-care basket.

Covering my face, my emotions swirl, not sure where to land. I am equal parts mortified and grateful.

This has to be the sweetest thing a man has ever done for me. But it's Archer, and I am so embarrassed.

Still, I can't help but smile as I reach for the note and open it.

Ronnie,

Please don't be embarrassed.

My smile grows wider, a warm sensation filling me at the thought that Archer knows me well enough to know that my first reaction to his gift would be one of embarrassment.

There's no need. I lived with two older sisters, a mom, and June. I'll have to talk about this stuff with Indy one day too. Crap. I didn't need that reminder.

Anyway, I hope this helps you feel better. Thanks for caring for my daughter the way you do and being a good friend to me.

And yes, you may share the chocolate with Indy.

-Archer

"Ronnie, why are you crying?" Indy asks, coming up beside me. "Are you sad?"

Brushing a tear away, I smile at her. "No, honey. I'm not sad. Sometimes people cry when they're happy too."

She glances at the basket and grins. "I helped Daddy! Do you like it?"

Pulling her into a tight hug, I reply, "I love it."

Indy then asks to have a tea party, so I carefully put everything back in the basket, still amazed at the thoughtfulness of the gift. And if he does something this sweet for a friend, he's going to be amazing when Indy hits puberty.

An idea forms in my mind, sending a bolt of excitement through my body. Why have I never thought of this? It's so simple. I'll have to do some research to see what other apps

are out there and how I can make this one shine, but I think I've finally figured out my next project.

And it's all thanks to Archer giving me a PMS basket.

After tea, Indy and I share some of the chocolate. Every time I see the basket, I can't help but smile. I almost took a picture to send to Chantelle but something held me back. For some reason, the idea of sharing the sweet gift doesn't feel right. I kind of want to keep it between Archer and me.

Just the idea causes a fluttering sensation in my stomach that I crush before it can fully take flight. Instead, I focus on the words in his note.

Good friend.

That's all there is between Archer and me. Friendship.

It's all I want anyway. Isn't it?

Indy walks to me holding a large photo album. "Want to see my mommy?" she asks.

My heart pinches, and I blink back tears. Have I mentioned I hate when I'm PMSing? So many emotions for the smallest of reasons. Focusing on Indy, I smile, though I can tell it's shaky. "I'd love to. You know, I knew your mommy."

Indy's brown eyes widen from behind her glasses. "You did?"

I nod, lifting the album to my lap and scooping her up to sit beside me. "I did. I knew you when you were a baby, too." Opening up the album, I flip through a few pages while Indy tells me about each of the pictures. It's obvious she and Archer have spent a lot of time looking through them by the way she's able to tell me what's happening in each one.

"I think I have a video of your mommy when she was pregnant with you."

Indy tilts her head. "Pregnant?"

Chuckling, I tickle her belly. "Yes, when you were in her tummy." I flip through and find the picture of June just a few days before she gave birth to Indy. Pointing, I say, "Like here."

“Daddy said I liked to do flips in Mommy’s belly.”

“I’m sure you did. I’ll bring the video tomorrow and show you.” I’ll have to pull it off my computer and put it on a flashdrive. But I know I’ve got one from when me, Chantelle, and a couple of the players’ wives and at-the-time girlfriends threw June a surprise baby shower.

Indy continues flipping through the pages and stops on one of her, June, and Archer at the ice rink. My throat tightens. This had to have been taken shortly before June died. Indy is old enough to have been standing on skates as June and Archer each hold one of her hands.

“Do you still like skating?” I ask.

Indy shrugs. “I don’t remember.”

“Your dad doesn’t take you?”

She shakes her head. “I wanna go. I wanna be a hockey player like Daddy!”

Closing the album, I glance at the clock. We have time. “All right. Let’s go then.”

Thirteen

Archer

I grit my teeth as I hit the ice. Cyrus still hasn't shown up for practice yet. When Aiden asked Bridger if he'd heard from him, he just shook his head. Cyrus is ignoring Coach's and my calls. And Coach Pratt is not happy about that. As much trouble as he's been lately, the team still needs him. But we need him fully here. Not late and definitely not coming in with a hangover. He's going to ruin his career if he's not careful.

I'm going to wring his neck whenever he *does* decide to show his face. I'd hoped our talk the other day had gotten through to him, but apparently not.

Cringing, I try to remind myself there could be a number of reasons for him not being here. Whatever the reason, I pray he's okay. Even if it means he's late because of a hangover or a woman.

Aiden barrels into me as he steals the puck from Bridger. "Quit scowling and get your head in the game, Sullivan."

Glaring at him, I make a faux move of skating away before swinging back in front of him and swiping the puck from him. I keep a tight lock on it, dodging Bridger and Joel's attempts at stealing it until I have a clear shot. Evan goes to block it, but it's already sailed past him and hit the net.

Spinning around looking for Aiden, I catch sight of Cyrus trying to sneak onto the ice.

I take off, anger fueling each movement, and come to a stop in front of him. Pulling my mouth guard out, I press my hand into his chest, pushing him against the wall. “Where have you been?” I notice the bags under his eyes and how pale his skin appears.

“Cool it, Cap. I just overslept. That’s all.”

“It’s not an excuse, Cy and you know it.”

He moves closer, his eyes blazing. “Why don’t you say what you really want to?”

“Cyrus, I don’t know what’s going on with you, but you’re going to ruin your career if you don’t deal with this.” I let my hand fall, dropping my voice so no one else can hear. “You need help, Cy. Whether that’s talking with me, or Aiden, or Coach ... or whether that means some kind of counseling. But man, something has got to change. I don’t want to see you lose your hockey career or worse.”

Flinching, he averts his gaze and sighs. “Sorry, Cap. I’ll do better.”

I grip his shoulder and squeeze it. “Don’t shut your team out.”

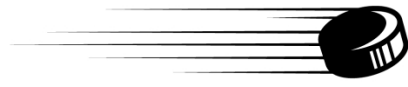
He snorts, jerking his gaze back to mine. “You mean like you have?”

Now it’s my turn to flinch as the truth of his words hits me with a pang of guilt. Ever since their so-called intervention, I’ve seen all the ways that I *did* cut them out of my life. “Yeah, I did. And you guys called me out on it. So now I’m returning the favor. Okay? We’re family. We take care of our own. Let us help.” I pray he hears the sincerity in my words. That he will accept the help I’m offering.

His jaw works back and forth for a moment, then he gives a curt nod. “All right. What’s the play here?”

Filling him in, we get back into position. Cyrus plays a perfect game, but I can still sense the brewing fury beneath his

facade. A sinking feeling lodges in the pit of my stomach as I wonder what the trigger will be that finally sets him off.



Bridger and Aiden both talked quietly to Cyrus once practice was over. I couldn't hear what they said, but it appeared that he might have been listening to them. I hope so, anyway.

After my shower, I grab my bag and start packing up when Joel calls out, "Hey, Cap, there's something waiting for you in the arena."

I glance around suspiciously. "I don't have time for one of your pranks, Doyle."

Aiden holds his hands up. "Not me. I have no idea what he's talking about."

Running a hand down my face, a puff of air escapes my lips. "Fine," I mutter to no one in particular. Lifting my bag, I nod at the room. "See you all at the game tomorrow."

They say their goodbyes as I head down the hall and toward the rink. When I'm almost there, I hear a high-pitched laugh that sounds eerily familiar. Quickening my step, I enter the arena and stop at the sight of Ronnie and Indy skating together. Indy is holding on to a skater training walker while Ronnie tugs her gently along, giving her instructions on how to move her feet and legs.

Stopping at the entrance, I watch them, my heart aching with bittersweet memories. Indy looks up and spots me. "Daddy," she squeals.

Ronnie whips her head in my direction, offering me a shy smile. "Hey."

A wide grin spreads across my face. "Hi," I reply dumbly. "Let me get my skates back on and I'll join you."

In a few minutes, I'm on the ice, skating toward them with my hockey stick in one hand. I slide to a stop in front of Ronnie.

She lifts her eyes, her cheeks slightly flushed, and smiles. “I hope this is okay.” There’s a tinge of uncertainty in her voice.

Tilting my head, my gaze flicks between the two of them. “It’s perfect.” Turning my attention to Indy, I hook the end of my stick on her walker. “You ready to go for a ride?” She nods enthusiastically. “Okay, hold on tight.”

Ronnie moves behind her, ready to catch her if she falls. I go slowly at first, instructing her on how to move her feet and bend her knees. It doesn’t take long for her to catch on.

“You’re a natural,” Ronnie tells her. “Just like your dad.” She sends me a wink, and I almost trip over my own feet. Ronnie stifles a laugh as I correct my stance. “Well, maybe not.”

I shoot her a glare, which only makes her laugh, and soon I’m joining her. And man, it feels good to laugh. “Indy, do you want to try without the walker?”

Indy nods. I pull her toward the entrance and set the trainer off the ice, holding her hand the entire time. Ronnie skates closer and takes her other hand.

Smiling at them both, I ask, “Are you ready?” They both nod. We start slow, Indy wobbling a bit as I remind her to point her toes outward.

“Spin me, Daddy!”

Chuckling, I take Indy’s other hand from Ronnie and spin her around. Indy squeals, nearly falling a couple times, but corrects herself. Ronnie watches us, the corners of her lips lifting into a soft smile.

I slow down and hold my hand out to Ronnie. “Come on.”

Her cheeks pinken as she eyes my hand. Tentatively, she slips her small hand into my larger one. I ignore the way my pulse skips a beat at the touch. With her other hand, Ronnie takes Indy’s. Soon, I’m spinning them around, all three of us laughing. I don’t know the last time I’ve felt such weightlessness in my chest.

It's as if for a tiny moment in time, every worry and care has rolled away, and it's just my daughter's sweet giggles and the slice of blades on the ice.

And there's also Ronnie.

A bright light in Indy's and my lives that neither of us expected but we both desperately needed.

"I have to pee," Indy announces, jerking me out of those thoughts. She tugs on my hand until I stop.

"Okay." I tell Ronnie we'll be back in a few minutes, and move toward the door. I notice Indy's shoes near the first bleacher and sit her down so I can remove her skates.

"Hurry, Daddy," Indy moans as I slip her skates off and put her shoes on.

"Hey, guys. Need some help?" a familiar voice asks as I finish tugging the last loop on Indy's shoestrings.

Glancing up, I meet Freya's smiling face. "No, I just need to take her to the bathroom."

"Oh, I can do it so you don't need to take your skates off too. Bridger had to run out and get my skates anyway. I forgot them in my car."

I hesitate, but Indy is already running to her, grabbing her hand. Freya's gaze darts to mine, silently asking permission. With a nod, I reply, "Thanks. That'd be great."

Freya smiles brightly, and the two head toward the bathroom.

I turn just in time to see Ronnie land a camel spin. It's a basic one, but still pretty impressive considering I didn't know she knew how to do more than skate forward and backward.

Opening the door, my skates hit the ice as I make my way to her. "Where'd you learn to do that?"

She breathes out a laugh. "Oh, I had big ideas of being a figure skater when I was younger since I was too big of a wimp to try hockey. Getting smashed into walls and knocked

onto the ice is not my idea of fun.” Tilting her head, her lips twist into a smirk. “Well, it’s fun to watch others get beat up.”

I slide closer to her. “It’s definitely fun.”

Flicking her eyes to mine, she replies, “I’m surprised you like getting beat up, Princess.”

Laughter infuses her voice and she goes to move away, but I grasp her wrist and spin her toward me. Her eyes widen as I steady her with an arm around her waist. Suddenly, I don’t even remember what I was going to say. Why did I keep her from skating away?

Her questioning gaze skims across my face, and it feels as if all the oxygen has been sucked out of the arena. My eyes drop to her lips as they part slightly. Have they always been so ... tantalizing?

I lift my eyes, but I’m no longer staring into Ronnie’s blue-green depths, and am instead looking into June’s dark brown ones. The image startles me out of whatever spell I was under, sending guilt rushing through my bones.

Dropping my hands, I skate backward, putting some space between us. What had I been thinking? My mind is a muddled mess, and I really need to get back on solid ground.

I clear my throat nervously, wracking my mind to try and remember what we had been talking about before I completely lost my mind and held Ronnie in my arms. “So, why didn’t you pursue figure skating?”

Ronnie blinks a few times. “Huh? Oh, yeah. I did a year of figure skating in fifth grade, but then realized I didn’t like doing it competitively. I just liked the math involved with it.”

She skates by me, and I join her, keeping enough distance between us so I don’t catch a whiff of her cocoa and coffee scent. Of course, the woman would smell like chocolate. “Math?”

“Yes, math. Everything is a math problem. How fast do I need to go and how much distance do I need to travel in order to perform this specific spin? How high do I need to jump? How many seconds need to go by before I land? So many

numbers. And that's what I liked." She spins around, skating backward, offering me a faint smile.

"Why app development and not a mathematician then? Or accountant?"

Her nose wrinkles and she spins back around. "Because that sounds so boring. I like numbers, but I also love being able to stretch my creative muscles."

"Have you had any bites for a job?"

"I'm working on an idea. I'm going to develop it a bit more and then run it by my friend, Rafe, and see what he thinks."

My shoulders tense, but I refuse to believe it's out of any type of jealousy over the fact that she is talking about a guy friend. That would be ridiculous. "Well, whatever you do, I know you'll be amazing at it."

She flashes me a small smile. "Thanks, Archer."

Indy's chattering voice echoes through the arena, drawing our attention. "Well, it's getting late. I should probably get her home and fed. Thanks for bringing her. She had fun." I pause and then decide to tell her the truth. "So did I."

"I had fun, too," she replies softly. "And thank you. For the basket, I mean. That was ... nice of you."

I dip my chin, relieved that she appreciated it and wasn't creeped out. "You're welcome."

Later that night, long after Indy is asleep beside me, I lay staring up at the ceiling, trying to battle the feelings that holding Ronnie stirred inside of me.

I don't know what they are. Definitely not love. Not even attraction.

At least, I keep telling myself that.

I close my eyes, and Ronnie's laughing blue-green eyes, her vibrant orange and black hair, and her plump, kissable lips flood my brain. That leaves me wondering ... what would it be like to kiss her?

I practically shoot out of bed at the thought, and my gaze lands on the picture on my nightstand of me and June. Our wedding picture.

Guilt presses on me so heavily that I can barely breathe.

“God, forgive me,” I pray quietly, but the guilt clings to me, and I realize I’ve gotten too close to Ronnie. If I’m not careful, I’m going to ruin our friendship by giving her the wrong idea.

Because nothing can ever happen between us. June was my soulmate. The only one for me. There will never be another who can take her place.

Fourteen

Veronica

Straightening the pillows on the couch, I glance around my apartment to make sure I haven't forgotten anything.

"Wow," I whisper to myself. This is the cleanest my apartment has been since the time I was sick with the flu and Chantelle went into a cleaning frenzy.

A knock sounds on the door, and I hurry over, not wanting to miss the expression on Chantelle's face when she sees how clean everything is.

Swinging the door open, I wave my arm toward my living room. "Ta da!"

Chantelle's gaze darts around the room, her mouth dropping open. "Uh ... what is going on?" she asks as she steps inside and hangs her purse up. "Did you hire a maid? Is Archer paying you that much? Maybe I need to go into nannyng for a living."

I chuckle and shut the door behind her. "No. I'm perfectly capable of cleaning my place by myself."

She lifts an eyebrow and crosses her arms. "Since when?"

Shrugging, I walk to the kitchen, open the fridge, and pull out the fruit tray. I set it on the counter and grab a couple plates from the cabinet.

“Okay, Ron. Spill.”

I glance over to see Chantelle with her arms crossed and her hip leaning against the counter. “Spill? What are you talking about?”

Again with that eyebrow. She waves a hand around the apartment and then to the food on the counter. “Your apartment is spotless. You’re wearing clothes—”

“Hey! I always wear clothes, except to shower because that would be dumb.”

Holding up a hand, she continues. “You’re wearing jeans and a sweater at ten in the morning instead of your normal sweats and hoodie. And now you’re eating fruit?” She comes closer, scrutinizing my face and pressing a hand to my forehead. “You aren’t sick, are you?”

I swat her hand away. “What? No. What is so wrong about me cleaning, dressing differently, and deciding I want some fruit?”

“It’s just really weird.”

Rolling my eyes, I pull a pack of Oreos out of the pantry. “I still want my Oreos.”

“Well, thank goodness for that. You were scaring me there for a minute,” she replies dryly. Picking up an apple slice, she takes a bite. “Don’t think I’m dropping this. Something is up with you, and I’m going to find out what.”

Sighing, I start piling my plate with a mix of fruit, dip, and Oreos. I chew the inside of my cheek, not sure if I want to voice my thoughts. I desperately want to talk this over with someone. Usually, that would be Chantelle, but ever since she had her heart broken by her jerk of an ex-hockey player—thankfully, not one of our guys—she’s been on the never-going-to-fall-in-love bandwagon with me. Our reasonings are very different, but we’ve supported one another in that decision. Which is one reason she was so adamant that I not

date Buck to begin with. Well, that and because he was a huge jerk. Obviously, she and I have horrible taste in men.

Dad is usually my other go-to when I'm struggling, but now whenever I talk to him, there's a giant elephant in the room that neither of us wants to address. AKA, the topic of my mom.

Most of our conversations have been strained since Cheyenne. It's exhausting.

Top that with whatever happened between Archer and me on the ice yesterday and I am just a ball of uncertainty lately. That's why when I woke up at four this morning, I let my anxious thoughts fuel me into cleaning the entire apartment.

Glancing down at the fruit on my plate, my mouth purses. This is all Archer's fault. His obsession with only keeping healthy foods around is causing me to crave them now. And I do not like it.

I stuff an Oreo in my mouth in silent protest. Why is Archer Sullivan suddenly invading all my thoughts?

"Did you see that cute video Freya posted on the Dragons' pages of Archer and Indy?" Chantelle asks as she takes her plate and sits on the couch.

Of course, she had to bring up the one person I'm trying not to think about right now. I'm off for a couple days and hope that a little distance between the two of us will help me sort out these confusing feelings.

"No. What video?" I sit beside her as she turns her phone to me.

"One of Archer and Indy spinning around at the rink." I'm glad to see that Freya focused on them and cut me out. Archer and I definitely don't need any rumors swirling around about the nanny and the single dad hockey player being together.

For just a moment, I feel the ghost of his arm around my waist and the gentle brush of his fingers on my wrist, but I quickly push them away and focus on the video. The soft smile on Archer's lips has my heart melting a little, and

though Indy's face is mostly hidden, you can still hear her adorable giggles.

"Why are you looking like that?" Chantelle asks, her eyes narrowing.

I blink at her in confusion. "Like what?"

"Like ... I don't know, but you've got this dreamy look in your eyes." She studies me a moment, then her mouth drops open. "Oh. My. Goodness. You like Archer."

I choke on the bite of fruit I had just taken. "What? That's the craziest thing I've ever heard. Why would you even think that?" My voice is a high-pitched squeak that is somewhere between a mouse and a crow. Or maybe it's a mouse being attacked by the crow.

All I know is that I missed my chance to play it cool because Chantelle is watching me with a smug grin on her face.

Setting my plate on the table, I try to calm myself and pray that she believes me. "I am not interested in Archer."

"You just ate a kiwi, Ron."

I throw up my hands. "What does that have to do with anything?"

"I've not seen you eat a piece of fruit in years."

"Bit of an exaggeration, don't you think? Besides, I'm washing it down with Oreos." I pick up one of the cookies and take a bite. "See?"

Rolling her eyes, she replies, "I bet you're going to tell me next that you're eating vegetables now too."

I avert my gaze. There's no way I'm telling her that I ate carrot sticks and celery with ranch dressing last night with Indy. "What do my eating habits have to do with Archer?"

When she doesn't answer, I turn my head and see her staring at the basket on my coffee table. I hold back a groan, wishing I could slap myself. How did I forget to hide it? The note from

Archer is sitting right on top. “Who’s the basket from?” I can tell from her tone that she’s already figured it out.

