



PITTSBURGH TITANS

STONE

His big break comes at a steep price.

Pittsburgh Titans' Plan Crashes Killing All on Board

It's a devastating scene at the International Airport as the plane for the Titans is being towed. Reports are citing a problem in the landing gear that caused the plane to drop to the ground. The chartered Airbus 320XLR-300 somersaulted on its side, bursting into flames. A witness described it as "an unimaginable tragedy." The Titans were leading following a 3-2 victory over the Columbus Hawks, earning another playoff spot. The Titans were on the verge of clinching the division title and heading to the playoffs for the first time in franchise history.



NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR
SAWYER BENNETT

STONE

PITTSBURGH TITANS

By

SAWYER BENNETT

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Dear Reader,

Just a quick heads-up that if you have already read *Baden*, you will see some familiar scenes as Stone's story runs concurrently with Baden's, although a bit longer in the timeline.

Enjoy his journey!

xoxo,

Sawyer

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PROLOGUE

Stone

“STONE.” SOMETHING SLAPS my arm. “Stone... wake up.”

“What?” I mumble, refusing to open my eyes. My tongue feels like it’s fucking glued to the top of my mouth.

“Your damn phone keeps ringing.” Female voice coming from the other side of the bed. Not all that surprising after a bender evening out.

I raise my head, a searing pain jolting through it. It’s dark and I’m disoriented, but I do hear my phone ringing on my nightstand.

Rolling that way, I nab it and squint to see who’s calling.

Dad.

“Fuck that,” I mutter, tapping decline.

Tossing the phone back on the nightstand, I close my eyes and try to will the pounding headache away. I had way too much to drink last night, so much so that I honestly have no clue who’s lying in my bed.

Nor do I care.

My phone immediately starts ringing again, and my eyes snap open.

“Turn the fucking phone off,” the woman whines grumpily, and I can make out her shadowy form pulling a pillow over her head.

I grab the phone, intent on doing just as she asked. It’s my father calling again, but it finally penetrates that it’s just past two a.m., so it has to be something bad if he’s calling me at this hour.

Hell, I'd probably think it was something bad if he called me in daylight hours too. He just doesn't reach out at all.

Despite the headache and slight buzz, I make the choice to answer.

"Yeah," I say into the phone, my voice thick with sleep and too much beer. I cough to clear it. "What's up?"

"Oh God," my father wails into the phone, and it's so full of anguish that my stomach rolls.

I fly up from the bed, swinging my legs around and fumbling with the lamp. It lights up the room, and I'm vaguely aware of the cursing woman behind me in bed.

"What's wrong?" I demand, but I'm not sure he hears me. My father is moaning piteously, crying and sobbing.

Just one name, over and over and over again.

Brooks.

My brother.

"Dad!" I yell, trying to get his attention—trying to talk louder than his sobs. "What the fuck happened?"

"Jesus Christ," the woman snaps, and I glance back at her. "Can you take that call somewhere else?"

I'm normally an easygoing guy, but something life altering is happening. I'm coming off a drunk, and I have a father I barely talk to on the phone, crying about my brother. Some strange woman is in my bed—who I clearly brought home and fucked, seeing as how we're both naked—and she's telling me to go somewhere else.

"GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY HOUSE," I roar, and no matter how loud that was, my dad's crying is still somehow more clamorous.

The woman's eyes bug out, and she scrambles off the bed, grabbing the sheet to cover herself. As she gathers her clothes from the floor, I give her my back.

“Dad.” He’s not responding, just out-of-control crying. “Dad... what’s wrong with Brooks?”

Nothing.

He says nothing. Only whimpers.

My heart rate is so jacked, I’m afraid I’ll stroke out. “Dad!” I scream at him, punching the wall and denting it. “Goddamn it. What’s wrong with Brooks?”

“Gone,” he keens. “Plane. Crashed.”

“No.” It can’t be. No fucking way. My heart twists, possibly tears in half.

My dad is sobbing again, and he sounds like a damn child. Completely useless, but I’m not without means to determine what’s going on. I snatch the remote from the nightstand, aim it at my thirty-two-inch TV on the dresser, and power it on. Because all I watch is ESPN, that flares to life, and I stare in horror at what looks like footage of a helicopter flying over... well, I’m not sure what.

It’s dark, but there are dozens of flashing lights. Police, ambulances, more fire trucks than I can count. And various chunks of something scattered about, blackened by fire.

It finally comes to me... I’m looking at an airport. I can see the runway lights, and my eyes focus not on what the reporter is saying but rather on the scrolling banner at the bottom.

“Pittsburgh Titans’ plane crashes upon landing at airport. Search for survivors continues.”

I stumble backward, vaguely aware that my bedroom is empty and the woman must have left. The backs of my legs hit the mattress and I sag onto it as I stare, disbelieving, at the screen.

My dad still cries on the phone. He says Brooks is gone.

Not dead, though. They’re reporting that they’re searching for survivors.

“Dad,” I bark into the phone, “have they found Brooks?”

“I don’t know,” he mumbles.

“The TV is reporting they’re looking for survivors,” I point out, turning up the volume so I can listen.

That seems to jolt him as he starts talking. “We’re watching too. The plane is destroyed. No one could have survived that. No one.”

My dad breaks down into sobs again, and I pull the phone away from my ear. I can’t stand to listen to him mourn Brooks when we don’t know for sure if he’s dead. There are ambulances out there. Rescuers searching.

He could have made it.



NUMBNESS.

It’s what I feel as I sit in the front church pew next to my parents, staring blankly at my brother’s coffin.

It’s closed casket, of course. Most of the victims of the Titans’ plane crash had closed caskets or were cremated, since many were already so badly burned. Identifications were done through dental records and rapid DNA testing. It’s grisly information, but I know it because my dad asked those questions to the FBI agent assigned to oversee victim identification and felt the need to share it with the entire family via email.

I personally could have done without that information, but my dad wanted it, not to ease his mind in any way but so he could use the drama during his interviews with news stations. He may have lost a son, and I’m sure he’s grieving, but he’s also in his element with the spotlight on him.

It’s why he let reporters with cameras into the service, so they could record how much he’s suffering after losing his precious son. He sits on the other side of my mom at the end of the pew, near the aisle, so he can make sure everyone sees the pain weighing him down.

Sitting in between me and my father is my mom. Brooks was the light of her life—or so I’ve heard her say on many occasions—and she sits with shoulders hunched, tears streaming down her face.

I try to put my arm around her—some measure of comfort—but she doesn’t seem to notice. She merely murmurs over and over again, “My son... gone. My precious boy.”

The Episcopalian service is disingenuous, given that we’re not a religious family in any way. It’s only being held here because my father wants the maximum effect. My mom weeps through the entire service. The Episcopalian priest talks about Brooks as if he knew him well, but it’s obvious they’re prepared remarks—I recognize my father’s hand in all the ways the world will be dimmer without Brooks’s greatness. Then it’s a painful ten minutes while I have to listen to my father eulogize my brother in a manner I find offensive.

Of course, he lists all the accomplishments of his second but favorite son. How well he did in college, getting drafted to play professional hockey by the Pittsburgh Titans and how his star shone brighter than he ever knew possible. He talks about what a loving and devoted son Brooks was and that he will never suffer a loss as great as this one. In fact, he tells the captive audience—while looking straight into a news camera—that he’s not sure he has anything to go on for.

I’m a little prickly about my parents’ behavior, for sure. My brother was indeed a great hockey player and a good person, and I miss him so much. But those blindingly overarching compliments are nothing but a slap at me. My father never misses an opportunity to raise Brooks up and try to knock me down at the same time.

My eyes remain dry throughout the entire service, just as they’ve remained dry since the moment my father called me a week ago with news of the crash. Too many emotions pulling me in a dozen different directions to even process the finality of what’s happened.

I'm resentful of my brother, and my father has made me that way. Over the last few years, my father managed to single-handedly destroy my relationship with Brooks, and he's apparently removed my ability to grieve or mourn his loss. I know that's some psychological, twisted, fucked-up nonsense, but there you have it.

I'm relieved when the church service concludes. I would leave now if I weren't a pallbearer for my brother's coffin. So I do my duty and carry him to the hearse. I ride silently in a black sedan along with my parents to the graveside. The entire time they clutch onto each other and stare blankly ahead without even bothering to look at me.

Not once have they offered me any solace. Not even a hug when I arrived home here in Ithaca to be with the family at this terrible time. Not even an acknowledgment that I lost something too.

When we arrive at the cemetery, I help carry the coffin to the waiting grave. The priest and other mourners file in around chairs lined up in front of the casket for the family. I choose to stand at the outer edge of the crowd, counting down the minutes until this is over.

The priest offers a brief prayer, and my father has a dramatic breakdown during the words meant to comfort.

Just before the casket is lowered, people file by to lay red carnations on top. I may have been mostly estranged from my brother, but I knew him well enough to know he would hate this.

My mother flings herself on top of the coffin and wails, and my father capitalizes on the drama by grabbing her from a semi-faint. All the while, the TV cameras are rolling because my father invited the reporters to this part of the service as well. I'm sure he'll watch the footage tonight to make sure they got the best angles on his grieving face.

It's all more than I can handle right now, so I pivot to leave. The day is cold and the brown, frost-covered grass

crunches under my feet. I don't bother heading toward the sedan that brought me here but intend to walk out of the cemetery and pick up an Uber for a ride back to my car at the church. I have to get back to Cleveland as we have a game tomorrow, and I've missed too much ice time as it is.

I make it no more than a dozen paces from the crowd when I feel someone at my side. A hand slips into the crook of my elbow, and I glance down to see my Aunt Bethany. She squeezes my arm and does nothing more than walk along with me silently.

When we reach the main paved road, I stop because I know she's not going to walk all the way out.

She tips her head back, and her kind blue eyes stare at me. "Are you sure you won't stick around for the gathering at the house?"

The look I give her is one of gentle chastisement. "Why would I want to suffer that?"

Bethany's smile turns sad. But it's also understanding, because she, better than anyone, knows the mental abandonment I've suffered from my parents over the last few years. "Because you love your parents, despite the way they are, and you loved your brother more than anything, despite what your parents did to the two of you."

She's not wrong about that. Sometimes I wonder how I still have care in my heart for two people who don't seem to have it in return for me. Deep down, I know my brother never wanted any of this and is not to blame. And yes, I loved him more than anyone in this world, just as much as I resented him.

"I can't." I glance back at the crowd for a moment and see that my father has managed to get my mom settled back in the chair. "This is probably the last time I'm coming home."

She nods and sighs. "Then I guess I'll just have to come visit you in Cleveland."

“The door is always open for you.” I bend down and kiss her cheek before wrapping my arms around her in a bear hug.

While I forgive her for being my father’s sister, I also understand why she plays the middle ground. Regardless, she’s been a surrogate parent for me, and there’s not much I wouldn’t do for her.

Except stay.

“I love you.” I release her from the hug, and we stare at each other for a moment. “And I’m lucky to have you.”

“You always have me, Stone,” she replies, patting me on the cheek. She then turns and heads back to the grave site while I walk as quickly as I can toward the cemetery exit so I can leave this all behind.



YAWNING, I RUB my eyes. Only another forty miles to go until I get to my apartment in Cleveland. I chose to drive the five hours to Ithaca rather than fly for many reasons.

There was no connecting flight, and it would’ve taken me longer to fly than drive. I also didn’t want to be at my parents’ mercy for transportation, and I wanted my car available in case I needed to bail.

And admittedly... my brother just died in a plane crash, so I’m a little jittery about flying.

Given the emotion of the last week, the funeral services today, and the long drive home, I’m exhausted to the bone and starving as well. I can’t remember what food I have in my house, but I’m too tired to stop by the grocery store. I also know if I get home and there’s nothing there, I’m going to have to go back out.

The choice is fast food now, or do I take my chances and go home to empty cupboards?

Before I can make the decision, my phone rings. It’s a number I don’t recognize, but it’s from the Pittsburgh area code.

For a moment, I think about ignoring it, assuming it's someone from the team to offer condolences. I know they've reached out to my parents on a few occasions offering to help in any way they can. My dad gladly accepted the organization's offer to pay for the funeral expenses, even though I'm sure Brooks had insurance so that burden wouldn't fall to them.

It was just another way for my dad to capitalize on the fame from this tragedy, proven when I saw a short interview he did with the local news about the generosity of the Pittsburgh Titans.

I connect the call, more to keep me awake during this last leg of my trip than anything. "Hello?"

"I'm looking for Stone Dumelin," says a man with a deep timbre, unrecognizable to me.

"You got him," I reply, trying to suppress another yawn.

"Stone... this is Callum Derringer." That perks me up, and I sit straighter in my seat because Callum Derringer is a name everyone knows—former general manager of the Ottawa Cougars who was fired for failure to produce a winning team. "It's not been released to the news yet, but the Titans have hired me as their new GM. I'm working closely with Brienne Norcross and a new coaching staff to put together a team to get back on the ice."

I'm only momentarily shocked by this news. The plane crash was but a week ago, and many people are still mourning. We just buried my brother today.

But there's a part of me that's not surprised by the organization's quick movement. I know the hockey industry well. While I might currently play in the minors for the Cleveland Badgers, I used to play in the majors. As a first-round draft pick, I went from college to the Boston Eagles where I played for a handful of years, even winning a Cup championship with them when I was twenty-three.

I understand that professional hockey is a for-profit industry, and without a team on the ice, everyone will lose millions. It's not just the Norcross family—owners of the Titans—who will lose out, but also all the vendors, merchandisers, fans, and ticket holders. The city of Pittsburgh makes money off the brand and tourism. It's an intricate web of codependency to keep everyone successful, and until the Titans get back into the game, everyone loses.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Derringer?” I'm assuming this has something to do with Brooks, although I don't understand why he's calling me rather than my father. He's made himself the mouthpiece for our family's tragedy.

“We'd actually like to extend you an offer to join the team. We've talked to the GM of the Badgers, and we've got a deal worked out. My understanding is you're not represented right now, so I'm coming to you directly.”

I almost drive off the road. I lost faith long ago that I'd ever make it back up into the professional league, which is why I don't have an agent representing me right now. I had accepted that I would retire as a minor league hockey player and was probably looking at doing that sooner rather than later.

“You had a tremendous career with the Boston Eagles,” Derringer continues, reciting a list of my statistics. “You were the first line left-winger, and you have a Cup championship behind you.”

Fuck, that was so long ago. Well actually, only four years, but it seems like a lifetime. “I'm not that player anymore, Mr. Derringer. I'm settled into the minors.”

There's a long pause, as if he's attempting to gather his thoughts. When he shares them, he pulls no punches. “You're the first player I've talked to with these offers who wasn't jumping for joy. It's almost as if you want to stay where you are.”

I imagine my lack of enthusiasm is shocking, but I truly can't find anything to be excited about. Maybe it's an indication of how far I've sunk into mediocrity that I can't even find simple joy in the prospect of something better.

I don't respond to his statement, instead asking a question. "Why me, and is this offer in any way because Brooks played for you?"

Because fuck if I'm going to be the next big headline for the Pittsburgh organization to show how magnanimous they are.

"It was a consideration," he admits bluntly. "But only to the extent we weren't sure if losing your brother would be an emotional barrier that would prevent you from playing. Our desire to have you on our team has nothing to do with your relation to Brooks but rather your talent and potential."

"What exactly is it you are offering, Mr. Derringer?"

"Please, call me Callum," he says genially. "Here are the terms of what we're willing to offer."

I settle back and listen to everything he has to say. I believe him when he reiterates that they're making this offer because they think I can make a major contribution to the team.

Still, at the end of the conversation, I'm not overly moved.

"I'll have to think about it," I say when he finishes. "When do you need an answer?"

"Twenty-four hours," he replies. "Otherwise, the offer goes to the next best left-winger on our list."