“It doesn’t matter.” I reach for the note, but she grabs it first.

“Why is Archer giving you gifts?”

Huffing, I hold out my hand for the note. “How do you know it’s from Archer? Maybe it’s from someone else.”

“I recognize his writing.”

“Creepy much?” I snatch the note from her hand. “And you’re worried about my love life?”

“So you do like him!”

“That was not an admission.” I rub the bridge of my nose.

“Man, he really has gotten under your skin,” Chantelle says. I shoot her a glare and she grows serious, her voice softening. “I just don’t want you to get hurt again. That’s all.”

“And you think Archer would do that?”

Chantelle bites her lower lip and sighs. “Yes, I do. But not intentionally,” she adds quickly. She lays her hand on my arm and squeezes. “You know Archer isn’t going to be interested in just dating.”

My throat tightens. “I know. Which is why I am not interested in him. Or anyone else, for that matter.”

“Then what’s with the basket?”

Heat rises to my cheeks and I bury my face in my hands. “It’s a PMS basket,” I mumble through my fingers.

There’s a beat of silence before Chantelle snickers. “A what?”

I peer at her from between my fingers. “You know, like a PMS care package. He put a heating pad, herbal tea, and tons of chocolate in it.”

Chantelle’s eyes widen. “Wow. That has to be the sweetest thing I’ve ever heard. No wonder you’re falling for the man.”

Grabbing a pillow, I hit her with it. “I told you, I’m not falling for him.”

She laughs, pushing me away. “Well, then maybe I’ll ask him out.”

“I thought you didn’t want to date.”

“And you don’t want to get married.”

Sighing, I lean back on the couch. “Archer tells me it’s worth it when you find the right person.”

Chantelle makes a humming sound in the back of her throat. “And Archer’s yours?”

Pressure builds behind my eyes and I shake my head. “No. June was his.”

“Do you really want those things, Ronnie? For as long as I’ve known you, you’ve always said you don’t.”

Stuffing all my doubts down, I flick my eyes to her. “No. I don’t. Love isn’t meant for me.” As the words leave my mouth, a band around my chest tightens, causing more tears to prick my eyes.

She scoots closer to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and pulling me into a hug. “You sure? Because if you did change your mind, I would support you.”

A tear slides down my cheek, and I discreetly wipe it away. “I’m sure. It’s just the PMS talking.”

Chantelle chuckles and sits up, pulling the basket from the table. “Then I think that calls for some chocolate and a sappy romance movie.”

I laugh, the band around my chest loosening a bit. There’s so many other things that I need to be focusing on.

Friendship.

Developing my app.

And as much as I hate it, I need to focus on making a firm decision about my mom.

But does my stupid brain listen?

Of course not. Because every few minutes, it’s replaying the moment on the ice when Archer pulled me close and wrapped

me in his arms.

And no matter how innocent it was, I can't stop thinking that there was something in the way his eyes raked over my face before landing on my lips.

And I can't stop wondering ... what would it be like to kiss Archer Sullivan?

Fifteen

Veronica

Popping my umbrella open, I step out of my Jeep and walk toward my apartment building, tired from my day with Chantelle. The prospect of curling up with a warm quilt while sipping a cup of hot tea has me hurrying my steps. Hopefully Mrs. Anderson isn't watching for me, though she's probably already in bed by now.

A faint whimper stops me in my tracks, and I glance around the parking lot. I'm pretty sure it was a dog.

The cold rain comes down a little harder. I tilt my umbrella around, trying to get a better look in the dark without losing my protection from the rain.

Making a tsking sound, I wait, praying that if there is a lost dog, it won't be afraid of me. I've always had a soft spot for animals, but I've never had a pet. Dad always said it would be cruel to adopt a pet and then spend most of our time boarding it while we traveled for his job. I used to hate the logic of that. But I'd always known he was right.

I make the noise again, and finally, motion catches my eye. A drenched little bundle of yellow fur comes out from beneath a car to my left. I walk toward it and squat. "Hey, little guy."

There's another whimper as the pup tentatively comes closer. Once it's within reach, I pull it to me, doing a quick check for the gender. "Oh, you poor boy," I murmur, noting he's not wearing a collar. His little body shakes against me. "We've got to get you warm."

I glance at my apartment and worry my bottom lip. My landlord has a strict no pets rule. I could get fined, or worse, kicked out.

Dad's reasoning for not having a pet is still true. He's out of town right now for work. Chantelle would help, even if the little guy destroyed her perfect home, but she's got a lot going on with her classes and exams.

An idea forms, and before I can question my sanity, I find myself returning to my Jeep. After wrapping the dog up in a hoodie I had in the back seat, I message Archer.

I need your help. Be there in ten.

I don't wait for a reply as I slide in and drive to Archer's, speaking soothing words to the pup the entire way. When I arrive, I don't even bother with the umbrella. Clutching my new friend to me, I hurry to the door. The rain picks up just as I step onto the covered porch. As I stare at the door, holding a trembling, soaking wet pup, the realization of what I'm getting ready to ask Archer to do fully hits me. My shoulders sink. There's no way he's going to help. He's got so much on his plate already.

Still, I'm shivering from the soaked clothes clinging to my skin. So, I draw in a deep breath and pray that he'll at least let Denny—yes, I've already named the pup—and me get warm before kicking us out again. Not that I think Archer would literally kick us out into the cold, but he might not be too happy that I've brought a stray to his house.

Before I lose my nerve, I knock quietly on the door, not wanting to wake Indy if she's already asleep. As I wait, I bounce up and down to ward off the cold and tighten my grip

on Denny, who is still wrapped up in my hoodie. The door jerks open, startling me, and I let out a small squeal.

“What’s wrong?” Archer’s voice sounds panicked, and his eyes are wide as they scan me from head to toe, as if he’s examining me for injuries. “Crap, Ronnie. Are you trying to get pneumonia?”

“Is that your way of inviting me in?” I tease through chattering teeth. I can barely see him through my wet glasses.

Denny whimpers, and Archer’s eyes dart down to the bundle in my arms. He lets out a sigh. “What’s that?”

“Uh ... pizza?”

Archer levels a look at me as he opens the door wider. “Get inside before you catch your death.”

“Yes, Princess.”

He shakes his head as he shuts the door behind him. “Why are you here?” His tone sounds strained and frustrated. Much different than the soft voice he used when we were skating together.

I’m shaking, and not just from the cold. He’s upset with me. “I-I’m sorry. I found him in the parking lot, and he was so pitiful. And it’s so cold and wet. My apartment doesn’t allow animals. And Dad’s not home. Chantelle’s busy with classes —”

He cuts off my rambling with a scoff. “So you thought you’d bring it to me?”

“Denny.”

“What?”

“His name is Denny. For the Denver Dragons. I thought about naming him Dragon, but he’s a little too soft and cuddly to be named Dragon, don’t you think?” I hold Denny up to Archer, who merely lifts an eyebrow. Then his gaze trails down to the floor and he sighs again, rubbing a hand over his face. When I look down, I realize I’m dripping all over his nice hardwood floors. “Oh. Ugh. I’m so sorry.”

“Here,” he replies gruffly, reaching for Denny.

“What are you doing?”

He lets out an exasperated breath. “Give me the dog, Ronnie, and you can go get some dry clothes on.”

“Denny,” I correct as I hand him to Archer. “Um ... I didn’t really think this through.”

“Ya think?”

I shoot him a glare. “I don’t have dry clothes to change into.”

He holds his arms straight out, keeping Denny at a distance. Glancing up at me, he replies, “My bedroom, second dresser drawer on the left. Just try to be quiet since Indy is sleeping in there.”

“Okay. I’ll grab some towels from the bathroom, too. I promise I’ll clean all of this up.” I motion toward the water on the floor, cringing at the mess I’ve made.

He snorts. “You’re darn right you will.”

I smile softly as I hurry on my tiptoes through the house. Opening Archer’s bedroom door, I peek at Indy’s sleeping form on the bed. My heart melts a little at the sight, and if I weren’t soaking wet, I’d be tempted to curl up next to her. That little girl has wiggled her way straight into my heart.

I’m careful to be as quiet as possible, and start rummaging through the drawer. The intimacy of it strikes me as I pull out a pair of Archer’s jogging pants. Heat licks my neck and face.

Am I really going to wear Archer’s clothes?

Another shiver courses through my body, giving me my answer. Yes, yes I am. I grab the joggers and a T-shirt. There are no long sleeve shirts or hoodies that I can see, but that’s okay. I’ll make some coffee or tea and sit by his fireplace to warm up. As I’m getting ready to step out of the room, I notice a hoodie thrown across the chair in the corner. Perfect. Grabbing it, I hurry to the hall bathroom and quickly strip out of my wet clothes. Thankfully, my bra and panties didn’t get as soaked as the rest of me. I pull on the joggers, tightening

them as much as I can so they don't fall off my hips. After I've put on the T-shirt and hoodie, I take a towel and wrap it around my wet hair. A happy sigh escapes my lips as my body begins to warm.

After drying my glasses off, I gather a few more towels and make my way through the house, drying up the water I tracked in. When I reach the entryway, Archer and Denny are nowhere to be found. A quick glance in the kitchen and dining room shows the lights are out. I walk to the living room, but the sight in front of me has my feet glued to the floor and my heart fluttering faster than a hummingbird's wings.

Archer is sitting by the fireplace, cuddling Denny to his bare chest while murmuring soothing words to him.

Be. Still. My. Heart.

Except my heart may very well be getting ready to leap from my body because Archer Sullivan is cradling a puppy to his shirtless chest while whispering sweet nothings into his ears. Suddenly, I am very jealous of Denny.

"Wh—" I clear my throat, trying to get words past the tightness. "What are you doing?"

Archer glances up, a flash of embarrassment shining in his eyes before he ducks his head again. "You remember when Indy was born and had to spend a few days in the NICU?"

"Yeah," I say, taking a step forward as I try to keep my eyes focused on his face instead of the many abdominal muscles he has on full display.

"Well, I had to do skin-to-skin contact with her. It helped regulate her body temperature."

"And helps with bonding," I add, setting the towels beside him and taking a seat on the end of the couch.

Archer lifts his head, his eyes locking with mine. "I'm not bonding with your dog."

My lips tug up as I reach for the blanket off the back of the couch and drape it over me, tucking my freezing feet

underneath. Snuggling deeper, I reply, “If that’s not bonding, I don’t know what is.”

Sighing, he hands Denny to me. “Here, take your dog.”

I pull the blanket up to my chin. “His name is Denny, and I think he looks way more comfortable with you.”

Archer huffs and mutters something under his breath but grabs a towel and sets Denny down to dry him off better. Denny wags his tail and keeps trying to jump back into Archer’s arms. I don’t blame him. I would too. “I’m not keeping him,” Archer says firmly.

I reply softly, “You do owe me a couple favors.” His eyes lift to mine, studying me, then dropping back down. I let out a resigned sigh. I never really expected him to keep Denny. I just didn’t know what else to do.

The crackling fire and Denny’s little whimpers and soft panting are the only sounds as Archer finishes drying him. He wraps Denny up in a dry towel and brings him back to his chest. “How long?” The words are so quiet, I almost don’t hear him.

“How long what?”

Letting out a deep breath, Archer looks at me. “How long do you need him to stay here?”

My mouth drops open and I quickly shut it. “Really? You’ll let him stay?” I try to tone down the hope in my voice, but it’s impossible.

His gaze traces across my face, soft and lingering. I must be imagining the moment his eyes land on my mouth before dragging slowly back up to meet my gaze. There’s a spark in his eyes and—I cut my thoughts off. It’s just a normal look, right? My pulse doesn’t get the memo.

Archer swallows, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “Yeah. He can stay.” His voice is low and gruff, causing my stomach to swoop. “Until you find out if he has a home or find him a new one,” he adds, but it doesn’t sound as convincing as I suspect he wants it to be.

My lips lift in a wide grin as I sling the blanket off and throw myself at Archer. He grunts as my body slams into his, the momentum toppling us both backward. He wraps an arm around me to steady me. “Woah, there,” he mumbles into my hair.

I chuckle nervously, not sure what came over me. “Sorry,” I say, pulling back a bit. Only ... we are so close. Closer than when he held me at the rink. Close enough that I can feel his warm breath fan across my face. “I’m just ...” I trail off because being in Archer’s arms has all my senses on overdrive. He smells of cedar and spice, and I want to follow Denny’s lead and curl into his warmth. Maybe snuggle up against his chest and take a nap. “Thank you,” I finally manage in a whisper.

He doesn’t respond, just keeps staring at me as if he’s never seen me until this moment, his eyes trailing across every inch of my face. I can’t help but notice that he still has one arm wrapped firmly around me. A weird tension flows between us and the longer I sit here, pressed against him with a wiggly pup between us, the more I want to erase the remaining distance until our lips meet.

The question I keep pushing away ricochets inside my mind:

What would it be like to kiss Archer?

My face must have my desires written all over it because, in the next moment, Archer is practically shoving me off him. Before I know what’s going on, he pushes Denny into my arms and stands.

“I’ll make you some tea,” he says crisply, not meeting my eyes.

I try to steady my racing heart as he walks out of the living room, but I’m not sure it’s possible. And it’s at that moment I realize that I lied to Chantelle.

I am falling for Archer Sullivan.

Oh, this is not good.

What is wrong with me? There is no way I can be falling for Archer. I don’t do long-term relationships, which doesn’t

matter anyway because he doesn't want to be in *any* relationship. And if he ever did, Chantelle's right—he would only want it to lead to marriage.

Memories of June flash before my eyes, bringing with them a wave of guilt. What would she say if she knew I was having more than friendly feelings for her husband?

By the time Archer returns with tea, Denny is asleep and I am in full-blown freak-out mode. I gently lay Denny down, still wrapped in his towel, near the fire to keep him warm. My fingers shake slightly as I take the teacup from Archer's hand. I avoid eye contact as I settle back down on the couch. This entire evening has been a huge mistake.

“Um ... I'll call the vet tomorrow. Maybe he has a chip or something,” I offer quietly, taking a sip of tea. I hum in appreciation as I swallow the warm liquid. Warmth spreads through my bones.

“Yeah.” His voice is off. Distant.

Chancing a peek at him, I catch him looking over at Denny. I wish I could tell what he was thinking. “You're in season right now, and I'm here more than I'm at home. So really ... it won't be much extra work for you. Right?”

Turning his gaze to me, Archer replies softly, “Don't worry about it, Ronnie. I already said he could stay.”

I nod, but then something hits me. “Oh no. What will we do with him when we leave the day after tomorrow?”

Archer gives me an I-told-you-so-look but releases a resigned sigh. “I'll take care of it.” At my questioning look, he continues. “We'll find a place to board him for a few days. A good place.”

I smile. “Thank you.”

He's quiet for a moment, his gaze flicking between me and Denny. “It means a lot to you, doesn't it?”

Rolling my lip inward, I wait a beat to answer. “It's just ... I've never had a pet. We were always traveling too much. I wanted to get one when I moved into my own place, but the

only apartment I could get has a no pet policy.” I glance at him. “So, I really do appreciate it. More than you know.”

Archer makes a noncommittal sound and dips his chin. We sit there in silence until I’ve finished the tea and take my leave. I’m so tired when I get home, but sleep eludes me as I wonder how I’m going to spend the next few days traveling with Archer when I’m developing these very real, very big, very wrong feelings toward him.

Sixteen

Archer

“Late night, Cap?” Cyrus asks. “Got a new girlfriend you didn’t tell us about?” He waggles his eyebrows while Bridger winces and shakes his head.

I fight a yawn. I don’t have the energy to put Cyrus in his place. “You know better than that. I just didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Uh-huh, sure,” he replies with a smirk.

He wouldn’t believe me if I told him the truth. That I took in a stray mutt just because Ronnie batted her pretty eyes at me.

I almost groan at the thought. Okay, Ronnie did not bat her eyes at me, but as soon as I saw the way she looked at that mangy dog, I couldn’t stop my stupid mouth from agreeing to let him stay.

He whimpered throughout the night and wanted to lay right on top of my chest, licking my face every few minutes to ensure I didn’t actually sleep. When Indy woke up this morning and saw Denny curled up on top of me, she was thrilled. I, on the other hand, was less than enthused when I swung my legs off the bed and stepped right into the present he’d left for me.

Cleaning dog crap off my feet at six in the morning was really not how I wanted to start my day. I knew then that I'd made a huge mistake, even if seeing Ronnie and Indy cooing and squealing at the mutt filled me with a sense of contentment.

I shove the image away, reminding myself that I can't get involved with Ronnie. She's Indy's nanny. More importantly ... she's not June.

It's the loneliness that's making me feel as if I'm missing something in my life. And I am.

My wife.

Not a new one. Not a girlfriend. Not someone to just have fun with.

I'm lonely for June, and no one can fill the gaping hole she left behind.

At least, that's what I keep trying to tell myself all through practice as I try to focus on the puck. But all I can picture is Ronnie snuggled up on my couch, wearing my clothes. Or the way her eyes softened when she walked in and saw me holding Denny. Or how it felt when she threw herself into my arms when I told her he could stay.

My head isn't in the game, and I end up missing a clear shot before getting tackled by Joel. He offers me a hand up, his brow furrowed. "You okay, Cap?"

"Just fine," I mutter bitterly.

The rest of practice doesn't get any better, and by the time we hit the showers, my entire body is tense.

If the woman is driving me this crazy, how am I going to survive a few days away with her and Indy?

Or maybe it's the fact that I didn't get any sleep because of Denny. "That stupid dog," I mumble.

"What's that?" Aiden asks.

"Nothing."

His expression says he doesn't believe me. "Going to the tavern?"

The word *no* is on the tip of my tongue, but when I think about dealing with Denny or facing Ronnie and whatever weird thing is between us, that isn't the response that slips out. "Sure."

Aiden blinks in surprise as a wide smile appears. He clearly wasn't expecting a yes. I'm just as shocked as he is by my answer. I shoot Ronnie a text to confirm she's okay keeping Indy a bit longer. She responds back with an, *of course*, followed by a picture of her, Indy, and Denny ... all three of them wearing tiaras and tutus. A smile tugs at my lips.

When we arrive at the tavern, I almost miss Ivan and his crew as the twenty year old crowd filters in. The noise grows, and I'm beginning to regret my decision to come here instead of going home. Some of the Darlings arrive and I tense, hoping Stevie doesn't catch sight of me. I breathe a sigh of relief when I see her chatting with Kent.

Thirty minutes later, and I'm getting that nervous twitch to bolt. Aiden just stepped away to talk to Evan and Greer. It's the perfect time to make a quiet escape.

Slender arms wrap around me, and lips press against my neck and then my cheek before I can react. "Hello, handsome."

I pry the woman off, but she plops onto the stool beside me, laughing and flipping her blonde hair. "I think you have the wrong guy," I say, frustration bubbling under my skin.

"Sullivan? Number ten? Captain of the Dragons?" Her voice is low and husky as she sets her hand on my leg, rubbing upward.

Removing her hand, I reply in a tight voice, "That's me. But you've still got the wrong guy."

A firm hand grips my shoulder. "I see you've met Lexie," Cyrus says loudly.

I grind my teeth and turn to glare at him. He's got his arm draped around the shoulder of a brunette. She seems vaguely

familiar, so she's probably one of his regular hookups.

Pushing away from the bar, I stand and pull Cyrus away from the girl. "Ladies, I need a word with my friend." I drag him to the back of the tavern and into the hallway so we're away from prying eyes and ears. I press him up against the wall. "What do you think you're trying to pull?"

Cyrus scowls, pushing me back. "I just thought you could loosen up a bit. Have some fun."

I motion toward the front of the tavern. "And you think that's my idea of fun?"

He shrugs. "It is for most guys. You should give it a try. Doesn't mean you have to commit."