CHAPTER 1

Stone

IT'S BEEN ELEVEN days since the Titans' plane crashed and my brother, Brooks, was killed.

Four days since we buried him.

Three days since I accepted the Titans' offer to come on board and rekindle my professional career.

I bet some would say it must feel like coming full circle, but it just feels fucking wrong to me.

My star soared for many years, starting when I was a young boy learning to play hockey.

Natural talent is what I heard over and over again, and because my father was a hockey player himself, he endeavored to foster my talent. It was the best camps, the best trainers, and lots of pressure from him to perform to perfection. In those days, I was the apple of my father's eye, and Brooks—two years younger than me—luckily wasn't browbeaten the way I was.

My dad took all the credit when I was accepted into a D1 school to play hockey, and he latched onto the limelight when I was drafted to the Boston Eagles. Brooks was ignored, for the most part, even though he had the same talent that I did. We were well-matched in all regards. In fact, Brooks essentially followed my path.

He, too, played D1 hockey and was drafted to the Titans. My father was happier than a pig in shit, and he for sure took all the credit for my brother's accomplishments. Brooks and I would laugh about it over beers and mimic my dad and his insatiable need for the spotlight.

When I was twenty-three, the Boston Eagles won the Cup. When it was my turn to have the Cup with me for the day, I threw a party at my home in Boston. It was Brooks's last year in college, and I told him it would only be a matter of time before he was able to hoist the coveted trophy above his head, so sure I was of his talent and determination.

Of course, we laughed because my dad pretty much clung to the Cup throughout the entire party and had my mom take a zillion pictures of him with it.

Those were the last happy days I remember. The next training camp, I injured my shoulder, and it was the start of a downward spiral. While Brooks's star started to shine brighter, I had a hard time coming back from the injury.

I was out for months but came back to the Eagles, only to injure it again. After another rehab, I came back but wasn't stable enough to even make the third-line cut.

At age twenty-six, my star dimmed, and I was sent down to the minors.

Can't say that my father really noticed, though. After my injury, he'd jumped on Brooks's bandwagon and never looked back at his injured son struggling to save his career.

It built resentment inside me, leveled mostly at my father for being so self-centered he couldn't be just a father, and then toward my mother who parroted him in all ways. Lastly, I resented Brooks because after years of being number two, he was now finally number one, and he loved the attention from our dad. We no longer laughed over beers about Dad's antics, and instead, Brooks staunchly defended him anytime I complained. I suppose he suffered from not having that fatherly attention all those years growing up and needed the validation.

It unfortunately caused a rift between us, and over time, we barely spoke to each other. Brooks was a star on the Titans, the second-leading scorer at left wing behind Coen Highsmith.

Me?

I played for the Cleveland Badgers, earning a whopping \$92,000 a year, quite the decline from my \$3 million contract with the Eagles. When I left the pros, so too did the endorsements. I was pretty much a has-been trying to hang on to a dying career. Even though I'd completely recovered from my shoulder injury and was as strong as ever, no one really remembered who Stone Dumelin was, indicating my star had completely fizzled.

Now... I'm back in the top tier with a lucrative contract freshly signed. I should be celebrating my luck, and yet, all I can think about is how fucking wrong it feels.

I arrived in Pittsburgh yesterday and moved right into a cheap, furnished apartment Aunt Bethany helped me find while I scrambled to close down my life in Cleveland. I can afford more, but I'm not interested. I've had the wealth and glamour, and I know how unimportant it is.

I also know how fleeting it can be, so I'm banking all my money and waiting for the other shoe to drop.

The Titans' arena has always been one of my favorites to play in, and now that it's my official place of employment, I came early today to take a better look around. Callum Derringer had front office staff prepared to give tours to all the incoming players, which was a major influx of new people to accommodate. The facilities are top-notch and luxurious, and I can say it doesn't suck to have such nice conditions.

Currently, I'm sitting in what is aptly called the Bowl. It's the team's meeting room shaped, well, like a bowl. Circular rows of plush chairs rise up from the center floor with large digital screens all around the top for us to watch video.

We've been summoned to our first meeting as the new team, and my stomach is in knots. I wonder if I've made a mistake because I feel like a fraud.

Glancing around, I see some familiar faces. Gage Heyward is a veteran player, and we've played against each other. He's well-respected, and I expect that's why he's on the team.

Coen Highsmith is another one, highly recognizable as a member of what has been referred to as the Lucky Three.

They're the three Titans players who weren't on the doomed plane: Coen, due to the flu, and the other two, Camden Poe and Hendrix Bateman, due to minor injuries.

Camden and Hendrix are sitting together, but Coen is off by himself in the last row opposite me. He's slumped in his chair, surfing his phone. Definitely unapproachable, but I figure the guy has a lot of fucking weight on his shoulders.

Most of the other guys are up from the minors, and I know them from my stint there as well. Not anyone I know well, though, as relationships don't seem to foster as thickly at that level as they do in the pros.

More players straggle in, and I take the opportunity to check my messages. Yesterday I let Bethany know I had arrived safe and sound. It's nice to have her worry over me. She made me promise to call after my first day to tell her all the details, and I'll do that later tonight when I get to my apartment.

I can't help the irritation that comes with merely seeing my dad's name in my texts. The man has barely paid attention to me in three years—since I lost my footing with the Eagles—and didn't try to offer any solace when Brooks died.

Now he won't leave me the fuck alone.

Now that I'm on a professional team again.

His latest message is offensive. *Let me know when you get family tickets. Mom and I will fly to as many games as we can if you can help us with the tickets. Otherwise, we'll drive.*

That's it. No checking to see how I'm doing, no supportive words, no affirmation. Just wanting to know when he can be a hockey dad again now that Brooks is dead.

Fuck him.

I turn off my phone just as one of the doors opens and Brienne Norcross strolls in with Callum Derringer behind her.

I'd noticed the coaches were already seated in the front row, and I had a chance to talk to all of them when I arrived earlier. Even the goalie coach, Baden Oulett, made a point of introducing himself, although we won't really be working together.

The room was mostly quiet before, none of the players openly talking. Now it's dead silent as the Titans' owner, Brienne Norcross, moves to the center. I realize that she and I have something in common... we both lost siblings on the plane. I haven't had the chance to meet her yet, but she sent me a nice welcome email after I accepted the offer and also extended her condolences.

Brienne makes a sound low in her throat, perhaps clearing it. She looks nervous, but determined. "Gentlemen... you must know first that I owe every one of you an apology."

I jolt in surprise—that is not what I expected for the opening line from the owner. I look left and right and see I'm not the only one perplexed by this.

But then she goes on to tell us that she is going to make mistakes, and she would ask us to bear with her.

Give her grace is what she requests.

In as humble a fashion as any multibillionaire can, she proclaims we will move forward as a team and that she will be there for us. She has put herself down on our level and let us know that whatever fumbles we have, we'll do them together.

Her speech is refreshing, and frankly, a little inspiring. For the first time since I accepted their offer, I actually think I could enjoy being on this team.

Apparently, the others think the same as she gets a thunderous roar of approval from the men.

She then hands the reins over to Callum, who follows her with a speech just as refreshing and classy. Also humble, also asking that we give him an honest shot to be a better general manager than he was before. I like that he admits his flaws. It makes me respect him more.

He, too, gets approval from the team, and I'm clapping hard when he finishes.

"One last housekeeping matter, then I'm going to give the floor to Coach Keller." Callum pushes his hands into his pockets, giving a slow three-sixty to look at all the players. "As you know, the league has voted in a points freeze retroactively to the plane crash, and we have four days to get in some shape to step out on the ice and reenter competitive play. The league just announced that they're giving an allowance to the Titans that any trades made going forward will not be penalized by making players sit out of the playoffs."

There's a lot of shuffling and murmuring at this announcement. On its face, it appears to be a generous allowance the league is making, but it has repercussions.

It means that just as soon as we arrived here, we could easily be traded, because we won't be penalized in the playoffs. I could find myself back down in the minors before I even have a chance to make my bed in my cheap little apartment.

Callum holds up his hands, asking for silence. "I know this might cause some distress, as many of you just got your call-up from the minors and you don't want anything interfering with your shot to make it in this league. While the chances are slim, it's possible someone could offer for one of you and then release you back to the minors. Brienne Norcross has made a commitment not to release any of you from your contracts this year. She wants your shot to be a good one, and you can't do that with fear of that shot ending hanging over you. It doesn't matter if a great opportunity comes our way. We are not going to sacrifice a single player in this room."

Jesus.

Brienne Norcross is making a major concession to give all the players new to the team security for the rest of the season—a decision that could cost her money, especially if we suck.

She's promising that no matter what, the men in this room are safe for the remainder of the hockey season.

This is well received by the players, and there's another round of clapping and cheering. I'm wondering why Brienne didn't tell us this news herself, since it's obviously her decision and she should take credit.

That probably speaks to the fact that she's a true team player, earning her even more of my respect.

The knots in my stomach at the beginning of this meeting have loosened, and I look forward to what Coach Keller has to say as he takes center stage.

Matt Keller is, by all accounts, a great coach on paper. He's fresh off a D1 national championship, and while a move to the pros is a bit of a big step, I'm assuming there weren't a lot of qualified candidates. I want to give him the benefit of the doubt, because I've already bought into Brienne's and Callum's values—but he starts off poorly.

We're first treated to a long-winded biography of his accomplishments, and it's clear he's trying to make sure he's qualified in our eyes. It's overkill as he won't shut up about how much of a genius he was to win a national championship. He spouts ideals of fraternity and loyalty, which sound good on the surface, but those are things that have to be proven.

So when he says, "You show your loyalty to me, and you'll have mine in return," it doesn't sit well with me.

Looking around at the hardened expressions on some of the other players' faces, I can tell it doesn't sit well at all with the whole.

"Now," he says, seemingly ready to wind down his speech, "we are going to be family to each other. But we're all relative strangers as of this day. I want to change that. So we're going to go around the room, and I want each player to stand up and tell us a little about yourself. Maybe share a bit about your background and what led you here today. I've had the fortune of studying your bios, and I feel like I know each of you pretty

well. But we need to share that with the others, so how about you there in the front row... Andrei Komokov.”

A young blond man warily stands, looking around before introducing himself in a thick Russian accent. His English is quite good, but his words are short, speaking more to his discomfort with being put on the spot like this.

Keller doesn't seem to understand that was painful as he calls another player to stand, and then another. Most of these guys are truly making a step upward, but they're nervous, and they realize they're here only because of a horrible tragedy. None of them want to express elation over this opportunity, and yet Keller seems to want to hear that gratitude.

“Stone Dumelin,” Keller calls as his eyes search the room.

I mutter a curse as I rise from my chair, and the movement catches Keller's eye. He smiles as if we're old friends. “Tell everyone about yourself, Stone.”

“Stone Dumelin, left-winger. Played for the Eagles out of college, had some shoulder issues and bounced back and forth between them and the minors. Been with the Cleveland Badgers for the last year.”

I start to lower into my seat, but Matt stops me cold. “And what do you think your driving force is to be here?”

Rage slices through me, and it takes all my effort not to leap rows to get down to his level where I'd like to plant my fist in his smug fucking face.

I rein it in, though, suck air through my nostrils, and let it out in a growl. “I'd say the driving force is the fact that my brother was on the plane. His death gave me a shot at the big leagues. Fortuitous, some would say. Don't you think?”

Tension sizzles through the room, and a few players murmur to one another. Keller's face goes white, and I can tell he didn't connect me to Brooks, despite the fact I know he knows my brother died in the crash. I think he had a major brain fart when he had this glorious idea for us to share our feelings.

“Fuck,” Keller mumbles, ducking his head sheepishly. “I’m so sorry. I got you confused with someone else, Stone.”

That’s even fucking worse. Jesus... did he not know the names of the players who died? Was he not told who I am?

Questions I’d probably have the right to ask this very minute, but for some of the men here, this is their shot at the big leagues, and I don’t want to ruin it for them. I want them to have faith in this man. But as of this moment, I’ve decided I hate the bastard.

I sink down into my chair, not accepting his apology. Keller stammers, looking around for another victim to call upon.

“Highsmith.” Keller looks at Coen Highsmith expectantly. “Stand up and tell the team about yourself.”

I don’t know much about this dude other than he’s really talented and brash, but that describes so many players in this league.

Coen shows the first signs of active rebellion and refuses to stand. In fact, he seems to slouch even more, as if he wants to be anywhere but here.

He stares at Keller, who swallows hard. His voice is lazy, almost nonplussed. “I think everyone here knows who I am. One of the Lucky Three.”

A pointed reminder that not everyone from the former team died in the plane disaster. And by the tone of his voice, I’m guessing he’s going to be battling some ghosts.

Keller stares at Coen, expecting him to say more. To do more. To perhaps validate him as our coach.

A monkey could figure out that Coen isn’t going to say another damn word, and if I had an ounce of sympathy for Keller, I might feel a little embarrassed for him.

But I don’t.

I hope he drowns in shame for destroying the good mood Brienne and Callum brought to the room.

“Coach.” All eyes in the room slide over to Gage Heyward, who stands from his chair. “I may just be speaking for myself, but I would personally rather get to know my teammates on a one-to-one basis. But more than that, I think I can safely say that everyone in this room is eager to show you what we can do. Am I right?”

I suspect everyone in the room feels the way I do at the moment... I want to kiss the fucking dude for rescuing us.

The men agree, yelling out their desire to get the hell out of here. Someone behind me says loud enough for all to hear, “I sure as shit don’t want to do all this kumbaya stuff.”

I look back down to Keller, and he is pissed, lips pressed flat and fury etched on his face. I can tell he’s going to take it out on Gage at some point for making him look like a fool, although personally, I think Gage was very diplomatic.

The point has been made, though. The only person who thought this was a good idea was Keller, and now he has the ability to release us from this suffering.

“Okay, men... it’s clear you want some action, and I’m ready to give it. Hit the locker rooms and suit up in practice gear. Everyone on the ice in fifteen minutes.”

It’s fairly quiet as we all stand, exiting from the bottom-level door, which is but a short walk to the locker rooms. Keller stands outside the door, smiling and slapping players on the shoulders as we walk by, as if we just had an amazing bonding moment. He tries to start up a conversation, and I dread having to talk to the dude right now. I’m still pissed he leveraged my tragedy to make himself try to look good.

Before I can reach Keller, though, Gage appears at my side and engages me in conversation, speaking loud enough for all around us to hear. “Hey, man... I don’t know if you remember, but we played against each other about four years ago, and after the game, you were telling me about some nutritional

supplement. I used it for a while and then stopped, and now for the life of me, I can't remember the name of it."

My head twists his way and my eyebrows draw inward, showing my confusion. "I'm not sure—"

"Yeah," Gage says, a bit louder, keeping my focus on him as we pass Keller. "They were these big horse pills you swore improved metabolism or some crap."

Just as I'm thinking this guy is bat-shit crazy, he grins and winks. In a low voice, he explains, "Figured you wanted a distraction to get past Keller."

Dawning hits me hard, and I manage a grateful smile. "Thanks. I'm not sure what I would've done had he spoken to me. I need to cool down a bit."

"Anytime," Gage replies, claps me on the shoulder, and moves toward the locker room, leaving me to my thoughts.

The team locker room is amazing, but I only had a quick peek inside during my initial tour. It's set in a half circle, as many are these days, which promotes a team atmosphere and provides opportunity for the coaches to address the team as a whole before, during, and after games. The Titans spared no expense in outfitting this place where many of us will spend much of our time. The showers are sleek and semiprivate, done in teak wood, and the floors are mosaic tiles of purple and silver to create the Titans' logo.