In a second, I have him up against the wall again, my forearm pressed firmly on his chest. "Listen to me very carefully. I am not that guy. I will never be that guy. You know that. And if you think this is somehow going to get you on my good side so I will overlook all the ways you've been screwing up lately, then you really don't know me at all." My eyes bore into his. "Cyrus, you are on the wrong path, and if you don't start making changes, there's not going to be anything that me, Aiden, or even Coach can do to help you."

Dropping my hands, I take a step back and let out a deep breath. Cyrus's jaw ticks, and I can see the anger in his eyes, but he doesn't say anything. "Do better, Cy. I know you can."

"Whatever," he replies under his breath and storms off.

I lean against the wall and tilt my head up toward the ceiling.

"Well, that was certainly interesting."

"I'm glad I could give you some entertainment for the evening." I turn my head slowly, meeting Aiden's eyes. He's studying me carefully, clearly wanting to say something. I let out a resigned breath. "Might as well spit it out, Doyle."

He chuckles quietly, then grows serious. "I'm not saying Cyrus did the right thing at all. But are you really closed off to the idea of another relationship sometime in the future?"

I clench my eyes shut. “June was it, Aiden. She was the only one for me.” Even as I say the words, the picture Ronnie sent me earlier flashes through my mind. I swallow over the thickness in my throat. “I will never be able to forget June. And I wouldn’t want another woman to feel like she was competing against her memory.” A weight settles on my chest. I could never do that to anyone. To Ronnie.

Not that I’m thinking of a relationship with Ronnie.

She’s Indy’s nanny.

She’s not June.

And Art would kill me ... if Chantelle didn’t get to me first.

So many reasons for me to shove all these thoughts and feelings into the deepest, darkest corners of my heart and lock them away, never to see daylight again.

Aiden grunts, taking a step closer. “Now, I’m no expert in this area, but it seems to me that the right woman wouldn’t expect you to forget June. After all, you and she created a child together. So I guess the real question is ... would finding someone who loves you and loves your little lass be worth the risk?”

The weight in my chest increases, squeezing around my heart until I can barely breathe. “I’m not sure,” I reply softly.

Aiden squeezes my shoulder, then drops his hand. “Good thing you’ve got time to figure it out then. That is, unless you’ve already found yourself a lass.”

My eyes snap to his. “That’s ridiculous. Of course I haven’t. I’m not even looking.”

“Aye. But love is usually like that. You don’t go searching for it. It searches for you.”

“I’ve had love, Aiden. The kind of love that only comes once in a lifetime.”

He lifts a shoulder. “Maybe. Or maybe in God’s grace, He gifts us with another chance. And if He does ... well, I would want to snatch it and hold on for dear life.”

Seventeen

Veronica

I hang Indy's coat up while Denny whimpers in the dog carrier. "Hold on, sweetie," I say in a soothing voice. Indy goes to open it, but I stop her. "No, leave him in there while you put your shoes away and then you can help me feed him."

"But I want Denny to come with me."

"I know, but I need to let him out back to potty first."

"I want to go!"

Kneeling, I look her in the eyes. "I know you do, but it's a bit too cold out right now. So go put your shoes away. Then we can feed him together."

Her bottom lip comes out and she crosses her arms. "No."

A frustrated breath puffs out of me. "Indy. You need to do as I say." She crosses her arms, staring me down. "Indy," I warn in a firm tone.

"But I love Denny and want to be with him," she whines.

"You will be. Once you've done what I've asked."

When she realizes I'm not going to cave, she huffs, picks up her shoes, and stomps her way to her bedroom. I take a

fortifying breath and open Denny's carrier, lifting him out. He wags his tail eagerly, trying to give my face a good lick.

Laughing, I let Denny out into the backyard. He's already busy doing his business before I've shut the door behind me. Archer taking him in really worked out perfectly since he already had a fenced-in backyard.

I'm thankful the vet had an opening today and was able to check Denny out. Is it bad that I was a little relieved when they discovered he didn't have a chip? Though I do wonder how Archer will take the news.

A few minutes later, Denny is back inside and Indy is happily pouring his food into his new bowls—she and I made a run to the pet store after we left the vet's office. After getting all the necessities, I may have gone a little bit overboard with doggy toys.

I glance at the clock. Archer should be home soon. It surprised me when he texted to ask if I could watch Indy a bit longer so he could go to Brokedown Tavern with the guys. I really needed to do some more research for my new app, but I also hated to tell him no when he's finally spending time with his friends.

A while later, I peek into the living room and find that Indy and Denny have fallen asleep on the couch together while watching a movie. The sight sends a strange ache of longing throughout my body. I really need to get this app done because the longer I'm with this little girl, the more I keep picturing a family of my own someday.

And that's definitely not happening.

But even the thought that soon Indy's nanny will return and I'll no longer be a staple in Indy's life sends a piercing pain through my heart. It isn't just the idea of a family I've grown attached to. It's this family.

Shaking the thoughts away, I open the oven to check on the baked spaghetti. Thumping comes from the front door and my heart skips a beat. Which is a completely ridiculous reaction to

Archer coming home. I listen as he hangs his keys up and drops his bag to the floor.

He steps into the kitchen with his head down, raking a hand through his wavy hair and letting out a heavy sigh. Lifting his head, his eyes connect with mine. The air feels like it's been sucked out of the room as Archer's eyes trail across my face.

My mouth is dry as I attempt to speak. "Hey," I squeak out and then clear my throat. "Have fun at the tavern?"

He walks around me to the sink, and my heart crashes when I notice the lipstick on his neck and cheek. Grabbing a glass from the cabinet, he fills it with water and takes a drink, not answering my question.

My eyes begin to water, but I bottle it all up as I turn to check on dinner.

"Fun," Archer grunts out sarcastically.

"Well, I've always thought kissing was fun," I blurt out stupidly.

Archer chokes on his water, spewing it all over the sink. "What!?"

Heat rushes to my face as I stumble over my words. "I mean ... uh ... just that, you know"—I cut myself off, pointing to his face—"you have lipstick on your face. And neck." I turn around, not wanting him to see my disappointment.

Archer mutters something I can't make out, then says more clearly, "I'm going to kill Cyrus."

I chance a peek over my shoulder, my nose scrunched. "Cyrus?"

He grabs a towel, still muttering under his breath. "He had one of his jersey chasers come on to me."

"Oh." Sweet relief rushes through me, even though it shouldn't matter. Archer is allowed to kiss anyone he wants.

Pulling a clean dishcloth out of the drawer, he runs it under the faucet, then squeezes the excess water out. He wipes at his face, completely missing the lipstick.

Chuckling, I walk over and take the cloth from his hand. “Here.” I add a drop of dish soap to it, rubbing the cloth around until it suds up a bit.

Archer’s eyes are focused on my every movement, and having his full attention is equal parts exhilarating and terrifying.

Standing on my tiptoes, I rub the spot on his cheek, trying not to think about how close I am to him. Without thinking, I place my hand on his arm so I can lean a little closer. His jaw clenches at the contact.

I linger for a moment longer, pretending to wipe at the spot, even though it’s gone, before dropping back down onto my heels. “Okay, turn your head so I can get your neck.” My voice comes out quiet and a bit shaky.

Archer tilts his head to the side, and finally, I’m not under the scrutiny of his intense stare. As I press the cloth to his neck, I realize this could possibly be worse than having his undivided attention. My chest brushes against his arm as I work quickly, trying to ignore the erratic beating of my heart. When my fingers accidentally skim against Archer’s pulse, I find it beating in tune with my own.

His entire body tenses, but he doesn’t say anything. I take a final swipe over his neck, then drop my hand.

“There. All gone.” I spin around so he can’t turn his piercing gaze on me. Putting an oven mitt on, I pull out the baked spaghetti and set it on the stove. “Did you give Cyrus a hard time about it?” I ask casually, facing him again. “I’m sure he meant well.”

Archer snorts. “Doubtful.” He leans against the counter, crossing his arms. “I just can’t get it through his head that I’m not interested in dating and will never be interested in dating again. June was it for me.”

The words slice through me, gutting me for reasons I don’t want to delve into. My throat tightens and tears burn the backs of my eyes. “He just wants to see you happy, Archer.”

“No. He wants to butter me up so I’ll turn a blind eye to the way he’s been slacking on the team. He’s always showing up late to practice, and when he does come in, he has a hangover. Not to mention his constant string of girls.”

I frown. “Has it gotten that bad?” I ask, pulling plates down for him and Indy.

Archer runs a hand over his face. “Yeah. Hopefully, I got through to him tonight. Though I highly doubt it. I think he’s at least finally realized that I don’t want to be set up with anyone.”

Sucking in a soft breath, I stuff down all my emotions and focus on what Archer needs right now. He’s grieving his wife. He doesn’t need me and my teensy crush—yes, I’ll admit that much—pouting because he doesn’t want to date. He needs someone to listen. He needs a friend.

“I’m sorry he did that, Archer. I do think they’ve just been worried about you and Indy. But now that you’re putting yourself out there more, they’re going to see that you’re okay. That you’re strong.”

A humorless laugh escapes him. “I’m not strong, Ronnie,” he whispers, his voice cracking. “Some days, I’m barely hanging on.”

His sad tone sends an ache through my heart. Placing a hand on his arm, I give it a squeeze and meet his eyes. “Archer, you have kept your job as the captain of a pro hockey team and you’re great at it. You’ve raised an adorable, loving, and sweet little girl. You may have closed yourself off from your friendships for a while, but you’re taking steps to come out of that. I know you’re still grieving June. I know there are still days that are impossibly hard, but on those days, lean on God and on your friends.”

He covers my hand with his own, his thumb brushing across my skin briefly, causing it to pebble. I hope he doesn’t notice. “You might have missed your calling,” he says softly. “You’d make a great counselor.” He pats my hand.

I chuckle, letting my hand fall from his arm. “Yeah. I don’t think that would work. I may be able to offer advice to a friend, but my own life is still a mess.”

“You haven’t decided what to do about your mom?”

Shaking my head, I turn to scoop supper onto his and Indy’s plates. Archer slides over and takes the spatula from my hand. “Here. You don’t have to do that.”

“It’s okay. I don’t mind.” I sigh. “And no. I haven’t decided what I should do about my mom.”

“Are you praying about it?”

“I’m trying. But it’s really hard.”

He smiles softly. “Maybe that’s your answer.”

“What is?”

“Maybe you’re struggling to pray about it because you know what the answer is going to be and you want a different answer.”

My jaw drops. “Wow. Now who’s in the wrong profession?”

He holds his hands up in surrender, his smile widening. “Hey, I’m just offering a possible reason.”

I nudge him with my shoulder. “Well, I don’t know if I like it.”

“Another reason it may be the answer,” he replies.

Rolling my eyes, I’m cut off from answering by a whimper and little claws tapping against the floor. “I think your new buddy needs a potty break.”

Archer groans. “He’s not my buddy. What did the vet say? Did they find a chip?”

I shake my head. “And none of their lost pet listings had one matching Denny’s description. They checked with the shelters too.”

Archer drops his head. “Of course.”

“But it’s okay,” I say brightly. “Indy and I went to the store. We bought him food, dog dishes, toys, a collar—”

“So you just moved him in with me, did you?” Archer asks, and I bite my lip, trying for an innocent look.

Denny whimpers at my feet. “Besides, look at him. He’s a cutie!” I lift him up and pepper his face with kisses before thrusting him into Archer’s arms. “And he needs to potty.”

“You’re going to be the death of me,” Archer mumbles, but I can’t decide if he’s talking to me or Denny.



Archer and Indy will be here to pick me up for our flight as soon as they drop Denny off at the dog boarder. I glance down at my phone to check the time. I have a few more minutes, so I double check that I’m not forgetting anything while also saying a prayer that the next few days go smoothly.

I’ve flown with the team a few times. But it was always because Dad either wanted to do some scouting at local colleges or he had time off and wanted to catch a game with me. It’s one of the reasons he’s such a great scout—he lives and breathes hockey.

But I won’t deny I’m nervous about this trip, and it has nothing to do with flying or the players ... well, all but one player.

I keep praying God will show me what’s going on, even though I already know what it is and why it won’t work.

I’m attracted to Archer. And I like him. A lot.

But I keep reminding myself of our talk last night, which was the prime example of why I need to lock my heart up and throw away the key. Archer doesn’t want another relationship. Which is fine. I’m not long-term relationship material anyway.

Even if I’ve begun having visions of a future that looks completely different than the one I’ve always imagined. A future where I’m not a busy career woman climbing the corporate ladder, but a mom who gets to spend my days working from home and snuggling little kids.

My thoughts are interrupted when my phone buzzes with a text. Archer and Indy are here. Inhaling a fortifying breath, I grab my suitcase and purse and head downstairs.

I see Indy's little face pressed against the truck window, as if she's watching for me. Smiling, I wave at her and her whole face lights up.

Archer jumps out, coming around the side of his truck. He looks good. He's wearing dark gray joggers, a Denver Dragons hoodie, and a red beanie covers his hair.

The beanie has my heart racing. His brown hair sticks out from underneath, giving him an almost boyish appearance. Or it would if it weren't for the short beard along his jawline that most definitely makes him look like a man. The long hair, beanie, and beard are making me wonder what he would look like dressed in flannel and jeans while carrying an ax.

Chill out, Ronnie, I chide myself.

But come on. Archer Sullivan as a lumberjack? He'd have all the ladies swooning. Not to mention, he already smells like cedar and spice and everything nice.

I have to refrain from taking a deep breath when he reaches for my suitcase.

Good grief. How am I going to make it through the drive to the airport in an enclosed space with him and his wonderful scent?

Better yet ... how am I going to survive this trip?

As he opens my door for me, he flashes me a bright smile that has my knees going weak.

Yup. I am in trouble. Deep, deep, trouble.

Eighteen

Archer

Indy bounces in her seat, eyes glued to the window as the plane takes off. Ronnie leans forward to watch her, a small smile lighting her face. “She likes flying, huh?” Ronnie whispers.

“When she gets a window seat, yes. She had a tantrum the last time we flew and we got an aisle seat instead.” I grimace at the memory. “It was not a fun trip. That nanny quit as soon as we got back to Denver.”

Ronnie cringes, then gives me an inquisitive look. “Just how many nannies have you had?”

Groaning, I lay my head back against the seat. “Too many to count.”

She chuckles under her breath. “Well, I’m sure when Ms. Wilma gets back, she’ll stick around. She seemed sweet and protective of Indy.”

My lips pull down into a frown. “Maybe. I’m afraid to get my hopes up, though.”

Nudging my shoulder, she replies, “Come on, Princess. You gotta have more faith than that.”

I grunt in response. Indy distracts me with a question. When I turn back around to Ronnie, she's deep in conversation with Freya, who is sitting behind us with Bridger. Freya whispers something and Ronnie snorts out a laugh. A smile tugs at my lips as I watch them.

Bridger taps me on the shoulder, then leans in to whisper, "Better watch it there, Cap. The guys are going to think you're developing feelings for Ronnie if you keep looking at her like that."

Shooting him a glare over my shoulder, I reply quietly through gritted teeth, "I have no idea what you're talking about."

Bridger leans back with a smirk, crossing his arms over his chest. "Don't worry. Your secret's safe with me."

"What secret?" Ronnie asks, glancing between the two of us.

Heat rises to my cheeks. "Nothing," I mumble.

Ronnie's lips purse as she studies me for a moment before turning back to Freya. Bridger has the nerve to wink at me, his smirk widening. I scowl at him, then turn around and distract myself by focusing on my daughter.

But it's not enough of a distraction to tune out Ronnie's excited chatter, or the way her warm laughter feels like I'm stepping into sunshine for the first time since June died. Bridger was right. These feelings I've been having for her are starting to go a lot deeper than just casual friends and I can't let that happen. For so many reasons.

These feelings I'm having for Ronnie are probably just a way my mind is trying to distract me during this stage of the grieving process.

"It has to be," I say under my breath.

"Did you say something?" Ronnie asks.

I inwardly groan. Does the woman have sonic hearing? "Nothing. Just running through plays."

The answer seems to satisfy her because she leans back in her seat, pops her earbuds in, and closes her eyes. “I’m going to take a nap.”

“We’ll be there in twenty minutes or less.”

She pops one eye open to look at me. “Never underestimate the power of a ten or fifteen minute power nap, Archer.”

I scrub a hand down my face to cover my smile. She closes her eyes again, her breathing becoming more even as she drifts off to sleep. Bridger punches me in the shoulder and my body tenses. Rotating in my seat, I shoot daggers at him with my eyes.

He’s smirking again as he leans forward and whispers, “You’re staring again.”

“You know, I used to like you.”

Bridger chuckles and then sits back in his seat, wrapping an arm around a sleepy Freya—who also has earbuds in—and pulls her in so her head rests on his shoulder. His gaze turns thoughtful as his eyes flick back to mine. “Might be worth it, Cap.”

“It’s not that simple, Bruiser,” I reply as quietly as I can, hoping neither Ronnie nor Freya can hear me.

Bridger tucks Freya closer to him, and she smiles softly but doesn’t open her eyes. “The best things in life are never easy.” He glances down at Freya, his eyes tender and full of love. Emotion clogs my throat. That’s how I used to look at June. How she used to look at me. Bridger raises his eyes again. “But they’re always worth it.”



We don’t have much time to spare once we land in Montana. The rental bus is ready at the airport to take us to the hotel for check-in, then to the rink for the game.

When we stop at the hotel, Indy and I remain seated. Ronnie stands, looking over her shoulder at me. “Aren’t you going to

check in?”

Wincing inwardly, I reply, “Uh. Actually, Indy and I are staying with my family tonight.” I want to slap myself. How did I forget to tell her? Most likely because I’ve been exhausted from work and taking care of her dog. Still, I should have remembered.

“Oh,” she says quietly, a flash of something that looks like hurt passing over her expression. Her lips purse as she turns around to face me. “Am I still taking Indy to the game?”

“Yes, of course. Mom and Dad will meet us there. They may be a little late though.”

She draws her bottom lip between her teeth and averts her eyes, looking down at Indy who is playing quietly on her tablet. My gaze lingers too long on where Ronnie is biting her lip before she releases it and meets my eyes. Heat creeps up my neck and spreads to my face. Hopefully she didn’t see me staring at her mouth.

“So ... tomorrow?”

I run a hand through my hair. “I’ll still need you to stay with Indy at the game tonight, at least until my parents arrive, then if you want to leave, you can.” The words taste bitter in my mouth. Would she want to leave? She’s a Dragons fan, so I doubt it, but the idea of her leaving the game causes a strange desire to swirl in my chest. I want her to stay. Not for Indy. But for me. “I definitely need you tomorrow. Mom and Dad will drop me and Indy back off at the hotel in the morning. Then we’ll all be riding the bus to Buffalo for the game there. I’m really sorry, Ronnie. I should have explained the plans to you. I just wasn’t thinking.”

A small smile forms on her face. “It’s okay. You’ve been busy. I should have asked.”

“Are you okay with all that?” My stomach knots. I don’t want to hurt her feelings, but I also need some space from this woman who has been slipping into my thoughts more and more lately. Plus, if Mom or my sisters get even a whiff of my conflicted feelings, they’ll never leave it alone.

Ronnie lifts a delicate shoulder. “Yeah, it’s fine. Freya and I can have a girls’ night.” She glances out the window, and my gaze follows to see Freya’s and Bridger’s arms wrapped around one another, lost in their own little world. Chuckling, she says, “If I can pry her away from Bridger.”

I snort. “Good luck with that. Those two can’t keep their hands off each other.”

A look of longing crosses her face as she watches them, then she flicks her eyes to mine, holding my gaze for a heated moment.

Someone bangs on the bus door, snapping us out of ... whatever *that* moment was. Cyrus sticks his head inside the bus. “Ronnie, you coming?”

Wiping her hands over her ripped jeans, she ducks her head, avoiding eye contact with me as she turns to Cyrus. “Yup.”

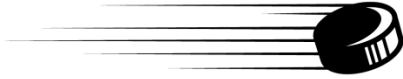
I drag my eyes away from the sway of her hips as she follows Cyrus off the bus and then turn my attention to Indy. Guilt pricks at my conscience. Indy’s who I need to be focusing on. Instead of spending my time being distracted by thoughts of Ronnie.

When everyone climbs back onto the bus, Ronnie takes a seat with Freya a few rows in front of me. An unwelcome feeling of loss mingled with jealousy stirs in my gut. Which is crazy.

Bridger drops down beside me, and before he can open his mouth, I tell him, “Don’t say a word.”

He snickers but remains blessedly silent all the way to the rink. I spend the twenty-minute ride trying to get myself hyped up for the game, but feminine laughter keeps floating back to me. It’s ridiculously distracting ... and also makes me want to smile. I refrain, though, knowing that if I do, Bridger isn’t going to be able to keep his trap shut.

I’ll be glad to have a night with my family. My parents’ house will be full of warmth, delicious food, and a hoard of my nieces and nephews running through the house. The perfect distraction.



I'm off-kilter the entire game. I blame it on the fact that I can't get that moment on the bus out of my head. And the fact that right before we stepped out on the ice, I glanced over to see Ronnie laughing with my sisters, Kiera and Sonja, with Indy snuggled up on her lap.

Frustration courses through my veins. My entire team is carrying my slack. Except for Cyrus, who winds up in the penalty box—again. I want to be angry with him, but heck, I'd rather be there than on the ice, completely screwing up every shot and pass I take. I clench my jaw, angry that I've let my team down.

It looks like we're going to lose the game.

Until Joel scores the winning shot.

Relief floods my veins. I'm still annoyed at myself for letting Ronnie get under my skin to the point where I almost cost us the win.

Mom's the first one to greet me when I walk out the doors, wrapping me in her warm embrace. "Archer, I missed you."

A smile spreads across my face. "Missed you too, Ma." I press a kiss to her cheek and then pull back so I can hug Dad and my sisters. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice Ronnie. Indy is perched on her hip with her head lying on Ronnie's shoulder, her eyes closed. An ache forms behind my ribs.

My oldest sister, Kiera, jogs me from my thoughts when she wraps her skinny arms around my neck. She leans close, whispering in my ear, "Fair warning, Mom is scheming."

I try to smother my groan, but Kiera must hear it because she chuckles under her breath.

When she steps back, I glance at Ronnie. "Do you need a ride back to the hotel?"

Ronnie rolls her bottom lip in, her eyes flicking nervously between me and my mom. I don't have a good feeling about

whatever that means.

Mom pats my arm, looking up at me with a mischievous glint in her eyes. “Oh, I invited Ronnie to stay with us tonight.” My jaw ticks with annoyance and frustration. Scheming indeed.

“Thank you for the offer, Mrs. Sullivan, but I don’t mind staying at the hotel.”

Mom lets out a small huff. “It’s Tabitha. And it’s no problem at all. We have plenty of room.”

“No, you don’t,” I mutter.

Mom snaps her head toward me, her eyes narrowing, daring me to say anything more. “As I was saying, we have plenty of room and food. We’d love to have you, Ronnie.”

I can feel Ronnie’s gaze boring into me until I finally lift my head. She’s watching me intently, likely waiting to see my reaction before answering. As much as I need to keep my distance from her, I can’t very well tell her that. It’s not like it’s her fault I can’t stop thinking about her. “We’ll stop by the hotel and get your bag if you want to stay.”

Mom smacks my arm. “Of course, she wants to stay.”

Ronnie smiles at my mom. “Thank you, Tabitha.”

Mom turns around with a satisfied grin on her lips and moves to join the rest of my family. Stepping closer to Ronnie, I lift a sleeping Indy from her arms. Indy’s head falls to my chest, and I press a kiss to her hair. Glancing up to Ronnie, I say, “I’m sorry about my mom. She can be a little intense. If you don’t want to come, I’ll make an excuse. Seriously, I don’t want you to feel pressured.”

Ronnie lifts a shoulder, smiling. “I’ve always liked your mom the few times we’ve spoken. And your sisters are really nice and funny.” Her eyes meet mine, a question hidden in their depths. “But I understand if you want time alone with your family. I really am fine staying at the hotel.”

Despite her words, there’s a glimmer of longing in her eyes. It’s the only reason I have for what comes out of my mouth

next. “Ronnie, I want you to come.”

Her eyes widen in surprise before a bright smile breaks across her face. “Okay.”

Nineteen

Veronica

Archer's family is intense, but it's a sweet intensity that has me smiling and laughing until my cheeks hurt.

I'm still not certain Archer even wanted me to tag along, but it was a little hard for either of us to tell his mom no when she left no room for argument. Plus, I had so much fun chatting with his sisters and nieces at the game and I'm looking forward to spending more time with them. Watching them cheer for Archer warmed my heart. Though he seemed off tonight and didn't play his best.

I frown, wondering how he's handling it. Yes, the Dragons won, but barely, and I've spent enough time with the guys to know how much a bad game weighs on them. It can either drive them to push harder the next game or mess with their confidence to where they can't hit the puck to save their lives.

Sighing, I glance around Archer's childhood home and smile. It's warm and cozy. And also incredibly loud. Between Archer and his two sisters, there are ten grandchildren. And Archer's oldest niece is here with her husband and their two-month-old baby.

I join Tabitha, Kiera, Sonja, and some of the older girls in the kitchen. The women are chatting as we prepare dinner,

while the men are in the living room watching sports—probably hockey—and the kids are spread throughout the house. A random blur, followed by a high-pitched squeal, runs through the kitchen every few minutes. It's total madness, and I'm kind of loving it. Tabitha introduced everyone at the game, but there are so many people, I can't keep their names straight.

The house is full of an energy that sends a sharp yearning through my heart. The chaos reminds me of working at SmartTru, and I find myself blinking back tears. There was always so much laughter, joking, and camaraderie, and I miss it more than I realized. I haven't truly thought about it, instead occupying myself with taking care of Indy and researching for my new app idea, but I miss being part of a team.

They've never even called you, I remind myself, ignoring the sting of pain that comes along with it. Not a single one of my former co-workers has texted or called since I walked out of SmartTru. Some team.

Another string of laughter drifts into the kitchen, and an intense wave of jealousy washes over me. Is this what growing up with two parents and siblings is like?

Pushing away the feeling, I return to chopping the vegetables for the salad.

"So, Ronnie, how did you convince Archer to dye Indy's hair?" Kiera asks, her eyebrow lifting.

A chuckle escapes me. "Oh, that wasn't me."

"It wasn't?" Tabitha asks, seeming surprised.

Shaking my head, I cube the tomatoes and place them in a bowl. "Indy had been talking about having her hair like mine, but I just laughed it off. Then Archer called me, panicking, and when I got to his place, he had Indy in the bathroom with all the dying tools and products."

"Huh. Interesting," Kiera says quietly.

I bite my lip, worry niggling through me. "I didn't encourage her to."

Tabitha places a hand on my arm. “It’s fine, dear. It’s just hair. We’re just surprised that Archer was so easygoing about it.”

My lips pull down into a frown. “Really? I mean, he can be overprotective in some ways, but that’s just being a parent. He didn’t even care when she used a permanent marker to draw tattoos on her arm to match mine.”

Kiera raises her eyebrow again. “Curiouser and curiouser.”

What do I say to that?

“Oh, leave her alone, you two. It’s obvious that Indy adores her. That’s all it is,” Sonja interjects, and I shoot her a grateful smile.

Their chatter continues as I turn my attention back to the remaining vegetables. Archer’s voice drifts from the doorway, and I flick my eyes to him, but I am not prepared for the sight of him cuddling his great-niece to him. He catches me watching him and embarrassment warms my cheeks.

Quickly averting my gaze, I hear his footsteps coming closer until he stops beside me. “Do you want to hold her?” he asks softly.

Looking up at him, my breath hitches. He’s smiling, the laugh lines around his eyes pulling in the corners and softening his features in a way that makes my heart pound erratically. Nodding, I grab the towel lying on the counter and dry my hands.

Archer gently places the baby in my arms, and I am acutely aware of every place his skin touches mine. Gulping, I turn my focus back to the little bundle in my arms. Smiling, I coo, “Hi there, sweetheart.” I glance up at Archer, momentarily speechless at the look in his eyes as he watches me. I’m too afraid to put a name to what that look means. Instead, I ask, “What’s her name?”

If he notices how shaky my voice is, he doesn’t let on. “Macy.”

Pulling my eyes away from Archer, I say, “You’re such a pretty girl, Macy.”

I cuddle her for a few more moments until Kiera sweeps in. “Do you mind if I steal my granddaughter for a minute?” She lifts Macy from my arms and follows the rest of the family out of the kitchen.

Finding myself alone with Archer, my senses are on high alert, aware of his every movement and that he’s still watching me. I turn around to finish the last of the vegetables. I feel his presence right before Archer reaches over me, snatching a couple of carrots.

“Hey, that’s for the salad.” I spin around to grab them back from him, but don’t realize just how close he’s standing. I have to tilt my head up in order to see the satisfied smirk on his face.

“Do you even eat vegetables, Ronnie? I thought your diet consisted solely of chocolate and coffee.”

He’s so close, I can feel the warmth from his body. I attempt to calm my racing heart as I lift a shoulder nonchalantly. “And the occasional salad.”

His smirk widens. “What? Like once a month?”

Snorting, I cross my arms. They brush against his chest, but since he doesn’t move, neither do I. “That’s a bit ambitious, don’t you think? My goal is one a year.”

“I wish I thought you were joking.” He shakes the carrot in front of my mouth. “Here, you need this more than I do.”

My nose wrinkles. “Uh. No, thanks.”

“Ronnie,” he says sternly, but I don’t miss the amusement in his eyes. “Eat the carrot.” His voice is low and commanding.

I make a humming sound in the back of my throat. “Is that your assertive captain voice?”

“My what?” he asks, his brows drawing together.

“Ya know, the one you use to get the guys to do what you want?”

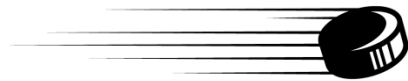
“Is that what I have to do to get you to eat a vegetable? Use my captain’s voice?”

I shrug. “Maybe. It’s kind of doing it for me.” My eyes widen as soon as the words are out of my mouth, and to stop myself from saying anything else completely humiliating, I lean forward and take a bite of the carrot, my lips brushing against his fingertips. Which I most certainly did not mean to do.

Archer watches me, his eyes seeming darker than a moment ago. All amusement has left his face, and an electric charge zips between us. The noise from the rest of the house has faded away. Archer’s gaze flicks to my lips, and I suck in a sharp breath that I know he notices. Neither of us speaks as he leans closer, his fingers grazing my arm. Just a gentle brush, but I feel it shoot throughout my entire body.

“All right, everyone! Dinner is ready!” Tabitha shouts from the dining room.

Archer jumps away from me and is out of the kitchen so fast I don’t even have time to blink, and I’m left confused and alone.



Dinner is torture. Archer has barely spared me a glance the entire meal.

Of course, I had to sit right beside him. Every time my arm or leg accidentally brushes against him, he tenses. Is he completely unaware of how hard it is for me to sit there having to smell his cedar and spice body wash, or to hear the rumble of his deep voice as he talks and laughs with his family all while he ignores me?

Roger, Archer’s dad, glances at me. “Ronnie, so tell us more about yourself, your childhood.”

“Oh. Um. I’m not sure there’s really much to say.”

“Did you always like hockey?” Kiera asks.

Smiling, I nod. “Yeah. It was kind of hard not to with Dad being a scout.”

Roger nods in understanding, while Tabitha asks, “What about your mom? What did she do?”

Archer tenses beside me. “Mom, why don’t we lay off the third degree here?”

Glancing down at my plate, I draw in a deep breath. “Actually, it was just me and my dad.”

“Oh,” Tabitha replies quietly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize she’d passed.”

Archer groans beside me. “Mom,” he grinds out in warning.

My heart warms at his protectiveness, even if he’s been ignoring me up until now. “It’s okay, Archer,” I whisper, then say louder, “My mom is still alive. She ... uh ... well, she left us when I was small.”

Tabitha immediately reaches across the table to place her hand on mine. “That must be hard.” Giving my hand a squeeze, she says, “Just consider us your family. You’re welcome here anytime.”

Archer chokes on the bite of food he has in his mouth, and Kiera shoots him a quizzical look. “You okay there, baby brother?”

Glaring at her, he takes a few gulps of his water before nodding. “Just fine.”

“I miss Denny,” Indy declares loudly, and I’m relieved at the change in topic. “Can we go home soon to see Denny, Daddy?”

“Who’s Denny?” Tabitha asks Indy.

Indy smiles widely, pushing her glasses up her cute little nose. “Denny’s my puppy!”

Kiera’s fork falls on her plate, her mouth dropping open as she stares at Archer. “You got a dog?”

Scrubbing a hand down his face, Archer sighs heavily. “It’s not *my* dog.” I can feel him shooting daggers at me, but I refuse to meet his gaze.

“He is too,” Indy argues. “He sleeps on top of Daddy every night.”

That has my head snapping to him, and I watch as red creeps up Archer’s neck. “See, Princess, I told you he loved you.” As soon as Archer turns his glare on me, I regret using the nickname.

Kiera’s husband, Tate, snorts out a laugh. “Princess? There has to be a story behind that.”

Wincing, I flick my eyes to Archer. “Sorry,” I whisper.

Sighing, he waves his hand dismissively. “Might as well tell them. They’ll never leave you alone until you do.” Chuckles sound from around the table, and after making sure that Archer really is okay with me telling, I go into an animated reenactment of the night I found him dressed up as a princess.

Everyone is rolling by the time I’m done, and when I chance a peek at Archer, even he has a smile on his face.

“Okay, but why did you get a dog, Archer?” Kiera asks. “You hate having dogs in the house.”

“Denny’s my dog, but Archer’s letting him stay there until ...” I trail off.

Archer props his elbows up on the table, resting his chin on his palm as he stares me down. “Yeah, Ronnie. Until when? Are you moving to a pet-friendly apartment?”

Taking a bite to delay my response, I don’t meet his eyes. “Uh. I’m sure I’ll figure it out. But just think, if he leaves, Indy’s going to be so disappointed and you’re going to get really cold at night.” The look he gives me is not amused, but I flash him a saucy grin and return to eating.

I can feel his mom and sisters watching us, but they don’t say anything more. The rest of the meal is less eventful, though Archer returns to ignoring me.

He continues to avoid me the rest of the night, and anytime our gazes lock from across the room, he quickly averts his eyes. Tears burn my throat, but I can’t allow myself to fall apart while I’m surrounded by his family. His coldness

shouldn't even bother me. I'm just the nanny. Just a friend. Nothing more.

But I can't stop trying to catch his gaze, hoping he'll seek me out and open up to me about what is going on. I know I'm not the only one that felt ... something back in the kitchen. It can't be just me. Can it?

When it's time for bed, Tabitha leads me to an upstairs bedroom at the end of the hall. "This was Archer's room when he lived here," she says as she flips on the light. "I didn't have the heart to change it after he moved out. He and Indy usually stay in here when they visit."

Smiling, I walk around the room, taking note of the hockey posters covering the walls. "You're sure he doesn't mind me taking his room?"

She waves her hand. "Oh, no. He and Indy are much more comfortable in the other guest room. We just put a queen size bed in there."

I nod, my fingers brushing against the desk as I picture a young Archer sitting there to study. A picture on the desk grabs my attention, and it feels like a bucket of cold water has been dumped on me.

Archer and June's smiling faces look back at me. They're dressed for prom, standing outside this house. June is flashing a dazzling smile to the camera, but Archer isn't looking at the camera. He's smiling down at June with such adoration that my throat constricts as I try to push away the ridiculous jealous feelings swirling around inside me.

"They were so happy." Tabitha sighs, picking up the picture. "It's hard to believe it's been two years."

"I know," I whisper. "I wasn't super close to June, but we always had fun when we were together. She and Archer were really happy."

"I pray he finds that kind of happiness again," Tabitha says, setting the picture back down.

My heart twists, and I ask the question that's burning at the back of my mind. "You think he'll ever get remarried? He and

June seemed like they were ... soulmates.” I drag my gaze away from the picture, guilt clinging to me, thick and heavy.

Tabitha makes a humming noise. “They loved each other, that’s true, but it doesn’t mean Archer can’t love again. Or that June wouldn’t want him to. Love is worth it.”

Turning around, I give Tabitha a smile that feels a bit shaky. “That’s what Archer said.”

One gray eyebrow lifts. “Archer said love was worth it?”

Twisting my fingers together, I meet her eyes that are so full of warmth I can’t help but open up to her. “I have a bit of an aversion to long-term relationships and marriage.”

There’s a flash of disappointment in her eyes before she quickly covers it, her face growing soft and thoughtful. “Because of your mom?”

Lifting a shoulder, I say quietly, “Somewhat. It’s not that I’m against the idea of love in general. It’s just not something I’ve ever wanted for myself.” The words don’t have the same ring of truth to them as they used to and I know it’s because of Archer. I swallow and stuff the longings back down where they belong.

“Hmm ... well, I wouldn’t give up, dear. You never know when love will find you.” She gives me a conspiratorial wink, says goodnight, and exits the room.

Sighing, I change into my pajamas, brush my teeth, and slip under the covers. But as soon as I get the first whiff of the cedar and spice still clinging to the pillow and sheets, I know it’s going to be a sleepless night. How do they still smell like him? Though I’m not exactly complaining. I snuggle deeper into the bed, my mind replaying the heated moment in the kitchen when I was sure Archer was thinking about kissing me, and Tabitha’s words about Archer finding love again.

Will he ever want another relationship? And if so ... would he want one with me? Because the more time I spend with him and Indy, the more I find myself wanting things I’ve never dreamed of before. And it terrifies me.

Twenty

Veronica

A rcher avoided me for the rest of the trip, only talking to me when it directly involved Indy. I tried not to let it sting, but going from opening up to one another to having him barely glance in my direction hurt and made me realize how much I'd grown to enjoy our conversations.

Since I was off yesterday, I spent the day researching for my app and putting together a presentation. Rafe has given me a few contacts, so as soon as my presentation is complete, I'll start reaching out to see who might be interested in the idea. After what Buck did, I'm keeping this idea under lock and key. I haven't even told Chantelle what it's about. Not that I don't trust her, but it's the most personal thing I've ever worked on and I'm a little terrified of failing.

It didn't help that Buck kept calling and texting me yesterday. I haven't spoken to him since leaving SmartTru, so I decided to listen to the first voicemail to find out what he wanted. He tried—and failed—to sound apologetic and begged for me to call him back. After that, I didn't listen to any other messages or read the texts he sent, assuming they were more of the same. I hoped he'd eventually get the point.

Newsflash. He did not.

He was texting me again this morning before I'd even gotten out of bed or had my coffee. You'd think after being together for months, he'd know that was as good as poking a mama bear. The man has already put me through enough grief and I really never want to hear from him again. So naturally, I sent him a singing telegram to deliver a cheesy love song from his secret admirer, along with the explicit instructions that when they were finished, to hand Buck his monthly subscription of hemorrhoid cream. I wish I could have seen his face. I kind of feel sorry for whoever had to be the one delivering the message, but I made sure to tip them extra.

Chantelle laughed until she cried when I called her while driving to Archer's. When I pull into Archer's driveway, I pray that he's stopped this avoidance nonsense. There's obviously some underlying attraction between us, which is probably the reason he's avoiding me, but I wish he would just talk to me about it. I understand if he's not ready. I'm not sure I am either, but we should at least talk.

Straightening my shoulders, I walk up the sidewalk, careful to avoid any icy patches. I pull my coat tighter around me to ward off the bitter cold. Archer may not want to talk, but I'm determined to make him.

That's the plan, anyway, but the man practically runs out the door the second I step in, claiming he's going to be late for practice. I sigh, my heart dropping as I watch him pull out of the driveway. Guess we'll have to talk when he gets home.