The entire locker room floor is covered in thick, dark gray carpeting with a purple border and the Titans' logo—at least fifteen feet in diameter—inlaid in the center. The carpet is high-end and pristine. I imagine there's probably a team of specialized janitors who care for it.

The cubbies are massive, built wide and deep and stained a deep charcoal gray. They have hooks and shelves for gear and uniforms and a built-in bench for the players to sit on. At the top of the cubby, mounted to wood, is chrome lettering that spells out each player's last name with purple backlighting.

None of the prior players' names have been removed, and I wonder if that's in tribute to them or if management is just waiting to replace them with our names.

Almost helplessly, my gaze finds my brother's cubby, locking onto the name *Dumelin* at the top. The locker is empty, but I can imagine his jersey hanging there. He wore number 62.

"Can't imagine that's easy for you, son." A hand comes to my shoulder, and I cringe as I recognize Keller's voice. "You want that locker, though, it's yours. Just say the word."

The other guys who'd filtered in before me watch, disbelief on their faces that Keller seems determined to flaunt my brother in my face.

I decide to set a tone that will get him off my back and leave my brother in the grave where he belongs. "We weren't that close. Give it to someone else."

"But... but..."

I don't wait around for him to finish stammering. I move away, causing his hand to fall from my shoulder.

Pretending an interest in the therapy room adjacent to the shower room, I walk through the doorway and pray to God Keller doesn't follow. If he mentions my brother again, I'm going to lose my position on the team as I'm going to end up punching him.

CHAPTER 2

Harlow

“LAW OFFICES OF Harlow Alston,” Bonita says sweetly into the phone. “How may I help you?”

I continue flipping through the mail Bonita had opened and sorted. She lays it out on the corner of her reception desk for me every day around mid-morning. I make myself come to her desk to go through it; otherwise, I’d never get out of my chair. I’m one of those workaholics who can sit in front of a computer for hours on end until my bladder threatens to erupt if I don’t go to the bathroom.

Bonita has other methods she employs to get me out of my chair. One day, she came into my office with a file to review, and her gaze fixated on something just over my shoulder.

“That’s the biggest spider I’ve ever seen,” she’d whispered cautiously. “Move very slowly out of your chair and—”

I came flying out of it so fast, it rolled backward and slammed into the windowsill. I was all the way out of my office before I looked back to see Bonita bent over laughing and shaking her head.

Tears in her eyes, she gasped, “As long as you’re up, you might as well take a quick walk around the block.”

It never seemed to matter to my faithful receptionist/secretary/paralegal/part-time surrogate mother that I work out every morning at five a.m. and am naturally athletic. I’m in prime shape, having played volleyball in college at Duquesne, and nowadays, I play in a high-powered rec league both in the spring and fall. I run half-marathons and spend most good-weather weekends hiking the Allegheny Mountains.

No, Bonita thinks I sit on my ass too much during the day, and she knows damn well I take work home with me and probably sit on my ass all night, so she takes it upon herself to get me moving when she deems I need it.

“Just a minute, please,” Bonita says and puts the caller on hold. “It’s Charlie Bitterman.”

“What is it this time?” I ask, still flipping through my mail. A legal pleading I’d been waiting on catches my eye and I pull it out to start reading.

“DWI,” she replies. “His grandfather bailed him out. Hearing is next month.”

“Thousand-dollar retainer,” I reply automatically. “Have him come in and meet me the week before the hearing.”

Bonita punches the button to reconnect the call. I pick up the mail and take it back into my office to review.

The big, shaggy beast lying in the corner raises his head to look at me.

“Do you need to go potty?” I ask him. Bonita usually handles the honors when I’m deep into my work, but since I’m up...

My dog blinks, rests his head back down with a sigh, and closes his droopy eyes.

“Lazy man,” I chide, but that’s my Odin. The biggest, fluffiest, laziest Bernese Mountain Dog in the world. Bonita once told me that the only reason he’s lazy is because I sit on my ass all day to work and that he’s taken on my personality.

Also, another perk of owning your own firm—you get to bring your dog to the office, something I never could’ve done when I worked at my father’s law firm. Despite the fact he’s a dog lover too, also owning two Bernese Mountain Dogs, he’s a firm believer that they don’t belong in a professional setting.

Settling into my chair, I kick my booted feet up onto my desk. Speaking of perks, one of the best of owning my own

firm? I make the rules, and my most favorite is that I can wear whatever the hell I want to practice law.

Today it's rag & bone dark-washed, boot-cut jeans, a crisp white button-up shirt with a long, pointed collar, and a cashmere shawl in navy blue. My camel-colored Stuart Weitzman ankle boots are buttery soft with a gold-plated, three-inch heel.

Even though the total cost of today's wardrobe is probably close to nine hundred dollars, my family would have an absolute conniption fit to see me dressed this way while practicing the prestigious career of law.

It's why I don't practice with them across the river in one of the modern buildings built of glass and chrome. The Alston Law Group is a family affair, consisting of my grandfather, my father, my aunt, my brother, and three cousins. Sure, there are non-Alston attorneys there, but they're grunge workers and will never own a piece of the pie. They basically come in, get the experience and a coveted line on their résumé, and then they move on.

I tried my hand at business and contract law with my dad proudly accepting me into the ranks. But it wasn't for me, and now I'm that lawyer across the river who helps poor people.

My family likes to give me hell about it, and while they still routinely try to get me to give up this slog and join them again, they also know I'm incredibly happy on the path I've chosen.

Is it hard work?

Hell yes. Sixty to eighty hours a week, and I can't remember the last time I took a vacation.

Do I make a lot of money?

Hell no. Owning your own law firm is a grind, and there are too many attorneys and not enough clients. Luckily, the Alstons are old money spanning generations, so I'm a trust-fund kid. It launched my law firm, and now I use it to buy my fancy clothes and pay my fancy mortgage. It lets me serve the

poorer masses at discounted rates. Troubled Charlie Bitterman will pinch and scrape up that thousand-dollar retainer, knowing that's all I'll charge him, and knowing it's about eighty percent cheaper than other lawyers.

What he doesn't know is that it won't go into my pocket. It will go into the operating fund to help pay for my office lease here in Allegheny West, Bonita's salary and benefits, as well as a modest amount into social media advertising. Truth of the matter is, though, most of my clients come from personal referrals, or they're repeat offenders—like Charlie.

I read the pleading that had caught my attention, scoffing at the defendant's motion to dismiss before putting it aside to look at in more detail. It's going to take some research, and I'll probably work on it tonight at home.

Some bills, a thank-you card from a satisfied client I helped out of foreclosure, and junk mail that killed at least a tree or two in its creation.

After tossing them into the trash can, I look down at the last piece of mail in my hand, an unopened, nine-by-twelve manila envelope. Bonita has *carte blanche* to open all my mail, but she didn't open this one, and it's because she saw who sent it.

Brooks Dumelin.

The tears immediately well in my eyes, and I grasp the envelope against my chest. I have no clue why something has been sent from him, but it's clearly his handwriting. That's his name and address in the upper left-hand corner.

I pull the envelope back and look at it. It's fairly thick and postmarked yesterday, sent from Pittsburgh.

Brooks died eleven days ago. I just attended his memorial in Ithaca, New York, four days ago. I sat in the back of the church and stood at the back of the mourners, watching as his brokenhearted family grieved.

I grieved right along with them, just as I grieve now.

“Damn you,” I murmur low, knowing my words will reach Brooks up in Heaven. “Why are you plaguing me? I’d just shed the last of my tears, you jerk.”

I can almost hear him laughing ... he truly enjoyed irritating me.

Swinging my feet off my desk, I reach into my middle drawer for the letter opener. I make an efficient slit in the top and with shaking hands pull out a thick sheaf of papers.

On top is a handwritten letter from Brooks, and it charms me that he took the time to do it. Who handwrites stuff these days? It’s much faster to type.

The letter is dated last September 28. Five months ago.

Dear Little Bit ...

His nickname for me, because I always took things in small increments. He was Big Bit, because he went big on everything.

I know this letter is going to come as a shock, and you’re probably going to be pissed as hell at me, but I’m hoping you’ll forgive the favor I’m about to ask.

Enclosed with this letter is my Revocable Trust with a Last Will and Testament I had an attorney draw up for me. This is probably something that’ll never come to pass, as I hope to live a very long life complete with grandkids and rocking chairs, but God forbid something does happen before then, I wanted to make sure things were taken care of. I want you to handle my estate.

No, I need you to handle my estate because, as you well know, it’s going to be a bitch.

I know I should ask your permission first, even though I know you’ll say yes, but the truth is, I’m almost too embarrassed to put this on your shoulders. If you receive this letter, it means I’m dead and beyond embarrassment, so that’s some solace, I suppose. I’ve

asked the attorney who drafted these documents to mail them to you after my funeral.

I trust you to make sure my wishes are carried out. I've made you the trustee because I know there's going to be dissension among family members over this, and I know you're strong enough to make sure what needs to be done is done. You'll know what I mean when you read the documents.

We've talked about it enough, so I know this probably won't be a shock. More importantly than the trust, though... I need you to make sure he gets the journals. Please make him read them.

He's going to fight you every step of the way.

Be stronger. I know you can.

Also tell him I love him.

Make him believe it.

Love,

Big Bit

By the time I finish reading the letter, I'm sobbing again. Odin rises from the floor—the dog bed I bought him two years ago ignored because the floor is cooler and he's a mountain dog—and pads over to me. He sets his big head in my lap, and my fingers bury into his fur for comfort. Bonita pokes her head in my office before bringing me a box of tissues. She backs out quietly as I reread the letter, shutting the door behind her. She's such a gem, she'll immediately head to the break room to brew tea.

I take out the trust documents and peruse them with a heavy heart. They were drawn up by a well-known estate firm downtown, and I have indeed been listed as the trustee. Brooks didn't ask me to draw up this paperwork because he knew estate work wasn't my specialty. With an estate the size of his, he needed lawyers who knew how to make the thing unbreakable and as advantageous tax-wise as possible.

I am, however, more than qualified to assume the role of trustee. I don't have to. I could petition the court to appoint someone else, but the asshole—with all due affection—handwrote me a letter and implored me to carry out these wishes.

There's no way I can say no.

Besides, he'd probably haunt me if I did.

Setting the documents down on the desk, I take Odin's head in my hands and lift him up so we're eye-to-eye. "I should have let you bite Brooks that first time you met him."

His dark brown eyes seem to say he understands.

But truly, I'm not mad at Brooks's request. I'd do anything to help him, and I hope if he's watching over me, this gives him peace knowing I'll do all I can to carry out his wishes.

Bending down, I place a kiss on Odin's snout and then give him a gentle push away. He moves over to his water bowl and laps it up before settling down beside my desk.

I flip through the trust documents again, identify the information I need, and then pull up my email.

Many attorneys prefer to send documents via snail mail, but I think it's a ridiculous way to communicate if you have an email address.

I type in the subject line, *Brooks Dumelin Estate*, and then move to the body of the email.

Dear Mr. Dumelin,

I'm reaching out on behalf of your brother, Brooks, who has appointed me trustee of his estate.

It takes me over an hour to compose what should've been a very simple email. But I know Stone Dumelin is not going to welcome this correspondence. Over the two years I've been friends with Brooks, I'm well aware of the toxicity running through the Dumelin family and that Stone was all but an

outcast. I also know that Brooks has long wanted to make things right, but he never quite knew how.

Maybe now is the time.

I only hope Stone Dumelin will respond to me so I can make good on his dead brother's wishes.

CHAPTER 3

Stone

CHRIST, MY NERVES are sizzling. First game as a Titan.

And not just any first game.

The first game with a new team after the old team died.

First game against a powerhouse—the Washington Breakers—who are third in our conference. I think we're all anticipating a slaughter.

And yet, the knowledge that we're a hastily thrown together group of hockey players who will probably flub a lot of shit tonight hasn't diminished the fans' excitement. Since the arena doors opened, we've listened to the crowd's almost nonstop cheering.

Not a bad thing, I might add.

Stepping onto the ice for warm-ups weakened my legs a little. Normally, most fans are out on the concourse before the game starts, socializing and getting food and drinks. Sure, there are those who like to watch us warm up, but it's typically quiet outside of the music that's pumped in.

But so far, tonight's been different from anything I've ever seen.

Almost the entire arena was already packed with fans on their feet, screaming in a frenzy as we did our warm-up drills. Little kids with inspirational signs stood at the glass, watching us with big eyes. Several of us flipped pucks over the top of the glass to them, earning gap-toothed grins and shrieks of excitement.

And now it's the final quiet before the storm. Warm-up is complete, and we're back in the locker room for last-minute

prep—taping sticks, adjusting laces and pads, listening to Coach Keller’s bullet points about the Breakers.

I sit on my cubby bench, elbows on my knees, and listen to Keller. He runs hot and cold with his messaging, whether it’s on the ice, passing in the hall, or here in the locker room. Sometimes he’s all praise and positive affirmation, proclaiming us the hope and future of Pittsburgh. Other times he’s blowing his lid over something insignificant and calling us a bunch of rejects. There’s absolutely no consistency, and I can tell it’s unsettling to many of the players.

He probably got away with that at the college level, but regardless if we’re pros or minors, we’re paid employees. No one takes that well from their boss.

I don’t give a shit because not much penetrates these days. I’m here to ride this wave as long as I can, fully expecting I’ll be back down in the minors at some point.

At least for tonight, Keller’s caught up in the history we’re making here today and is attempting to be genuinely inspirational. I keep half an ear on what he’s saying.

I glance around the half-moon shape of the room, most of the players sitting the same as I am. Operations moved fast this past week, removing the chrome names of the victims from the tops of the lockers, replacing them with the names of those here today.

A young winger the team picked up from the Czech Republic sits at the cubby that used to be my brother’s. There was an attempt made by the owner of the team to see if I wanted Brooks’s cubby. Brienne Norcross approached me not long after we had our first team meeting, clearly not having received the message from Keller that I didn’t want to sit at my brother’s place. She pulled me aside and expressed another round of condolences for the loss of Brooks.

I thought it ironic when she said, “I didn’t know your brother...”

And I wanted to say, “Same, Brienne. Same.”

Whereas Keller had no tact in asking me about the cubby, Brienne was savvy enough to know that it could be a comfort or a hindrance, and I appreciated that she wanted my thoughts on the matter rather than making a unilateral decision.

It was still a quick choice—I told her I didn't want it. I was already having too much impostor syndrome trying to sit on his bench.

They instead gave me a spot seven down from his, and rather than the name *Dumelin* above mine, they put *S. Dumelin* so there was no mistaking I'm not my brother.

It was something I appreciated because it kept feelings at bay.

It's more than I can say for the annoying attorney Harlow Alston who isn't getting the hint when I ignore her outreach. She sent another email today and has left two voicemails. After the first email, I sent a curt reply basically telling her to leave me out of it. I graciously gave her my parents' contact information. But she wrote again, saying she didn't want to speak with my parents, that she had explicit instructions to deal with me.

But I don't want to deal with her. I don't want to think about my brother anymore.

So I'm ignoring her.

Whatever is going on with Brooks's estate is none of my business, and I've got no desire to step in to manage it or whatever the fuck she wants me to do. She can get my father on board, and I'm sure he'd be more than glad to dive in. I'm sure he and my mother are the sole beneficiaries anyway, so there's no reason for me to get involved.

Keller finishes his remarks, and it's time to go back out on the ice. We're greeted with a big, formal introduction with strobes, flashing lights, a raucous AC/DC song, and one of the league's best announcers to whip up the crowd.

I missed this part while down in the minors. We didn't get this level of fanfare, but at least the hockey was good.

What makes it extra special as I step onto the ice—feeling the familiar rush of adrenaline amping up my excitement and actually morphing that sizzle of nerves into energy—is the fact that my Aunt Bethany is in the stands. She came in from Ithaca yesterday and is staying at my apartment for a few days, insisting she needs to get me adequately set up. Today was spent buying curtains, towels, sheets, and other homey touches that don't mean anything to me, but it makes her feel good to be able to help.