"Come play with me, Ronnie." Indy tugs on the bottom of my shirt. Smiling, I run my hand down her hair, my throat tightening. I adore this little girl, and I'm terrified of what will happen if Archer keeps pushing me away. I'm not sure who it will hurt worse—Indy or me.

After a couple hours of tea time, art—where Indy decided to paint her entire face while I stepped away to the bathroom—and a dance party that had me begging to tap out, I'm letting Indy watch one of her favorite cartoons while I prepare lunch. My phone rings, and I tense when I see Dad's name. He's still asking me to go see Mom, and I'm still sidestepping giving him a firm answer. I snort. Guess Archer isn't the only one

who's great at avoiding something he doesn't want to deal with.

"Hey, Dad," I say as I answer, trying to add some chipperness to my voice that I am definitely not feeling.

"How's my favorite girl?"

That does bring a smile to my face. "I'm okay. How are you?"

"Good. Good." There's a strange tone in his voice that sets me on edge. "I'm visiting your mom today." My head falls back as I stare at the ceiling. I must make some sort of noise of acknowledgment because he goes on. "I'm not with her at the moment, but if you think it would be easier to talk to her on the phone, I could call you back and let you two talk."

"Dad," I grind out. Clenching my hand into a fist, I force myself to take a deep breath. "I'm working right now."

"Oh, right." Tears burn the backs of my eyes at the disappointment in his voice. I hate that I feel responsible for it, even if she's the one who left and he's the one who lied. "Well, I'll be here for a while. You could call when—"

"No. You promised you'd give me space. And time," I remind him.

He's silent for a moment. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"It's okay." It's not. But at least it sounds like he's going to drop it.

"Well, I'll be home in a couple days. I love you."

"Love you too, Dad."

I've no sooner hung up than Buck's name appears on the screen. Anger bubbles inside me as I swipe to answer. "What do you want?"

"What was with that prank of yours?" he snaps.

I roll my eyes. "I'm sure I have no idea what you're talking about."

He sighs, then softens his tone. “Ronnie, we need to talk. Can I come over?”

“No, you can’t come over! I don’t want to ever see you again. Stop calling—” My phone is jerked from my hands and I swivel to find Archer standing beside me.

“Can I help you?” he asks. I can’t hear Buck’s response, but Archer’s expression grows harder the longer he listens. “Listen, I don’t really care who you are, if you ever call this number again, I’ll file for a restraining order.” Buck’s response is still too muffled to hear. Archer’s jaw tightens. “That’s none of your business. This conversation is done.”

He ends the call and hands the phone back to me. My hands are shaking as I slide my phone back into my pocket. “Thanks,” I whisper.

Archer’s hands grasp my shoulders gently. “Are you okay? What did he say?”

A tear slips down my cheek, and the next thing I know, Archer is cupping my face and wiping my tears. It only makes them fall harder. He pulls me to him and I let it all out. Everything with my mom. Everything with Buck and losing my job. I’m just so tired of it all.

Finally, I pull back and wipe my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

He’s watching me thoughtfully. “Don’t be sorry. You’re allowed to be upset.”

Sniffing, I let out a strangled laugh. “I’m not even that upset about Buck. I mean, sure, he’s been calling and texting me for two days, but I’ve just ignored him.”

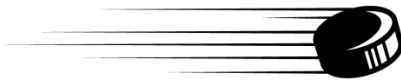
“Then what’s really bothering you?”

I let out an exasperated sigh. “Dad called. He’s visiting *her*. And wanted to know if I would talk to her over the phone.”

Archer winces. “I’m sorry, Ronnie. He shouldn’t have put you in that position.”

Biting the inside of my cheek, I glance down. “I’m just so angry, and it’s like he doesn’t even care.”

Archer's silent for so long, I start to squirm. Then he says softly, "I know just what you need."



After my little outburst in front of Archer, he surprised me by calling Kiera, who was in town visiting her in-laws, and asked her to come watch Indy so he could take me somewhere. As soon as Kiera showed up, Archer followed me to my apartment so I could drop my Jeep off, then told me to hop in his truck.

I try to tamp down the excitement bubbling up at being alone with him without his adorable daughter as a buffer, but it isn't working.

Instead, I'm suffering through a fifteen-minute drive with the cedar and spice scent of his cologne filling the space between us. I keep my hands to myself, trying not to let my nervousness show as I babble incoherently about anything that pops into my head.

"Oh, look at that shoe on the side of the road. That's sad. I wonder if it misses its mate." I snap my mouth shut, instantly regretting my poor choice of words.

To my utter relief, Archer chuckles, the deep, warm sound vibrating through my entire body. "Its mate?"

"Yup." I nod enthusiastically. "Aye, aye, matey." I cringe. "Or ... um ... something like that," I mumble.

"Has anyone told you that you're a bit odd?" he teases, a smile in his voice.

"At least once a day. But no one has today, so congratulations on being the first." I glance around, trying to figure out where we are. "So, where exactly are you taking me?"

"It's a surprise."

"You kidnapped me. The least you could do is tell me where we're going."

His eyes flick to me, his lips tugging up at the corners. “The way I remember it, you came willingly.”

“Only because you used your authoritative captain voice. I was afraid of what might happen if I didn’t. But now ...” I trail off as his lips lift higher, turning into a full-blown smile. It almost undoes me. Archer doesn’t often offer such a wide grin. Not unless Indy is around, and then he hands those devastating smiles out like they’re candy. They are definitely eye candy. And I want them all.

“Now?” he presses.

“Well, now I’m not so sure. How do I know you aren’t really a serial killer? Maybe you’re like Dexter. Normal job by day, psychotic murderer by night,” I say dramatically.

“Wow. You’re talking some major smack about your ex-boyfriend *and* my friend.”

“Wrong Dexter,” I quip back.

“You dated two Dexters? Sounds like you have a type, Ronnie.”

Rolling my eyes, I can’t stop the smile pulling at my lips. “The TV show, Princess. Keep up.”

“Oh ...” he says overdramatically. “That Dexter. Yeah, sorry. I’m not a psychopathic killer. Too messy.”

I snort. “Of course. But you still didn’t answer my question. Where are you taking me?”

He shoots me another grin, and I’m glad I’m sitting or my knees would have definitely given out. “To get messy.” And then ... the man winks at me before turning back to the road and I am DONE FOR. Done. Stick a fork in me D.O.N.E.

My heart still hasn’t slowed by the time we pull into the parking lot of a building that is so run down, I wonder if it’s even open. And if it is, it has to be violating at least a dozen health codes.

“I’m starting to question your assurance that you aren’t a serial killer. What is this place?”

Archer laughs. “It’s the Dragon’s Lair. A rage room.”

I lift an eyebrow. “Rage room? And why are we here?”

Shrugging, he replies, “You seem like you have some rage to get out.”

“That’s an understatement,” I mutter.

He jumps out and jogs around to open my door. I’m thoroughly confused by this point because he’s doing so many things that a boyfriend would—or at least, should—be doing. Smiling. Laughing at my jokes. Opening doors for me. Winking at me.

“Some of the guys will be here in a bit. I think Chantelle is coming with them.”

I stop in my tracks. “Chantelle? She comes to the rage room?”

“I don’t think she’s been yet. She’s coming today because she knows you’ll be here.”

I eye him warily. “You were that confident I’d come?”

Lifting a shoulder, he replies, “Yeah. I guess so.”

“How did you even plan all of this so fast?”

“I just sent Aiden a text. Told him you needed to get out and to see if anyone else was free to join us.”

Warmth floods me. “Thank you, Archer.”

His lips tug up as he sticks his hands in his pockets. “You’re welcome.”

We walk in, and after a brief rundown of the rules, are handed helmets and protective goggles.

“The rest of the tools are inside. Shut the door behind you so you don’t disrupt the other rooms. Oh, and the cameras are broken in that one, so if you get injured, you’re going to have to come out or yell,” the kid who looks to be eighteen or nineteen says in a monotone voice. He looks less than thrilled to be here.

Archer presses a hand to my lower back, guiding me into the room. I want to sink into his touch but refrain. He's just being a gentleman. That's all it is. And my newfound feelings are just trying to pick up on something that's not there.

We walk inside the room, the door shutting with a loud thud behind us. I glance around. Shattered glass and TVs are littered across the floor and table, but it's the computers with their hard drives and motherboards broken into pieces that make me gasp. "This seems so wrong."

Archer chuckles, cups my elbow, and guides me away from the glass and toward a table with a variety of weapons. Baseball bats, mallets, golf clubs, and crowbars are laying there, waiting for me to choose one of them.

"All right, Ronnie. What's your weapon of choice?"

My gaze drifts across the table and lands back on Archer. "Are you sure this is a healthy way to get your anger out?"

His lips lift into a dangerously sexy smile and my knees wobble. "No. Not at all," he says easily, picking up the mallet. "But it sure as heck is a lot of fun."

After choosing the golf club, I take a swing at the flat-screen TV, and whether or not it's actually healthy, Archer is right. It's fun. Instead of screaming or crying, I find myself laughing as we take turns smashing item after item. Maybe it's the feeling that comes from bashing things, or maybe it's the carefree smile that Archer keeps throwing my way, but I am on cloud nine. Which is probably why I don't see the computer tower on the floor in front of me.

I'm walking one second and tripping the next, trying to prepare myself for landing on the pile of glass directly in front of me.

But my fall is stopped by a large arm wrapping around my waist, tugging me safely up until my back is flush with a solid, warm chest.

My pulse is racing, but I'm not sure if it's from my almost fall or because Archer still has his arm wrapped around me.

Swallowing, I turn around, expecting him to drop his arm. He doesn't, and now we're standing chest to chest. I drag my gaze slowly up over his collarbones, his strong bearded jaw, full lips, straight nose, and finally up to his eyes. They darken as they flick across my face and down to my lips.

My breath hitches as the arm still tucked around my waist tightens. His other hand comes up, gripping the back of my neck as he lowers his head, stopping before our lips meet.

"Ronnie, I ..." He trails off, his warm breath brushing across my mouth, sending a shudder through my entire body. I sense he's about to pull away, and even though part of me is terrified of crossing this line, a bigger part cannot let this moment pass without knowing how he tastes. How our mouths will fit together.

My hands come up, clutching his shirt, and I push up onto my toes, pressing my lips to his. Archer groans into my mouth, his grip on the back of my neck tightening as he takes control, angling my head so he can deepen the kiss. My hands move from his chest to his shoulders, and then around his neck as I pull him closer.

The stupid goggles are getting in my way, so I rip them off, which slings my glasses across the floor, but who cares about that when I'm experiencing the best kiss of my life with Archer Sullivan?

Archer pulls his own goggles off, tossing them to the side and drawing me to him again. His beard scratches against my cheeks as he pulls his mouth away from mine to trail kisses down my neck before capturing my lips once more.

I'm so lost in him that I don't hear the noise coming from outside the door. There's a thud and the door begins to open. Archer and I jump apart like two teenagers caught making out. Well, we were definitely making out.

My face flames as I turn around and grab a mallet, bringing it down on top of a computer screen just as Chantelle and the guys enter, laughing loudly.

I can't bring myself to look up. I know my hair is a mess, my face is red, and I probably look like a woman who was just thoroughly kissed. My eyes slide over to Archer, who looks ... completely unfazed. His face is void of expression as he listens to whatever Bridger is telling him. My heart sinks, uncertainty twisting my stomach. Did I just make a complete fool of myself?

Archer's gaze flicks to mine so briefly that I can't read it before he jerks it back to the guys. The muscle in his jaw twitches, and I can't help but hope that it's because he was as affected as I was by that amazing kiss.

"Hey," Chantelle says quietly. "Are you okay?"

I smile, trying to hide all the emotions tumbling around inside me. "Peachy keen, Ernestine."

Chantelle's brow furrows and she narrows her eyes. "You're hiding something."

"Wh-what? No, I'm not." I scoff and turn away.

"You're always extra weird when you're nervous, Ronnie. Don't worry. I'll get it out of you." She pauses and leans in closer. "Or maybe I should ask Archer?"

"No," I whisper-yell, turning to face her.

Chantelle crosses her arms, giving me a knowing look. "Where are your glasses? And where are your goggles?" Her gaze swivels to Archer, who has put his goggles back on. Why didn't I think of that? Oh yeah, because my mind was still in a kiss-induced coma.

Leaning toward me, Chantelle says, "We're going to talk about this."



I managed to thwart Chantelle's threat by hitching a ride with Aiden. It wasn't my first choice, but when we were all done at the rage room, Archer glanced at his watch and said, "Oh,

sorry guys, I gotta cut out. Can someone give Ronnie a ride? Okay. Great.” He practically ran to his truck.

Aiden and Bridger eyed one another and turned to me. “Everything okay?” Aiden asked, crossing his arms.

“Yup.” I glanced around, not meeting their eyes, thankful Chantelle was still having a conversation with Evan and Greer. “Can one of you take me home? I don’t want to disturb Chantelle.”

Bridger arched a brow, but Aiden simply nodded.

And that’s how I found myself riding home with Aiden.

He’s quiet for most of the drive, but I can practically hear his thoughts bouncing around inside his beat-up Mustang. Aiden is perceptive, so I try to act normal. Of course, this means I’m acting totally not normal.

“Did you know owls don’t have eyeballs? They’re actually elongated tubes. So they’re eye tubes, but they’re the only animal that can see the color blue, so I guess that’s pretty cool. And they can’t even move their eyes, which is why they move their heads all creepily.” I move my head back and forth as owl-like as possible. “Oh, and did you know that reindeer’s eyeballs turn blue in winter? It’s pretty crazy. It helps them see at lower light levels.” I’m not sure how I got on an eye fact rant, but I’m going with it. “For how trusting they seem, dolphins must make a lot of enemies because they sleep with one eye open. An ostrich eye is bigger than its brain. And—”

“Did you and Archer kiss?”

I laugh, but it comes out a little maniacal. “What? Kiss? Archer? Me? Kiss? That’s—”

“Exactly what happened.”

My shoulders fall and I pinch the bridge of my nose. “It’s... well, I don’t know what it is yet. But please don’t say anything, Aiden. Not to the guys and not to Archer.”

He’s quiet for a moment, then says softly, “Just be patient with him, mo chara.”

“And you won’t say anything?”

“Your secret is safe with me.” He pauses, adding, “Unless Sullivan does something stupid.”

I roll my eyes at him, but my gut swirls with unease. I know Archer. He wouldn't hurt me intentionally, but I'm also worried. What if he isn't ready to move on? June's face flashes in my mind, causing a tangle of emotions to ripple through me as I press a hand to my stomach.

Oh my goodness. I kissed June's husband.

I wasn't super close to her, but I don't believe June would want Archer and Indy to not move on. June was kind, and she loved her family fiercely. She wouldn't want Archer to close himself off to the possibility of love.

Woah. Not that I'm in love with Archer. I shove those thoughts deep down, locking them away. I don't even know how Archer feels about our kiss. I cannot be going around thinking I'm in love with the man. I do love Indy, but who wouldn't with her cute dimples, sweet smile, and obsession with all things tea parties and princesses?

Sighing, I lean my forehead against the window. I'm thankful Aiden hasn't said anything else as he pulls up to my apartment.

Now I just have to figure out how I'm going to face Archer again.

And find out how he's feeling about our kiss. Which, for the record, was most definitely the best kiss of my entire life. I'm ninety-nine percent certain that Archer Sullivan just ruined me for all other men.

Twenty-One

Veronica

Archer's given me his answer loud and clear. Well, not loud, since he's been practically radio silent since he ran out on me at the Lair. When I texted him yesterday to find out about watching Indy, he said Kiera was spending some extra time with her so he didn't need me to come over.

I'm disappointed and not just because it means I've been left freaking out over what that kiss meant. I miss Indy. It's been three days, and it's killing me. Her presence in my life has left its mark, and if Archer is pulling away from me, then I'm afraid I'll lose her as well.

The Dragons have a game tonight, but if it weren't for Chantelle begging me, I wouldn't go. I'm not sure I can handle him avoiding me in person. Or seeing Indy, knowing I won't get to remain a part of her life.

Tears sting the backs of my eyes and I blink rapidly to keep them at bay as I flip through my jerseys. I want to wear Archer's, but I'm not sure what he'll think.

If he even sees you.

My chest tightens as I pull out his jersey. If he's not ready to move on, I can't force it on him. I would never want to. But

I'm going to make darn certain he knows what I want.

To be his.

And if he doesn't want that, then he's going to have to open his mouth and tell me instead of ignoring me for days on end.

When I step into the lounge, Kiera and Indy are already there. Indy sees me first, wriggling out of her aunt's arms and flinging herself at me.

"Ronnie!"

I lift her up, pressing a kiss to her cheek and soaking in her vanilla scent. "Hey, sweetheart. I missed you," I say over the lump in my throat.

Indy pulls back to look at me, a frown on her face. "Where have you been? You missed our tea party."

"I know. I'm sorry. But you had your Aunt Keira there, right?"

"But I wanted you, too."

Warmth fills me, and I squeeze her tighter. "Well, maybe I can come over soon and we'll have the biggest tea party ever."

"Yay," Indy squeals.

I smile at Keira as I sit beside her. She returns the smile but is giving me a strange look that I can't decipher.

"Hey." Her eyes flick to Indy, then she mouths to me, "Is everything okay?"

I want to play it off, but I'm so tired of pretending. Lifting a shoulder, I sigh. "I'm not sure."

She makes a noncommittal noise just as Chantelle, Greer, and Freya enter the lounge, chatting away and laughing. Indy hops out of my lap and makes a beeline to the women, having them laughing in no time.

Kiera nudges me with her shoulder. "Want to talk about it?"

I bite my lip, averting my eyes. "I'm not sure I should."

"Because it involves my brother?"

Heat creeps up my face as I nod.

“You care for him.”

Tears prick my eyes as I glance around to make sure no one is paying attention. Meeting her eyes, I answer honestly, “I do, but it’s complicated.”

“Why?”

My eyebrow arches as I give her a disbelieving look. “Um ... because I don’t know that he’s ready. And even if he were, I’m competing with his soul mate. His high school sweetheart. His one and only.” I repeat the phrases I’ve heard Archer say when he describes June, the pressure behind my eyes building. “June was wonderful and so different from me. And I’m just not sure I can win against the ghost of her memory.”

Kiera tilts her head thoughtfully. “Who says it’s a competition?”

“I don’t want it to be, but Archer has made it clear he doesn’t think a love like that comes around more than once in a lifetime.” Pain pierces my heart at the reminder. I’ve been such an idiot, letting myself fall for him. To think that maybe, with Archer, I could overcome my misgivings of love and marriage.

Kiera scoffs. “My brother has a very short memory.” Leaning closer, she whispers, “Did you know that I also married my high school sweetheart?”

“You and Tate have been together since high school?”

She smiles softly. “Not Tate. My first husband, Rick.”

My eyes widen slightly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realize you’d been married before.”

“Nothing to apologize for.” She waves a hand. “It’s been a long time since Rick passed away.”

“Oh,” I reply, unsure what else to add.

“We got married right after graduation, and he joined the military. We had one year together before he was killed

overseas. I'd just found out I was pregnant with my oldest when I received the news."

"Oh, Kiera. That must have been awful."

She nods. "It was. And I was a lot like Archer, swearing I'd never fall in love again. You know, Archer was barely ten years old then, so he probably doesn't remember everything I went through."

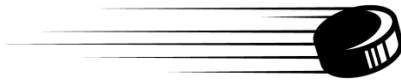
"What changed your mind?"

"Tate." Her smile widens, her eyes softening. "Tate was patient with me. And showed his support and love for me and my baby in everything he did."

Cheers sound around us as the Dragons enter the rink. My eyes zone in on Archer, and even though he isn't even looking in this direction, my pulse quickens.

"If you truly care about him, be patient with him." Kiera places her hand on mine and squeezes.

I turn my attention to the game, praying that Kiera is right.