Of course, giving Bethany a ticket to this game was a no-brainer. I really had to think about what to do with my father's repetitive requests for tickets. Ultimately, I had to tell him I couldn't swing it but maybe some other time.

This was followed by repeated demands via text, email, and voicemail wanting to know why, simply not understanding, I didn't secure season tickets for him already. He wanted to assure me they'd be coming to most of the home games. It's like they've already forgotten Brooks.

I'm starting to understand that it wasn't necessarily their younger son they decided to focus on to the exclusion of the older so much as they were attracted to his star power and what it could do for them.

It seems I've become that surrogate, and it makes my gut burn. My goal is to ignore my father and hope he gets the message and backs off.

As I circle the ice before the national anthem plays, I look around the stands. It's just a sea of people—anonymous faces—all cheering at the top of their lungs. I have no idea where Bethany's seat is, but I know she's here. She texted me when she arrived, having taken an Uber. I was able to get her a pass to come down to the family waiting area after the game, and she'll ride home with me. No going out and partying afterward, no matter the outcome.

Just a quiet night at home with the one family member who truly matters.



WE'RE SCORED ON within the first twenty-four seconds of the game against the Washington Breakers, and I can't help but think we're on our way to a bloodbath. But the fans aren't put out in the slightest. Normally, an arena will go quiet when the home guys are scored upon, but fuck me... they seem to get louder than they were before the game even started. The fans chant their team's name: *Titans, Titans, Titans*.

It's a battle cry from the fans telling us they're our seventh player out on the ice, and they aren't giving up.

Gage skates over to Patrik, has some words, and then motions the rest of the team in while the Breakers celebrate. Gage isn't our captain—that honor was given to Coen by Coach Keller—but he doesn't hesitate to show the icy calm that comes from being a veteran in this league.

“Not a big deal,” he says, and it's not lip service. I can tell he let that goal roll off his back, and he wants us to do the same. “These fans are with us. No matter what, we have them, so let's show them our resilience. Dig deep, give it your all for them. Got it?”

Everyone echoes his sentiments, except Coen. He doesn't say a word, face impassive, and merely skates off to the bench as we disperse for the new line to come on for the restart of play.

We battle it out for two periods and go into that last intermission only down 2–0. Not much Keller can say because we're holding our own. Our goalie, Patrik Senlund, is a bit of a basket case, and he's doing an awful lot of complaining that the defensemen are getting in his way and he can't see what's going on, but other than that... we're not doing that bad.

Over the last four practices, I earned and settled into the first line with Gage Heyward at right wing and Coen Highsmith at center, as well as Nolan Carrier and Kirill Zucker as our defensemen. Patrik got the call to be in net tonight, but I know Jesper is going to get a shot at the next game. They've

been fairly even in practices, and I think it'll come down to temperament.

On the ice, I have to admit that Gage, Coen, and I are gelling. It's always a little rocky to join a new line, and here we are putting three distinct styles together to form the offense. But for whatever reason, our speed, pacing, and strategy seem well-matched. While we run well-rehearsed plays, if there's a bobble, we seem to be able to pivot together well.

About the only thing not quite working up to par is Coen. He earned his spot on the first line because he's not only a good player but because he was on that line before the plane went down. While he's smooth and confident on the ice, he's just not operating at quite the same level of skill as he was prior to the crash. His personality seems to have changed, at least from what I've heard about him.

At times, he's withdrawn and moody, and he doesn't engage the other players in any meaningful way. If he gets frustrated by someone or something, he doesn't rant or rail. He ignores it almost to the extent I wonder if he feels anything at all. In my mind, I've likened him to a zombie off the ice because he seems to be stumbling aimlessly with nothing going on between the ears.

Regardless of these issues, we seem to be fairly in sync. That's probably more due to the fact we're experienced players and not rookies. We've got the shots on goal to stay competitive—it's just that their goalie is in the zone tonight and seems to be stopping everything with a sixth sense.

It's the start of the third period, and the Breakers score quickly, capitalizing on a missed pass from our third line. Disheartening, but clearly the difference between seasoned professionals going up against players still trying to find their footing. This type of mistake doesn't bother me and will only improve with more practice.

The red light comes on at the center-ice booth indicating a TV time-out. Our first line will be handling the face-off after,

so I stand on the ice, leaning against the boards. I normally don't pay attention to the fans, but I let my gaze roam, taking in the atmosphere. In all the games I've played in the professional league, including during Cup playoffs, I've never heard fans be as consistently loud in their cheers. Normally, there's waxing and waning, but these Titan proud haven't stopped giving their all to let us know they're with us. It's the most inspiring thing I've seen in a long time.

The red light dims, and we head out to the face-off circle, settling into our places while the ref prepares to drop the puck. Coen is taking the battle, and I watch the ice where the puck will fall, ready to grab it if it shoots my way. He's going to try to get it on Gage's stick who is standing to his left near the top of the circle, but if he's beat on the draw, I'm ready to jump on it.

Coen wins the draw, but it shoots past Gage and gets trapped against the boards. He scrabbles at it, pushing and shoving against a Breaker for possession. Gage rams an elbow back hard into the guy's ribs, which stuns him enough through the padding that Gage is able to poke the puck away with his stick.

Kirill picks it up, along with the Breaker who was just on Gage. He spins and dumps it back to Gage as I'm skating toward the blue line. Coen's on the opposite side, not two feet behind me.

Gage slides it across to me, and I push it into the Breakers' zone with Coen following right behind over the blue line. I dump it behind me to him, continuing to streak over to the left side of the net. Gage is on the right, near the boards but cutting in fast to the net. Our defenders are only a skate's length off, but they seem more like troublesome gnats than anything.

Coen executes a sharp pass to me, and my blade is already connecting in a pass right across the center of the Breaker's zone to hit Gage crashing in. He flips it over the goalie's right shoulder, and the arena erupts in a roar of victory so loud I swear the rafters are shaking.

The five of us come together in a big-ass group hug, and I swear I even seen Coen's lip curl slightly, which might indicate this goal stirred some level of happiness.

And thus, the new Titans have put their first points on the board. A goal by Gage and an assist by me.

It feels fucking fantastic.

CHAPTER 4

Stone

IT WAS A good practice.

As good as one could expect from a downtrodden team thrust together with immense pressure on our shoulders. We're not by any means professional quality, but we're not the Bad News Bears either. Some things are starting to come together.

Some things are not.

The battle for starting goalie is going to be intense. Both Patrik and Jesper are good and deserve to be on this team, in my opinion. Patrik has a technical edge over Jesper, but Jesper has nerves of steel, whereas Patrik can let his emotions tear him down. It's tough letting this play out, because having a solid goalie in net is crucial to filling up the wins-versus-losses columns.

There are other bright spots. Gage is quickly becoming the glue that's holding people together. The younger players gravitate to him for advice and direction because while Coen has been designated captain, he's built walls around himself. He's made it clear he really doesn't want the title, and I expect if Coach Keller has a sensible bone in his body, he'll designate Gage as the team leader sooner rather than later.

Not only has Coen checked out mentally, but his play is starting to suffer. He performed solidly in our first game, but it wasn't at his usual level. Yesterday's game wasn't so hot. He underperformed across the board, at least in comparison to his ability. Our star center looked sluggish and dull more often than not. The fan favorite known for his incredible energy, disarming smile, and roguish antics was nowhere to be seen. I expect this might stem from emotional issues relating to recent events, but it's so hard to tell. Maybe Coen was only good

because of the particular people he played with. Maybe without the players who died on that plane, Coen isn't going to be good at all.

Regardless, not my problem. I'm pleased with my level of play and the more I'm out on the ice, the better I'll get. Gage and I are clicking out there, and he reciprocated the favor I did him in the first game and fed me a pass for a quick slap shot yesterday to get my first goal with the team. Unfortunately, we lost 2-1, but it wasn't a blowout, and that's something we'll take right now.