I'm scrambling around my dad's kitchen, attempting to get all the plates, glasses, and utensils laid out for everyone. Why did Dad not tell me he was inviting the entire team over after the game? I would have come before the game to get everything ready. Not like I had anything else to do anyway.

Chantelle works quietly beside me, arranging everything to look much nicer than I had it. I kind of just threw everything onto the counter and hoped for the best.

The noise from the other room has grown louder with each new person that arrives. The last time I looked, everyone was here.

Except for Archer.

Disappointment clings to me, no matter how hard I try to shake it. I know Kiera would have watched Indy. She told me

so halfway through the game when Chantelle announced my dad's plans—and how did she know but I didn't?

The doorbell rings, and a nervous butterfly erupts in my stomach. Maybe Archer did show up after all.

"I'll get it," I tell Chantelle, rushing out of the kitchen before anyone else can beat me to the door. Smoothing my hand over my hair, I smile and swing the door open ... and the butterfly is crushed to death.

Scowling, I cross my arms. "What do you want, Buck?"

He throws me the smile that used to make me melt. Now it only makes me want to hurl into the bushes. "Hey, babe." His gaze flicks behind me. "Can we talk? Alone?"

"If you promise to never call me babe again," I say in frustration, grabbing my coat off the coat rack and stepping outside, shutting the door behind me. Do I want to talk to Buck? No. But if hearing him out means he'll stop pestering me all hours of the day, then I'll suffer through it this one time. "How did you even know I was here?"

"You weren't at your apartment, so I took a chance."

I plant my hands on my hips. "And what would you have done if my dad was the one who answered the door?"

Red creeps up his neck and he tugs at his collar. "Your dad and I always got along—"

"For my sake, Buck. Dad never could stand you."

"Well, regardless. I would have told him I was here to apologize. Which I am."

I cross my arms and narrow my eyes. "So you told everyone that you stole my idea, and gave me full credit?"

"Come on, Ronnie. You know that was a misunderstanding. We were brainstorming together. That app was my idea."

Scoffing, I reply, "Just get on with it. What do you really want?"

"I miss you. I want us to get back together."

Anger surges through me. “You have got to be kidding me. You stole my idea, Buck! You don’t care about me.”

He steps closer, brushing his fingers along my arm. I shudder, thankful for the protective barrier of my coat, and jerk my arm away.

“Don’t say that, babe. You know I love you. We’re a great team.”

I press a hand to my stomach. If he doesn’t stop saying *babe* and the word *love*, I really am going to vomit. Preferably on his three-hundred-dollar shoes. “No, Buck. You don’t love me. You only love yourself.” Something clicks in my head. “You’re having problems with the app. Aren’t you?”

He runs a hand through his hair. “No, the app’s fine.”

“But?”

“They want more ideas.”

I snicker. “Since you’re so great at stealing—I mean, coming up with your own—ideas, then I’m sure you’ll be fine.” I give him a patronizing smile and turn to leave, but he grasps my wrist.

“Ronnie, I don’t think you’re listening.” His grip tightens, his eyes flashing with desperation. “I need your help.” He brings his other hand up and cups my face, and the nausea in my stomach increases. “And I really do want you back.”

I twist my arm, trying to escape his hold. I don’t believe he’d hurt me, but I also know people do crazy things when they’re desperate. Just when I’m about to scream for the guys, Buck is jerked away from me.

“You need to leave,” a low voice says, and relief washes over me.

Archer.

Buck straightens. “I was just talking to my girlfriend.”

Archer glances over his shoulder at me. “Is he your boyfriend, Ronnie?”

I shake my head, rubbing my wrist.

“And do you want him here?”

“No.”

Archer turns to Buck. “The lady has spoken. Now leave.”

Anger flashes in Buck’s eyes as he shouts at Archer. “You have no right. Who do you think you are? You can’t tell me I can’t talk to my girlfriend!”

The door swings open behind me, and the entire team pours out of Dad’s house and takes a protective stance behind me. Archer turns, stepping beside me. When he glances down at me, I can’t read his expression, but it gives me a weird sense of hope.

Dad comes to stand on my other side and rests his hand on my back. “Get off my property, Buck.”

Buck’s jaw has gone slack as his gaze roams across all the hockey players behind me.

“We don’t take lightly to someone messing with one of us,” Archer says. “So you can leave quietly and never contact her again or ...” he pauses for effect, glancing behind his shoulder at his teammates. Shrugging, he continues, “You can take your chance with us.”

Turner chuckles, clapping Archer on the shoulder. “I wouldn’t want to mess with this guy. An archer and a buck?” Turner shakes his head, letting out a low whistle at his joke. “I’d put my money on the archer every time.”

For a moment, I think Buck is just dumb enough to try and pull something. But finally, he gives me one last look that borders on contempt and storms off while mumbling to himself.

“Are you okay, Veronica?” Dad asks, concern tinging his voice.

I nod. “I’m fine, Dad.”

Dad studies me a moment, then presses a kiss to my forehead. He follows the guys back inside. Chantelle wraps her arms around me. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s a good thing Bridger and Freya were holding me back because I was about to take that jerk out.”

I smile, gratefulness filling my veins. “He wouldn’t have stood a chance.”

“You got that right.” She glances over my shoulder, her lips lifting into a smile. “Go thank your hero.” Winking, she walks back into the house.

Turning slowly, I see Archer standing a few feet away, his face masked in the shadows.

“Thank you,” I say, stepping closer to him. His unreadable expression puts my nerves on high alert.

“Did he hurt you?” His voice is like gravel.

“No. I’m okay. He’s all bark. Like an annoying Chihuahua.”

Archer grunts as he grasps the wrist Buck held. His fingers are gentle as they graze against my skin, stopping over my pulse. “You said you’re fine, but your pulse is racing.”

“Not because of Buck,” I whisper. Archer’s gaze jerks to mine, his eyes roaming my face, landing on my lips. My heart speeds up as I inch closer, wanting to erase the distance between us—physically and emotionally. “Archer—”

Dropping my hand, he takes a step back and stuffs his hands in his pockets. “Kiera has plans for the next two days. Can you watch Indy day after tomorrow? We have another game.” His tone is cold. Distant. My hopes shatter and fall to the ground.

“Yeah. Of course.” I can’t keep my voice from wobbling. Archer gives a curt nod, then leaves me standing alone in the cold night air.

Twenty-Two

Archer

The locker room is buzzing with excitement as the guys rib one another and prepare for the game. I try to smile and get everyone pumped up, but each round of laughter only adds to the pressure building in my head.

Indy and Ronnie won't be at the game tonight because Indy had a small fever. It's probably just a cold, but I can't help but worry. And I hate not being there with her when she doesn't feel well.

Then there's all the tension between Ronnie and me. I've been on edge ever since Buck showed up at Art's. It took all my self-control not to punch him in the face when I saw him holding on to her while she struggled to get away.

Bridger walks up to me, pulling me from my thoughts. "Hey, have you heard from Cy? He should be here by now." His eyes dart to the door as if he's hoping Cyrus will walk through.

"I haven't," I reply, unease pooling in my stomach. "If he's not here in five minutes, I'll—" The door opens and Cyrus walks in. A relieved sigh huffs out of me until I notice the dark circles under his eyes and the way he's barely walking in a straight line.

Bridger groans beside me, taking a step toward Cyrus. I grip his shoulder and shake my head. "I've got it." Bridger's shoulders slump.

Cyrus is unpacking his gear as I stop beside him. "Not sure if you should go through the trouble," I say.

His eyes flick to me, guilt covering his features. "And why's that?"

Leaning forward, I reply quietly, "Cy, you're hungover. You can't get on the ice like that."

"Not your call, Cap. I'm fine."

"Look at me."

He faces me, crossing his arms. "You need me to win the game. You know that."

"That's not how this works. We're a team. If one of us isn't functioning, then that means everyone else has to pick up their slack."

Cyrus smirks. "Oh, you mean like when we played Montana and everyone had to pick up your slack?"

A muscle ticks in my jaw and I clench my hand into a fist. "Yes. You're right. I almost cost us that game. And we can't afford that again if we're going to make the championship." My gaze roams his face, searching for even a hint of regret. "How much did you have to drink last night? How late were you out?"

"That's none of your business."

I step into his space, my face mere inches from his. "It is when you're a liability to the team. You're a danger to yourself and everyone else on the ice."

Cyrus's eyes flash with anger as he puts his hands on my chest and shoves me backward. "Back off, Cap. I know what I'm doing."

"What's going on?" Coach says, making Cyrus freeze. For the first time since he walked in, I see true panic in his eyes.

“Nothing, Coach,” he says, turning away to continue unpacking his things.

Coach glances at me. “Archer?”

The locker room has gone quiet. The weight of responsibility settles heavily over me. What I say next is going to change everything for the team, but it’s up to me to make sure it’s for their good.

I turn and meet Coach’s eyes. “Cyrus is hungover.” Pulling in a deep breath, I continue. “I don’t think he should be on the ice, Coach.”

“I’m fine,” Cyrus seethes through his teeth.

Ignoring him, I keep my eyes focused on Coach as his gaze flicks between Cyrus and me. He rubs a hand down his face and sighs heavily, motioning toward the door. “Cyrus, let’s go talk.” Cyrus shoots me an accusatory glare as he follows Coach out the door.

When I turn around, Bridger is there, his expression emotionless except for the flicker of pain in his eyes. “I’m sorry, Bruiser.”

Bridger shakes his head sadly. “Not your fault, Cap. He’s brought this on himself.”

Everyone is silent when Cyrus storms back in, grabbing his stuff and leaving without saying a word to anyone.

Coach returns to give us a last minute pep talk. I pray it’s enough for the guys to put Cyrus out of their minds and focus on the game.

Guilt presses on me. I should have done more for Cyrus. Maybe if I hadn’t closed myself off for the past two years, I would have noticed his struggles early on and been able to do something to get through to him.

The guys pour all their emotions into the game. I think we’re all a bit surprised when we win, though none of us really feel like celebrating.

In the locker room, Aiden eyes me warily as I remove my gear. “You okay over there, Sullivan?” he asks.

“Why wouldn’t I be? We won.”

His eyebrow arches. “You were more aggressive than usual ... and I sense that it’s more than just Cyrus bothering you. Want to talk about it?”

My shoulders tense at his words, though I know he’s right. I want to blame it solely on the guilt I have over letting Cyrus down, but it’s not just that. There’s the guilt that I can’t be home with Indy right now when she’s sick and an even heavier guilt that I am still completely rattled by the kiss Ronnie and I shared at the Lair. I can’t get her out of my brain, and it’s driving me crazy ... and making me feel guilty every time I walk into my home and see pictures of June.

Of course, I don’t say any of this to Aiden.

“If I need a therapist, I’ll be sure to let you know.” The words come out more bitter and sarcastic than I intend, but there’s no way I’m talking to him about whatever the heck is going on with Ronnie and me.

Just her name floating through my mind conjures up the hurt look in her eyes when I refused to talk to her after the confrontation with Buck. When she showed up today to watch Indy, I avoided meeting her eyes, knowing that if I did, I’d have her backed up against the wall, kissing her until my lips were branded on her skin forever. And I can’t let that happen.

I hold back a sigh. At some point, we’re going to have to talk.

Coach sticks his head in, his expression sober as he glances at me and Aiden. “Gonna need you two to stick around.” He doesn’t have to say why. My shoulders tense as Aiden sends me a knowing look.

Clapping me on the back, he says, “We did everything we could.”

I wish I could believe him, but there’s still a sense of guilt hanging over me. I should have done more for him.

The rest of the team filters out, Bridger’s eyes darting between Aiden and me. I shake my head, and Bridger’s

shoulders sink. It's going to hit him the hardest since Cyrus is his best friend.

Aiden and I walk in heavy silence until we reach Coach's office. Aiden knocks.

"Come in."

We take a seat in front of his desk. Worry lines etch his face. "I'm sure you know what this is about."

Aiden and I nod in unison. Apparently neither of us want to speak the words out loud.

"The meeting's tomorrow before practice. He can tell everyone goodbye after." He lets out a deep breath. "With how angry he was, I'm not even sure he'll show up."

"He'll show, Coach. Cyrus ... " The words stick in my throat.

"He's one of us. Even if he's been an eejit," Aiden says, his voice full of emotion, causing his brogue to thicken.

Coach nods. "We'll talk about the details tomorrow. Frankly, I'm exhausted and don't want to deal with it right now. I'm sure the rest of the team already knows or will by the end of the night. So if they reach out, just tell them I'll talk to them at practice tomorrow."

After we leave Coach's office, Aiden and I are quiet, both apparently lost in our own thoughts as we walk toward the parking lot. Weight presses down on me as I think about how Cyrus's life has just been flipped on its head—even if it was his own fault—and the conversation I need to have with Ronnie when I get home. Ms. Wilma called me this morning. Her sister is finally recovering and she can start watching Indy again.

Now I have to tell Ronnie I don't need her help anymore.

My heart squeezes, something shouting and protesting inside of me that I do need her. But I can't. I can't give my heart away again. I can't go through the pain of losing someone else. It almost destroyed me with June.

Kiera drilled me about Ronnie yesterday. And though I tried to keep her from seeing the truth, she saw through me and called my bluff. I finally admitted that I might be slightly attracted to Ronnie, but nothing could ever happen between us. She'd given me a sad look and said, *"You know, Archer, you can let yourself love again. Look what I've built with Tate. Rick wouldn't have wanted me to be by myself, and June wouldn't want you to pass up this chance with Ronnie."*

A part of me that knows what she says is true, but the larger part is just ... terrified.

All I want to do is go home and cuddle my little girl until I fall asleep. I can forget that my wife is gone. I can forget that Cyrus's career is over and it's partially due to the fact that I haven't been there for him. I can forget the kiss I shared with Ronnie that made me feel more alive than I have since losing my wife.

Pulling into the driveway, I brace myself to face Ronnie. At least Indy will be there as my buffer.

When I open the door, the house is dark and quiet, setting off my panic. "Indy?" I call.

"Shh..." Ronnie appears in the kitchen entryway. "She's asleep."

I blink. "Oh. Did she fall asleep watching a movie?"

Ronnie smiles wide and adjusts her glasses. "No, in her bed."

"Her bed? She never falls asleep in her bed. Is she feeling worse? You should have called me."

"No, she's fine, Archer. Her temperature was back to normal at bedtime. I've been working with her on sleeping in her own room and falling asleep on her own. Tonight, she wanted to try all on her own ... well, Denny is in bed with her, but she did it." Ronnie clasps her hands together excitedly. "Isn't that great?"

My jaw tightens. "I never told you to do that." My voice is rough and low, my emotions barely held in.

Ronnie studies me for a moment, confusion wrinkling her forehead. “I know. But I thought it would be a nice surprise for you. And it’s good for her to know she can do hard things.”

“She doesn’t have to do hard things, Ronnie! That’s why she has me.”

Crossing her arms, Ronnie narrows her eyes. “Everyone has to do hard things at some point in their lives, Archer. And she’s fine. She didn’t even cry. She was excited to sleep in her bed. We read a couple stories, and I left some quiet music playing while she snuggled Denny.” She shrugs. “I’m not sure what’s wrong with that.”

“Did it ever cross your mind that maybe I like her still wanting to sleep with me?”

Ronnie’s eyes roam my face, her expression softening. “I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

Throwing my hands in the air, I cut her off. “Of course you didn’t. It’s just like when you showed up with that mangy dog. You never think!” I immediately regret my words, but also realize this is probably for the best. Ronnie and I can’t be together.

I’m surprised when she doesn’t burst into tears—not that I truly wanted her to—instead, anger flashes in her eyes as she steps forward, jamming her finger into my chest. “Just because you’re angry doesn’t mean you get to speak to me like that.” She moves closer, her finger still pressed into my chest. “And don’t think for a second that I don’t know that this is about a lot more than me getting Indy to sleep without you. If you would actually talk—”

And maybe because I’m doing exactly what she says or maybe because she looks incredible all fired up, her eyes flaming to match her hair, that I’m suddenly cupping her face with both my hands. Her words fall away as I press my forehead to hers, squeezing my eyes closed and breathing her in.

“Ronnie ...” I swallow, not knowing what else to say. She doesn’t move, both of us waiting on the other. The air crackles

between us until I can't bear it anymore, leaning down to capture her lips with mine.

She sighs into my mouth, and I grip her tighter, all the tension leaving my body. She's balled the front of my shirt into her hands, tugging me to her. Wrapping an arm around her waist, I walk her backward until she bumps into the kitchen counter. In one swift move, I lift her onto it, only breaking our kiss for a brief moment. She wraps her arms around my neck and her legs around my waist, pulling me closer. My hands move up her legs until I'm gripping her waist, all while she kisses me as if I'm her next breath. She runs her hands lightly through my beard, and heat flares through my body.

She's molded to me perfectly as our lips move together in a glorious rhythm that I don't ever want to end. Except...

I jerk away from her. What am I doing?

Her eyes are hooded as she blinks away the kiss-induced fog. "Archer?" My name comes out of her swollen lips in an anxious question.

Running a hand through my hair, I bite back a curse as I flick my eyes to her and then look away. "I'm sorry. Th-that shouldn't have happened."

"Why?" she asks, confusion tainting her voice.

I huff out an exasperated breath. "Why?"

She hops off the counter and comes to stand in front of me with her arms crossed. "Yes, why?"

With her standing this close, looking up at me with those blue-green eyes, all I want to do is take her in my arms and kiss her again. But that can't happen. "Because it didn't mean anything," I blurt out the first lie that comes to mind.

Hurt flashes in her eyes. "You really want me to believe that"—she waves her arms toward the counter where she sat while my lips explored hers—"didn't mean anything?"

"It's the truth." My face is set in stone. I can't let her think it was anything more than what I told her. "It's just been a long

time. That's all it was." The words taste bitter on my tongue, but I don't take them back.

She rears back as if I'd struck her. "You're lying." Her voice shakes, and I hate myself for letting things get so far that I've hurt her.

"I'm sorry, Ronnie. I never intended to hurt you." At least that much is true, though the way she's looking at me, I'm not sure she believes it. "But ... yeah. It's just been a long time. That's it. There's nothing here." I motion between us.

She gives a sarcastic laugh. "Okay. If that's what you want to go with."

"It's the truth," I bite out.

Biting her bottom lip, she glances at the floor. "You told me that it was worth it," she whispers.

I tilt my head. "That what was worth it?"

Her watery eyes meet mine, and I have to clench my hands into fists at my sides to keep from wrapping her in my arms. "Love," she says simply, then shakes her head. "But you obviously don't believe your own words."

My heart squeezes painfully, as I realize I already let this get out of hand. "This isn't love, Ronnie."

Her lips pinch together and she nods stiffly. "You're right. I'm sorry I read into it. I'll be sure to keep things professional from now on."

"Uh ... actually ..." I rub the back of my neck as I trail off. "Ms. Wilma's sister is out of the ICU and doing better. She's going to start watching Indy again."

Ronnie's face twists in anguish until a mask slides into place. "Okay. That's perfect actually. Just, tell Indy goodbye for me." She turns away, but not before I see a tear trailing down her cheek. "I'll have Dad come and take Denny off your hands."

"Ron—"

Her shoulders stiffen, but she doesn't turn around. "No. Don't, Archer." And without another word, she grabs her bag and walks out.

"I did the right thing," I mumble to myself. But as I peek in at Indy sleeping peacefully, Denny curled up beside her, my heart doesn't believe me.

Twenty-Three

Veronica

An all-consuming numbness envelops me, burrowing deep into my very bones. My mind is a blank void, just going through the motions as I wipe the single tear away and pull out of Archer's driveway.

That's the last thing I remember until I'm standing in front of a familiar door. A shiver works its way through me, the first feeling I've had since leaving Archer's.

Lifting my hand, I knock, even though I have a key. My mind is too muddled to dig in my bag for it. When the door opens and I'm greeted by Dad's concerned expression, the dam bursts and I throw myself into his arms as tears stream down my face.

"Ron, what's wrong?" he asks, rubbing my back.

I can't answer as I try to suck in deep breaths between the sobs wracking my body.

"Come on, sweetheart," Dad whispers, pulling me inside and shutting the door behind us. He leads me to the couch, covers me with a blanket, and presses a kiss to my forehead. "Do you want some tea and chocolate?"

Sniffing, I nod, still unable to get the words past my tight throat. When he walks out of the room, I curl up on the couch, tugging the blanket tighter around me as the tears continue to fall.

I'm not sure if Dad knows I'm here because of Archer, though he's helped comfort me through many breakups. But this feels different. Archer didn't just break my heart. He ripped it right out of my chest, threw it to the ground, and watched it shatter into a million pieces. I'm not sure I'll ever recover.

Dad returns, placing a mug on the coffee table and a bowl of various chocolates beside it. I force myself to sit up, and he settles on the couch beside me, handing me a mug. "Who do I need to murder?" Normally, this would get me to laugh, but this time, more tears fall, splashing into my tea.

Dad waits patiently, letting me get everything out. Finally, I set my mug down and open a chocolate, but it only reminds me of the PMS basket Archer made for me. Drawing my feet beneath me, I sink back into the couch. "You can't murder anyone, Dad," I say quietly, my voice hoarse from all the tears.

"Maybe not, but I can at least beat him up for you."

"What makes you think it's a him? Maybe Chantelle and I had a big fight."

Dad crosses his arms and studies me. "I've seen you after fights with Chantelle. That's definitely not what this is." He angles his head. "What happened?"

Worrying my lip, I avoid his gaze and stare down at my lap. "Promise not to freak out?"

"When it comes to someone hurting you? I'm not sure I can."

Sighing, I reply, "Dad, I'm serious. Besides, it's my fault. I don't need you to fix anything. Just listen."

"I'll always listen, Pumpkin."

I run my fingers through my hair, my eyes tearing up again as I glance up at him. "I'm an idiot. I kissed Archer." I flinch,

waiting for his angry reaction, but I'm surprised when his face remains passive. "You knew?"

Dad shrugs. "I didn't know for sure, just had a feeling there was something going on between you two."

My shoulders fall. "Well, there's not. Which is why I'm an idiot." I look down, my throat constricting with the threat of more tears. "Archer said it was a mistake. That there wasn't anything between us." The pieces of my heart crack even more, remembering Archer's words to me.

Dad harrumphs. "And how do you feel?"

Sniffing, I reply, "We're better as friends, but I'm afraid I've lost that too. You know how I feel about long-term relationships, Dad. I don't know what I was thinking when I kissed him." Of course Archer pushed me away. I told him multiple times that I didn't want love or marriage. Maybe if I would have opened up to him and let him know that I was willing to try. For him. For Indy.

"You really think you just want to be friends with him?"

"Yes," I reply firmly, willing my heart to believe it.

That's all we can ever be. Trying wouldn't have been enough for Archer. If he ever gets involved with another woman, it won't be to just date. He'll want commitment. Marriage. Maybe have more kids so Indy isn't an only child. Archer will want stability for himself and Indy.

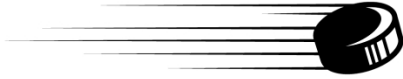
And that isn't me. I'm too much of a flight risk.

The truth hits me like a bullet to the chest, unearthing the deep-rooted fear I've been burying for years.

I'm afraid of being just like my mom. Of not being enough for someone, and then not being enough for me. I can't allow myself to commit to one man because I'm afraid that, eventually, I'll run away.

Turning to Dad, I suck in a deep breath. "Dad, I'm ready to meet Mom."

And maybe finally get some answers. And peace.



The next day, I find myself staring at an unfamiliar apartment door. My hands shake as I try to gather the courage to knock.

Am I doing the right thing? Will this help me put to rest a piece of my life that has hung over me like a dark cloud my entire life? Or will it only make the clouds thicker, heavier, until they burst open and drown me?

Biting my lower lip, I battle within myself. But I've already made the three-hour drive to see her, and deep down, I know if I don't face this, face her, then I'll never get over my fear of marriage.

Taking a deep breath, I raise my hand and knock on the door. My heart is racing so hard that my ears pound. The seconds seem to stretch, my lungs constricting and blocking me from getting air, until finally, the knob turns. The door opens, revealing a woman with eerily familiar blue-green eyes. She's about the same height as I am, with the same black hair, though hers is longer and streaked with gray.

Gasping softly, her eyes widen and fill with tears. "Ve-Veronica?" Her voice cracks, and my heart immediately wants to soften. But I can't trust her until I get answers, and maybe not even then.

"Hi," I say quietly. "Umm ... can I come in?"

"Of course, please." She steps back quickly, opening the door wider so I can step inside. "It's not much. I'm sorry. Uh ... I wasn't expecting company."

My eyes trail around the small apartment, taking in the clean but untidy room. There's laundry scattered over her loveseat and books and magazines spread across the coffee table. A quick glance into the tiny kitchen shows a sink full of dishes and food boxes stacked on the counter.

Except for the layout and color scheme, it looks just like my apartment. My stomach twists with the realization that I *am* like my mom and in more than just looks.

She hastily scoops laundry off the couch and dumps it in a laundry basket. Her hands shake as she tries to straighten the books and magazines.

“Wait,” I say, touching her hand, surprising myself. I offer her a forced smile. “It’s fine. Really.”

She stares at me again, her mouth opening and closing before she asks, “Would you like something to drink? Water, coffee, tea?”

“Coffee sounds good.”

Strained quiet hangs in the room as she scoops the coffee, neither of us apparently knowing where to begin. Once we’ve both made our cups, she motions for us to sit in the living room. Nervous energy courses through me, and I take a sip of my coffee, forgetting that it hasn’t cooled. I grimace as the scalding liquid burns my tongue and throat.

“Your father didn’t tell me you were coming,” she says with a shaky laugh.

“I asked him not to.” It’s now or never. “Why?” I ask simply.

She blinks at me. “Why?”

My throat tightens. I will not cry. “Why did you leave? Why did you never come back? Why did you not once try to get in touch with us? How could you do that? To Dad? To me? Do you know how devastated he was? For years? Always searching for you. Always coming up empty handed and disappointed.” I huff out a disgusted breath and shake my head. “What kind of mother leaves her child?”

Her lips form a thin line and she wipes a tear from the corner of her eye. “Oh, Veronica.” A weary sigh leaks out of her lips. “I wish I had some big, wonderful excuse that would make you look at me like a hero instead of a villain. But ... I don’t.” My heart sinks to my stomach. “All I have is the truth. If you’re willing to listen.” Her eyes meet mine and they’re filled with desperation and tenderness.

“I want to know.” My voice comes out barely a whisper. “Whatever it is. I want to know the truth. All of it.”

She nods and sets her coffee on the table. “First, you have to know that I have always loved your father and you. I never meant to hurt either of you.” I refrain from snorting and rolling my eyes. “Art and I were so excited when we found out we were expecting. But sadly, we lost the baby.”

My spine stiffens. “What? You were pregnant before me? Dad never told me.” I blink rapidly, trying to keep the tears at bay. The knowledge that I could have had a sibling hits hard. And knowing Dad kept that from me has anger coursing through my veins. Yet another lie from Dad. What else has he lied about? Even as the thought forms, I know it’s unfair. Dad’s not perfect, but he’s still a wonderful father. Still, I’ll be talking to him as soon as I get home. I don’t want any more lies between us.

Nodding sadly, she says, “Yes. It was devastating to both of us. It’s still painful to speak about sometimes. Art probably thought you didn’t need to know. He always had a hard time talking about how he feels.”

Dad has always been good about getting me to talk about my own feelings, but it’s true that he never really opened up about his own. Maybe part of me always wanted to think it was because he was perfectly content and happy with our little life. Now I’m seeing that maybe he did it to protect himself from the pain of losing his child and wife. The thought makes my heart ache. I wish Dad would have let me share in the pain a little more.

“Six months after we lost our first baby, we found out we were expecting you. Again, we were both excited, but there was also a heaviness with this pregnancy. We were scared of losing you, too. And when you were finally born, oh, I had never seen love like what I saw in your father’s eyes when he held you for the first time.” Her eyes take on a distant look and a soft smile pulls on her lips.

“What happened then? If you were so excited?” I try to keep the accusatory tone out of my voice, but I don’t think it worked.

Sighing, she meets my eyes. “Unfortunately, I developed severe postpartum depression and anxiety after you were born. At first, it was just small things. But the oppressive weight wouldn’t leave.” Sadness is etched onto her face. “I tried talking to Art, but he thought I just needed rest. Don’t get me wrong—it’s not his fault and he’s lived with so much guilt ever since, thinking that if he had done more I would have stayed. But I don’t blame him at all. There wasn’t as much support for PPD at the time, and I didn’t know how to talk to anyone about the intrusive thoughts I was having. They were just so dark.” A small sob escapes her lips, but she recovers quickly. “I’m sorry. It’s still hard to talk about.”

She pauses, taking a sip of her coffee while she collects herself. “Anyway, I found myself so distraught. Unable to sleep. Unable to love you or care for you in the way that you needed.” Her eyes meet mine, and I swallow back the tears. “I left for you, Veronica. I know you may not believe it, but I honestly thought that if I didn’t leave, I would do the unthinkable and hurt you.”

I can hear the truth in her words, but it still doesn’t answer everything. “Why did you never come back, though?”

Her shoulders droop. “I didn’t have anyone. No family or friends to turn to once I left. And because I didn’t get the help I needed, I found myself turning to drugs.” She shrugs, averting her gaze. “It was a bad few years. Drug addiction. Homelessness. I wasn’t in a position to come home.”

Glancing around her apartment, I ask, “What changed?”

Her lips lift in a bright smile. “Jesus. I finally stumbled into a homeless shelter where they shared Christ with me. Once I turned my life over to Him, I was able to see how truly messed up I had become. I went to rehab. They helped me get back on my feet, get a job, until I could finally afford a place of my own.”

“When was that? How long have you been clean?”

“Eight years.”

I scoff, fighting against the pain. The pain of everything she went through and the pain that even once she was clean, we still weren't enough for her to return to. "So you could have come back and didn't? And you want me to feel sorry for you? Forgive you?" Bitterness drips from my voice, but this time, I don't care if she hears it.

"I could have come back, yes, but I was scared. It's not an excuse, but I let fear hold me back." She wipes a tear from her eye. "I also didn't want to mess up your life. When I found you online, you both seemed so happy. I didn't know Art was looking for me at the time. I thought if I got on my feet and could prove that I'd been clean for long enough, then maybe I could try to come back to you. To ask for your forgiveness. But Art found me first."

"You really want me to believe you were planning on coming back?"

"It's the truth."

A tear slips down my cheek, and I try to wipe it away discreetly. I need to ask the question burning at the back of my mind, but I'm terrified of the answer. My throat is dry as I force the words past my lips. "You and I are a lot alike."

She tilts her head. "What do you mean?"

I motion between us. "We look alike." I wave an arm around the apartment. "My apartment is messier than this. Dad has always fussed at me for not keeping things picked up and tidied."

A small smile forms on her lips. "He always fussed at me, too."

I don't return her smile as I finally ask, "What happens if I get married, have a family and—"

"Leave?"

As I nod, another tear falls. "I don't want to ever do that to anyone."

She takes a while to answer, my heart clenching as I wait for her response. "I never wanted to do it to you or your father."

But there's no way to know what the future holds. That's why we cling to Christ. And one another. You have your father. You have the knowledge to get help if you were to develop it. You don't have to take the same path I did. You don't have to be like me. I know I made the wrong choices, and I've had to live with the consequences and guilt every day since. But Veronica, you can't stop living your life for fear of something in the future that may never even come to pass."

Her words roll around in my mind as I soak them in, a sudden lightness filling my limbs, flooding me with relief.

"So that's the truth, and I hope knowing it will help you forgive me, even though I don't deserve it. I truly am sorry, Veronica." Her voice wobbles, and I notice her wiping a tear from her cheek. "Can you ever forgive me?"

We sit in silence for a few moments, her looking at me with so much sorrow and hope, and me attempting to summon the strength to forgive the woman who abandoned me. I believe her, and I do feel sorry for everything she's gone through. But her actions also caused a lot of pain in my life. Maybe she thought she couldn't have come back, but she didn't even try.

Archer's words from a couple weeks ago come back to me. *"As long as we're breathing, repentance is never too late. And neither is forgiveness."*

Peace floods my heart. It isn't going to be easy or happen overnight, but maybe I can do what she hasn't done until now and at least try.

Drawing in a deep breath, I say quietly, "I believe you, and I want to try to forgive you, but I'm going to need to take things slow. Can we just work on getting to know one another first?"

Sniffing, she nods. "I'd love that."

Twenty-Four

Archer

It feels as if I've been hit by a semi, then pushed into the path of an oncoming train, and then dragged behind it for ten miles.

It took me hours to fall asleep after Ronnie left. It was strange not having Indy curled up next to me. I wanted to slide into bed with her but was afraid I'd wake her, and then we'd both be up all night. Once I did drift off, I tossed and turned, my dreams jumping back and forth between images of Ronnie and June. Each new image sent guilt swirling into my gut.

Guilt over hurting Ronnie. Guilt over dishonoring June's memory.

When I wake up and remember the meeting today, more guilt crashes into me. I'm failing everyone. Ronnie. June. Cyrus.

I trudge to the kitchen to begin breakfast, my eyes catching on little things that make my heart clench tighter. I can't even make it through the morning without having tiny reminders of Ronnie taunting me.

There's one of her hoodies on the back of the couch, the chocolate and Oreos that I stocked for her in the cabinet, along

with her favorite tea, and a tech magazine that she left behind on the coffee table. Artwork that she and Indy made together covers my refrigerator. And I sure as heck can't look at the counter without remembering that kiss from last night and the way it felt having her in my arms.

I was a total jerk, and though I want to apologize for hurting her, I still don't want to lead her on or allow her to think something can happen between us. It can't. June and I were end game. No one can fill the hole she left behind.

Pouring a cup of coffee, I flip Indy's eggs and place them on the plate beside her toast and fruit slices.

"Breakfast," I call out, and the sound of pitter-pattering feet echoes through the hallway, followed by the clicking of toenails. Groaning, I scrub a hand over my face. How did I forget about the dog? "Let Denny outside first, okay?"

Indy makes a beeline for the back door, letting Denny out. "Did you get Denny's breakfast, Daddy?"

"Working on it." I'm not, but I will as soon as I drink more of my coffee. I place Indy's plate on the table and press a kiss to her hair. "Good morning, Cupcake."

She flashes me a wide grin, pushing her glasses up her nose. "When's Ronnie coming?"

I wince inwardly and pray she takes the news well. "Uh ... she isn't."

The smile drops from her face and turns into a pout. "Can we go see her?"

"No. But Ms. Wilma will be coming back. You like Ms. Wilma, right?"

Indy frowns, her eyes filling with tears. "Yeah, but I love Ronnie. She's my favorite. I want Ronnie." A tear slips down her cheek, and I wipe it away, fighting my own.

Denny scratches and whines at the door, yet another reminder of Ronnie.

Bending down, I brush my fingers over Indy's cheek. "I know you want Ronnie, and I'm sorry she can't be here. But

she has to go back to her other job. Okay?”

Sniffing, Indy wipes a hand under her runny nose. “But she’s still my friend?”

I nod, guilt twisting my stomach. “Of course.”

“And she can still come over to play?”

This is the worst. “Well, we’ll have to see. She may not have as much time with her new job.”

“Ronnie said she always has time for me,” Indy argues.

I’m blessedly interrupted by a knock on the door, though I’m not sure who it could be since Ms. Wilma isn’t supposed to be here for another hour and a half.

Indy’s face brightens. “Is that Ronnie?”

A weird hope surges in my chest, but I tamp it down. “No, Cupcake. You eat your breakfast, and I’ll see who it is.”

Opening the door, I’m surprised to see Kiera on the other side. “Oh, hey. What are you doing here?”

Rolling her eyes, she steps inside and walks toward Indy. “How about, ‘Oh, Kiera, my favorite sister! I’m so glad you stopped by to see me on your last day in Denver!’ Would that have been so hard?”

“Yes, actually,” I reply dryly.

She chuckles, giving Indy a hug while I let Denny inside. Kiera glances over at Denny jumping at my legs, begging to be picked up. “I still can’t believe you got a dog.”

“Not my dog.” My eyes flick to Indy as she and Denny run back to her bedroom. “And he won’t be here much longer,” I add quietly.

Kiera frowns and moves closer. “Why not?”

“Ronnie isn’t watching Indy anymore, so she’s going to get Art to pick him up.” I avert my gaze. Kiera’s always had this weird sixth sense and can usually read me with just a glance into my eyes.

“What did you do, Archer?”

“Why do you think I did something?”

She lets out an exasperated breath. “Indy looks like she’s been crying, and you look like you’ve been in a boxing match.”

I start to lie, but instead, I open my mouth and the truth pours out of me. “I blew it with Ronnie and I’m not sure how to fix it or even if I should. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I kissed her. Twice.”

“And then?”

Gripping the back of my head, pain slices through me as I remember the harsh words I spewed at Ronnie last night. “I told her”—I gulp—“that the kiss meant nothing, that it had just been too long for me.”

Kiera pinches the bridge of her nose. “Oh, Archer. Why did you do that?”

“Because I’m an idiot and don’t know what I’m doing. How can I replace June, Kiera? You know how much I loved—love her.”

“Archer, what did I tell you the other day? You aren’t replacing her. Just because June’s gone, doesn’t mean you stop living. You can’t. You have a daughter who needs you. She needs to see you living life and not sinking into your grief.” She plants her hands on her hips. “Do you really think Ronnie is the kind of woman who would make you choose between her and June? She loves Indy as if she’s her own, and I’m pretty sure she loves you too and all that loving you entails. Your past, present, and future.”

The truth of her words pierces me. “How’d you do it? How’d you get over the guilt of loving Tate and still honoring Rick?”

“By letting Rick go. By letting Tate love me and realizing that God had given me the amazing gift of finding love not once but twice. By finding the right person who didn’t expect me to never speak Rick’s name or share a memory of him or to keep pictures of him.” Lifting a shoulder, she says quietly, “So

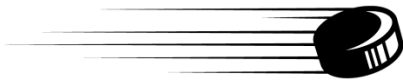
I guess you just have to ask yourself, is Ronnie that person for you?”

Closing my eyes, I think back over the last few weeks with Ronnie, remembering the laughter, the deep talks, her smiles and the warmth they bring with them, the way she loves Indy, and the way I feel at peace when she's near. Ronnie didn't just embed herself into every area of my house. She's embedded herself under my skin, into my mind, and into my heart.

She's filled the hole that losing June left behind and though there will always be a spot there with June's name on it, my heart now beats for Ronnie.

I meet Kiera's eyes. “I need your help.”

Kiera's mouth tips up. “It's about time you admitted it.”



Ronnie isn't answering my texts or calls. I'm not surprised, but each time she doesn't answer, another knife slices through my heart. It's my fault, and I am determined to make it right. Or at least try my hardest to.

I want nothing more than to drop everything and show up at her apartment with a basket full of chocolates and beg for her forgiveness. I'm not sure how I'll convince her I want her after everything I did and said, but at least that would be a start. Kiera said all I need to do is actually talk to Ronnie. I doubt it will be that simple after how deeply I hurt her.

If only I didn't have this dreaded meeting to deal with and then practice afterward. Every second that passes without being able to apologize to Ronnie feels like another weight pressing on my chest.

Cyrus is surprisingly sullen during the meeting. I keep trying to meet his eyes, but he keeps his head down, not saying a word. I hate this. I hate it for Cyrus, and I hate it for the team. Aiden and I will have to work at keeping their spirits up once the announcement is made.

After the meeting, Cyrus follows us to the locker room. Everyone goes quiet when we walk in. Coach grips Cyrus's shoulder, whispering something to him. I only catch the words "son" and "always a Dragon."

The guys line up as everyone says their goodbyes. Cyrus mumbles his responses, his head hanging during most of it. When it's Bridger's turn, Cyrus finally raises his misty eyes. I turn away, not wanting to eavesdrop on their conversation.

It's the worst practice we've had all season. No one is feeling it, including me. As soon as we get out of the showers, I check my phone, disappointed to see that Ronnie still hasn't responded. Sighing, I toss my phone into my bag just as Art walks in, a folder in his hands.

His narrowed gaze immediately lands on me and I swallow hard. He knows.

Drawing in a deep breath, I walk toward him, my stomach rolling at having to face him. "Hey, Art. Um ... do you know where Ronnie is? She's not answering my calls."

"Did you expect her to?" he asks coolly.

Cringing, I rub the back of my neck. "No. Not really. I don't know what she told you—"

"She told me enough," he replies, his voice gruff with disappointment.

I nod, heat inching up my neck. "I want to apologize to her."

"You should." He eyes me for a moment, then hands me the folder. "But she's out of town for a couple of days. She wanted me to give this to you."

Panic floods my veins. "What is this? Where did she go?"

Art smiles. "Calm down, son. First of all, I don't know what's in the folder. And she went to see her mom."

I blink in shock. "Oh. That's good." I'm glad she went, but I'm also selfish and wish she were still home.

"Yeah, I hope so." He pats me on the shoulder. "I'll leave you alone to open it," he says, then heads over to talk with

Coach.

Sitting on the bench, I open the folder. The words *Single Dad Center* are typed on the front page, and there's a sticky note underneath with Ronnie's handwriting.

Thanks for being the inspiration for my new app. No matter the way things ended with us, I want you to know that you're an amazing dad.

Tears clog my throat as I flip through the pages.

It's a presentation for an app centered around supporting single dads. Ronnie's thought of everything to build a community around the how-tos of parenting without a mother present.

The app will have articles and tutorials on every topic from *How to Talk to Your Daughter About Periods* and *How to French Braid Your Daughter's Hair* to *Teaching Your Children How to Cook* and so much more.

Each page is full of graphs and statistics. She's put a lot of research into this, and a weird sense of pride wraps around me.

I reread her note several times. Closing the folder, I slip it into my bag. There's no way I can wait days for her to return home. And since she's not answering my calls—for good reason—I'm going to go to her.

Twenty-Five

Veronica

I'm ready to collapse into bed when I arrive back at my hotel room. Mom offered to let me stay with her, but baby steps. Very small baby steps.

We spent the afternoon getting to know one another. There were many awkward moments, but overall, I'm feeling hopeful about the future of our relationship. We even made plans for her to come visit Dad and me in Denver. I have a feeling that if things continue to go well, Dad will want her to move back in with him. I'm not sure how I feel about that yet, but I'm at least thankful they both seem to be taking that part slow. It'll be a big adjustment for all of us.

After taking a shower, I slip on my fuzzy socks and my coding pajamas that Chantelle gave me for my last birthday. The shirt says "Eat, Sleep, Code," and the pants have binary numbers on them.

I definitely want to eat and sleep right now, but my brain is too tired to even think about coding. While I was at Mom's, one of the companies I submitted my initial proposal to called to set up an official virtual presentation day after tomorrow.

My stomach dips just thinking about it. I've only done mock presentations on my own in college. This is the real deal, and I

pray I'm ready for it.

Thinking about the upcoming presentation has my mind returning to Archer. I wonder if Dad has given him the folder yet. I don't even know why I felt the need to show Archer, but since he was my big inspiration for it, I thought he should at least be the first one to see it. And even though I'm completely gutted, I wanted to offer a small olive branch of friendship to him and remind him that he's an amazing dad.

I'm flipping through the local restaurants' menus, wondering what I can get delivered to my room when there's a knock on the door. Frowning, I walk on my tiptoes to the door, trying not to be heard in case it's some creeper—I may have listened to too many true crime podcasts on the drive over.

Looking through the peephole, my heart stops when I see Archer standing on the other side.

I jerk back, my hand at my throat. How did he know I was here? The answer comes immediately. *Dad*. But how did Archer convince him to tell him where I was?

Only one way to find out.

Taking a deep breath, I turn the knob and open the door. Archer's shoulders sink with what looks like relief, his dark eyes roaming over my face. My gaze flicks to the bouquet of sunflowers mixed with wildflowers and the huge box of chocolates he's holding. Hope takes flight within my chest, but I keep it reined in until I hear what he has to say.

Crossing my arms, I ask, "What are you doing here, Archer?"

"You haven't been answering my texts or calls, so I asked Art where you were."

"I don't have anything to say to you."

Sighing, he nods. "Yeah, I know." He glances around the hallway. "Can I come in?"

I raise an eyebrow. "Inside my hotel room?"

"Ronnie, please." There's a plea in his tone that I can't ignore.

Opening the door wider, I step back. “Okay. But don’t forget that Dad knows you’re here.”

The door shuts behind us, and the room suddenly feels much smaller. His warm cedar and spice scent wafts through the air, and I’m already regretting allowing him in when he hasn’t even apologized yet. If that’s even what he’s here to do. But it has to be, right? Why else would he have gone through the trouble of finding out where I was and driving three hours to bring me flowers and chocolate?

Nervous energy flutters in my stomach. “Are those for me?” I ask, tilting my head toward the flowers and chocolate.

“Oh, yeah.” He hands them to me, stuffs his hands in his pockets, and glances around the room appearing as anxious as I feel.

“Thank you.” I set them down on the desk in the room, weariness—both emotional and physical—from the day enveloping me as I turn to face him. The dim light dances across his face, highlighting his sharp jawline and cheekbones. He’s so handsome it makes my heart ache. I’d love nothing more than to step into his warm embrace. To talk to him about everything that happened today with my mom.

Clearing my throat, I avert my gaze. “You still haven’t answered my question, Archer. What are you doing here?” My eyes snag on the clock and I frown, realizing just how late it is. “Where’s Indy?” I ask, turning back to him.

“She’s with Kiera.” Archer steps closer to me, his warm eyes flicking across my face. “I had to see you, Ronnie. To apologize for everything I said.”

Tears build behind my eyes, but I force them back. “Why?”

He takes another step until we’re toe to toe and I have to look up to meet his gaze. “Because I’m an idiot. Ronnie, I need you to know that I didn’t mean any of the things I said.”

“Then why did you say them?” My voice cracks and I press a hand to my heart. “Do you have any idea how much you hurt me, Archer?”

Sorrow fills his eyes. “I was a coward. Ronnie, I’ve never done this. I’ve never had feelings for anyone other than June. I was afraid of getting too close to you. Of what that would mean for my memories of her.”

I shake my head. “I would never expect you to forget about June. She’s part of you. Part of Indy.”

A sad smile crosses his face. “I realize that now. But I’ve also been scared of what would happen if I gave my heart away to you and then lost you.”

My heart softens, but I have to know. “Archer”—I drop my gaze to the floor—“were you ... thinking of June when you kissed me?”

His warm hands cup my face, tilting my head up until our eyes meet. Regret washes across his face. “I need you to look at me and hear me when I say this, Ronnie. When I kissed you, *both times*, I was only thinking of you. No one else. Only you.” A tear falls down my cheek, and he brushes it away with his thumb. “I am so sorry, Ronnie. I know I hurt you, and I know I don’t deserve your forgiveness, but I am begging you to give me another chance. To give us a chance.”

I bite my lip, wanting to cave, but something holds me back. Archer must read the hesitation in my eyes.

Slowly, he drops his hands from my face and steps back. “You don’t have to answer tonight. I know you’ve had a long day. Maybe I could take you to breakfast in the morning and we could talk some more?”

Clearing my throat, I reply, “I’m not going back to Denver tomorrow.”

“I’m not either.”

My gaze latches onto his. “What? You’re not?”

Archer shakes his head. “I got a room.” He chuckles. “Funny enough, it’s just across the hall.”

“Oh. Are Kiera and Indy here too?”

“No. They’re back at home.”

My mouth drops open. “You’re really not going back?” He shakes his head again. “You’re spending the night away from Indy? Why? You never leave her.”

He smiles softly, moving closer to me and cupping my face with his hands once more. “I don’t like being away from her and I do miss her, but Ronnie, it’s been absolute torture not being with you, even for just a few hours. Especially with my cruel words hanging between us. I had to apologize to you, face to face, and tell you how I feel about you.”

“And how do you feel about me?” I whisper.

Archer’s smile grows wider as he tucks a strand of hair behind my ear. “You, Veronica Reynolds, are the sunshine that broke through my darkness. You’re like the first spring morning after a cold and harsh winter. When I’m with you, I feel alive for the first time in years. You bring the sweetest chaos to my life. You’re all things warm, vibrant, and colorful.” Pressing his forehead to mine, his warm breath dances across my face, and I sink into his touch. “I love you, Ronnie. I want to build a life with you. You and Indy ... heck, even the mangy dog.”

A tear-filled chuckle escapes my lips as I soak in his words. His thumbs move in slow circles across my face before he moves one to the nape of my neck, threading his fingers into my hair. He begins massaging my neck, his other hand moving to rest on my hip as he tugs me closer.

Pulling back, I meet his eyes. “You love me?” I whisper through my tears.

“I do,” he replies, drying my cheeks. “The question is, how do you feel about me?”

A grin breaks through as I throw my arms around his neck. A chuckle rumbles in his chest, reverberating throughout my body.

“I hope this means you love me too,” he says quietly. “Otherwise, you’re giving off some mixed signals.”

I laugh, pulling back and placing my hand on his cheek as my eyes roam over his face. Archer is more than I ever

thought possible for me. More than I ever dared to hope for, and the words I never thought I'd say to a man ache to be released. "I love you too ... Princess."

Archer throws his head back, groaning. "You're never going to stop calling me that, are you?" His brow lifts as he looks down at me.

Linking my arms around his neck, I shake my head. "Never."

Wrapping both arms around my waist, he pulls me flush against him. "It's a good thing I like you then."

"Oh, we're back to like now? I thought you loved me."

His gaze softens as he leans down, his mouth almost touching mine. "Ronnie?"

"Yes?" I ask breathlessly, my heart skipping a beat.

"I'm going to kiss you now to show you just how much I love you. Okay?"

"Okay." The word is barely out of my mouth before Archer's lips claim mine in the tenderest kiss I've ever experienced. It's slow and languid as he takes his time, pouring all his love into it.

My hands move to his face, my fingers raking through his beard. A low rumble pours from him as he steps closer, moving me until my back is pressed against the wall.

Breaking away, he glances down at me. "Does this mean you forgive me too?"

I roll my eyes, gripping the front of his shirt and tugging his face back down to mine. "I forgive you, Archer," I say quietly. "Now kiss me."

A smirk tugs at his lips as he buries his fingers in my hair and his lips connect with mine. Moving to my jaw and following the path to my ear, he whispers, "I love you, Ronnie." His hot breath sends goosebumps down my spine, but I don't have time to respond, because he's kissing me again.

This time when he breaks away, he trails kisses on the other side of my neck until he reaches that ear. “I’m sorry I hurt you.”

Emotion clogs my throat as I gently pull his face to me, forcing him to meet my eyes. “Archer, I forgive you. You don’t have to keep apologizing.” His shoulders sag a little. “Just make sure it never happens again.”

Chuckling, he wraps his arms around me, drawing me into a warm embrace. I let my head lay where his heart beats erratically, matching the rhythm of my own. He rests his chin on my head, and as our heart rates slow, contentment and peace pour over me and I know ...

I’m home.

Epilogue

Veronica

Six Years Later

“Indy. Please tell your sisters to come in and help them wash their hands. Dad will be here soon.” I wipe a hand over my forehead as I put the finishing touches on Archer’s cake.

“Mom, do I have to?” Indy grumbles from the chair in the living room where she’s reading a book. Denny is curled up beside her, and she runs her fingers through his fur.

“You know the answer to that.”

Sighing, she sets down her book and stands. Denny, who is basically just an extension of Indy, follows. Opening the back door, she yells, “Fallon! Hattie! Come wash your hands!”

“No yelling,” I remind her as girlish squeals echo from the backyard. We moved to a small town outside of Denver last year, and it’s been such a good experience for the girls. They love being able to run free. Denny loves it too.

“Mom, Grandpa’s chasing them. I don’t think they’re going to listen.”

My head falls back as I stare at the ceiling, praying for strength. “Get Grandma on him. He’ll listen to her. And tell him he’s supposed to be grilling!”

Indy giggles and steps outside to holler at Mom. I shake my head, a smile on my face.

Dad and Mom renewed their vows three months after I met her. It was a little sooner than I anticipated, but it’s what they wanted. It’s been a long road of healing and forgiveness for all of us, especially me. But the more I got to know her, the more she showed me she’d truly changed for the better. I’ve never seen Dad happier in my life, and I’m so grateful that God restored our little family, even if it took years to do so and to get where we are now.

My phone dings with a text from Rafe about the new app we’re developing together. With taking care of the girls, I’ve slowed down on work, but he reached out a couple months ago and asked me to collaborate with him on a new project after the success of the Single Dad Center app.

The first company I pitched Single Dad Center to wasn’t interested. Neither was the second or third. But the fourth company saw my vision and took a chance on me. Now, it’s the number one place for single fathers to find community online. It’s grown to have several spin-off apps, and we have millions of users around the world.

I shoot him a response and then set my phone down. Glancing around the kitchen, I run through my mental checklist to make sure I’ve got everything I need for Archer’s surprise party to celebrate his retirement from the Dragons. Though I’m pretty sure Fallon spilled the beans about the party last week before Archer left for his weekend trip at the lake with the guys. I tried to deflect, but I could tell by the twinkle in Archer’s eyes that he was onto me. That’s what I get for daring to make plans when my four year old is within listening range.

A moment later, Mom and Indy walk in, each with a child on their hip. I barely hold back a groan. “Mom, they’re filthy.”

Hattie squirms in Indy’s arms and raises her mud covered hands, a wide grin on her face. “Mommy, mud,” she squeals in her little toddler voice. Fallon giggles with her, taking her own mud encased hands and patting Mom on the cheeks.

Mom just laughs and waves a dismissive hand at me. “They’re fine, dear. I’ll help get them cleaned up.”

“You’ll have to clean yourself up too,” I reply, unable to keep the smile from my face. Watching her with my daughters has been a healing balm to my soul. Sometimes it’s bittersweet, seeing what I missed out on growing up, but I’m glad she’s here for them. “Is Dad at least done with the food?”

The door opens and Archer’s dad, Roger, walks in carrying a tray of burgers and hot dogs. “The guests have started to arrive.” Placing the tray on the counter, he presses a kiss to my forehead.

I smile. “I think everything is ready.”

Patting my arm, he says, “Don’t stress, Ronnie. It’s going to be fine, and Archer is going to love it.” He glances down at my rounded belly. “How’s my grandson doing?”

Laying a hand on my stomach, I chuckle. “I don’t think he ever sleeps. It’s like he’s already playing hockey in there.”

Roger laughs just as the doorbell rings. “I’ll get that.”

Our home is soon flooded with friends and family. I’ve lost count of how many hugs I’ve been pulled into. Almost all the Dragons, from the time Archer joined the team to now, and their families are present.

My eyes fill with tears as I take in the sight. Dex and his wife, Millie Jane, are here with their kids. Greer and Freya are chatting while they wait for their husbands to arrive with Aiden and Archer. Even Cyrus and his family showed up, which I know is going to make Archer happy. He kept in touch with Cyrus after he left the team, and their friendship is stronger than ever.

All the kids make their way outside to play while the adults mingle inside.

“When’s Archer going to be here?” Kiera asks.

“Bridger just texted me and said they’re five minutes away,” Freya says.

A few minutes later, Aiden opens the front door, Archer right behind him. Everyone shouts “surprise” even though Archer had to walk past a driveway full of vehicles to get inside. Our eyes connect from across the room, his gaze soft and full of love as he sends me a smile meant only for me. I’ve missed him while he was gone, and I want nothing more than to be swept up in his arms, but he’s soon surrounded by all the guys greeting him, so I wait patiently. Besides, I’ll have him all to myself tonight.

Archer’s going to miss being on the team, but we’re both looking forward to quieter days spent with the girls now that he won’t have to drive so far for practice and games. He’ll be starting his job coaching the high school team here in town when school starts back up for the year.

Aiden walks over, pulling me into a side hug. “Did you decide what to name the lad?” he asks, gesturing to my stomach.

“We still can’t find a name we both agree on.”

“You know, Aiden is a real strong name.” He winks at me, and I chuckle.

“Doyle, mind if I steal my wife for a minute?” Archer asks, coming to my other side and wrapping his arm around my waist. Well, part of my waist anyway.

Archer takes my hand and leads me out of the crowd, back through the hallway, and into the office, shutting the door behind us.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

Lifting my hand, Archer places a gentle kiss to the place on my wrist where my pulse beats for him. “I’ve been going crazy missing you the last few days. I needed a moment alone

with my wife.” His hooded eyes find mine. “Don’t ever let me go away that long again.”

Smiling, I reply, “As sweet as that is, we have a house full of guests.”

Archer shrugs, pressing a kiss to my palm. “They’re eating and catching up. They won’t miss us.” Stepping closer, he tenderly cups my face.

I make a humming noise in the back of my throat. “What if someone walks in?”

Leaning down, he brushes his lips against mine in the softest of touches, knowing I’m going to want more. “That’s the wrong question.” He kisses the tip of my nose, then my eyelids, and each cheek before capturing my mouth again. He angles my head, deepening the kiss until I’m melting into his touch.

Even after six years, this man still makes me weak in the knees.

When he finally breaks the kiss, we’re both a little breathless. “What’s the right question, Princess?” I whisper.

Archer flashes me a wicked grin. “The right question is, does it matter if someone walks in?” His voice is low and husky as he pulls me to him once more, his lips pressing against mine.

And as he trails kisses down my neck and whispers sweet promises into my ears, I realize the answer is ... no, it doesn’t.

Eventually, we leave the office. My cheeks are flushed, and I’m sure that my hair is a wild mess. I run a hand over my head to smooth it down as we make our way outside where everyone has gathered.

Archer was right. No one bats an eye at our reappearance. The children are running and screaming, while the Dragons—both former and current—are laughing as they make their plates. Archer’s parents are talking to mine. We’re surrounded by family and friends, and my heart feels as if it might burst.

Then the girls spot their dad and race to him, tackling him to the ground. He laughs, scooping them into his arms and pressing kisses to each of their heads. His loving gaze finds mine, and for this small moment in time, life is perfect.

The End

Want More Dragons?

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Author's Note

Thank you so much for reading Archer and Ronnie's story. I hope you love them as much as I do.

Postpartum depression (PPD) affects one in seven women. While the awareness of PPD and PPA (postpartum anxiety) is better understood than it used to be, it is still something that is often looked down upon by many. As someone who suffered from PPD and PPA during my first two pregnancies, I pray I handled the topic with grace and care. Everyone is affected differently, and though mine did not get as bad as Ronnie's mom's, it is still something that makes you feel isolated and alone. And many don't realize that it can cling to you long after birth. Please don't be afraid to ask for help from your family, friends, and care providers.

Also By Latisha Sexton

Click [HERE](#) to check out (and follow) my author's page on Amazon to learn more about my other books.

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always point you to the One who loves you beyond measure.
Soli Deo gloria!

About the Author



Latisha Sexton has always had a love of reading and wrote and published her first book, *In the Midst of the Storm*, in 2023. Born and raised in Kentucky, she resides there with her husband of fourteen years and three children. When not homeschooling, she's either reading, writing or watching Turkish romcoms. She is active on social media where she shares her love of books, faith, family, and bookish memes. You can follow her on Instagram and Facebook @sincerely.latisha or at www.latishasexton.com where you can receive a free novella by subscribing to her newsletter.