Showered and changed into street clothes, I gather my duffel bag and swing it over my shoulder. As I pass Gage on the way out, he looks up and grins. "Great practice. That little juke move you did had Poe's head spinning."

He's talking about Camden Poe, one of the original Titans defensemen who wasn't on the plane. He'd missed that game due to a knee injury and was slowly working his way back. Today's was a good move, and a greater test of Poe's abilities. I might have lost him for a minute, but he caught up.

For the first time since joining this team, I have a moment of genuine lightheartedness with a teammate. I've had good practices before—I've had great practices before. I've played well, and some would say even better than when I was down with the Badgers.

But I haven't connected with anyone. Still so mired in my guilt over taking Brooks's place on this team, I haven't wanted to let anyone in lest they see what a fraud I am within the Dumelin family.

Gage catches me off guard, though. I'd been thinking about stopping by the grocery store, so when his compliment came, accompanied by such an easy smile, I opened up to it.

"Thanks, man," I reply. "You didn't do so bad yourself, for an old guy."

Gage snorts and turns his attention back to his gear bag. "See you tomorrow."

“Later.”

As I navigate through the basement level and up one flight of stairs to the players’ underground parking garage, I pull out my phone and see an email from Harlow Alston—again.

This now makes the third she’s sent, which is one more than I can tolerate since I’ve told her I’m not interested and to leave me alone.

It’s apparently a concept she can’t understand, and I wonder if it’s because of who she inherently is or if she’s driven by the monetary compensation she’ll get by dragging me into this.

When I first received communication from her, I googled her name.

Her website came up, and I was surprised to find that she’s an older attorney with short, iron-gray hair in a pixie cut. Her ice-blue eyes are cold, and the expression on her face said, “Don’t dare fuck with me.”

She looks like she could chew up anyone and spit them out without so much as breaking a sweat. She looks like just the type of attorney I would hire if I had legal woes.

She’s clearly a fucking bulldog and doesn’t know when to quit, and it’s pissing me off.

I pull up this most recent email.

Dear Mr. Dumelin,

In regard to your last communication wherein you asked me to leave you alone, I am sorry, sir, but I cannot do that. I am acting on your late brother’s behalf, and I have very important information that we must discuss. This is not something you can ignore. I am demanding that you take this seriously and reach out to me so we can schedule an appropriate time for you to come into my office and go over these issues.

If your schedule is such that you cannot come in, we can certainly do a telephone conference. However, there are documents for you to review and sign in front of a notary public, which will require your presence in my office at some point.

I would suggest you give your brother the respect he deserves and call as expeditiously as possible to make an appointment.

Sincerely,

Harlow Alston

My blood boils as I read back over the line where she tells me to give respect to my brother. Who in the fuck does she think she is? She doesn't know me, and I know she sure as hell didn't know my brother. Some high-powered lawyer he must've hired before he died to do something that needs my attention. More than likely some type of release to his estate so my parents can claim it all, which can most certainly be done via mail and without bothering me.

I read her email again, and I know she's not going away.

My fury doesn't abate but seems to burn brighter. I'm already burdened by so much fucking guilt that I've taken my brother's place on this team, I don't need some high-and-mighty bitch telling me I owe my brother respect. Does she think I don't understand that?

She could never know that our estrangement before his death has caused me to question every motive I've ever had in ignoring a repair to our relationship. I don't need any extra burden added to my plate.

Grocery store be damned... I'm going to handle this right now, so I don't have to hear from this woman ever again. I copy and paste the address at the bottom of her email, put it into Google Maps, and when I get to my car, I set out for her office, intent on not only putting her in her place but putting my brother's ghost far behind me.

Once I get her off my back, I can be done with Brooks Dumelin.



BASED ON OUTWARD appearances, Harlow Alston's law firm is not what I expected. It's in the Allegheny West neighborhood in a Victorian row house on a tree-lined street. When I googled

her, her picture was in a sleek chrome-and-glass office overlooking the city. Perhaps she's moved, but the hardened-looking older woman I saw on Google didn't look like her office would be so cute or informal.

I easily find side alley parking, zipping my coat when I get out of my car. The wind is bone chilling. Although spring is just around the corner, it sure as shit doesn't feel like it today. In fact, the skies are gray with darker clouds brewing. I should check the weather to see if we're getting rain or snow.

A brass plaque hangs on the black exterior door to the rose-colored brick Victorian that serves as Ms. Alston's office. It bears her name only, and as I enter, I find myself in a small foyer with a staircase leading up but with a velvet rope cordoning it off.

To the left is another black wooden door, and I assume that must be the law office.

Without hesitation, I enter and take a quick sweep of my surroundings. Clearly a lobby as noted by the traditional-looking furniture as well as an antique desk with a woman sitting behind it.

A door to the left is closed, and a brass nameplate on the wall beside it reads Harlow Alston, Esquire.

To the right is another closed door, also with a brass plate affixed that says Restroom. To the left of that is a short hallway that leads to the back of the first floor, but it's darkened by shadows and presumably unused.

I'm relieved to see no other people in here because I'm so mad at this attorney for refusing to leave me alone and then threatening me, I'm pretty sure I'm not going to keep my temper under control. From a PR standpoint, I'm sure the Titans' organization doesn't want me running about being a dick in public.

The receptionist—a kindly looking lady who could easily pass as someone's soccer mom—smiles up at me. “Welcome. How may I help you?”

“I’m here to see Harlow Alston,” I reply tightly.

“Of course.” The receptionist smiles again and clacks on her keyboard, eyes focused on the computer screen. “She has an available appointment tomorrow at two p.m. What type of matter is it for?”

My palms press against her desk, and I bend over her in an attempt at intimidation. “I want to see her now.”

The woman is not intimidated in the slightest. She lifts her chin and narrows her eyes. “She’s not available right now. Her first available appointment is—”

I point at the closed door to the left. “Is that her office?”

She merely presses her lips together in a clear refusal to help me achieve my goal of putting this attorney in her place.

I glance at the door and back at the receptionist. “Is she in there now?”

It’s at this point the receptionist looks alarmed, figuring me for perhaps a nutjob who might want to off her boss.

I don’t wait for her to answer, pushing off the desk and heading for Alston’s office door.

The receptionist is far sprier than I gave her credit for, and apparently doesn’t have a meek bone in her body. She scrambles up from her chair and runs to intercept me before I can open the closed door.

“Sir,” she says with authority and disapproval, “she is busy and cannot see you. It’s completely rude for you to try to go in there without an appointment.”

She nervously glances down at my hands hanging loose at my sides. I cross them over my chest to show I mean no physical harm but that I can be every bit as mule-headed as she is.

Glaring down at the small lady with a short brown bob and deep brown eyes, I ask, “Rude, is it? What’s rude is that woman harassing me to take part in my brother’s estate that I

want nothing to do with. She's damn well going to hear it from my own lips this time, so she'll leave me alone."

The woman's eyes soften as she tips her head to the side. "Mr. Dumelin?"

I nod curtly.

Gone is the slight empathy that I thought I saw when she understood I'm Brooks's brother, her face businesslike again. "It's important that you meet with Ms. Alston. I can set an appointment for you tomorrow, or we can even try for a phone conference another time. Or you can wait to see if she has a bit of time later. But right now, she is in the middle of drafting a very important discovery that has a deadline—"

And I'm done listening to excuses. She harassed me, now I'm here.

I step around the receptionist and reach for the closed door. I twist the knob and push it open quickly before she can impede my progress. Taking one firm step into the room, I lock on a gorgeous redhead sitting behind a desk. She's most certainly not the lawyer I saw on the internet listed as Harlow Alston.

One more step into her office and her head lifts, green eyes flashing with irritation to see me there.

A third step in, intending to close the door on the receptionist who I feel right behind me, when a low, rumbling growl emits from behind the woman's desk. To my astonishment, a big, black, shaggy beast stands and prowls around the corner, its eyes focused on me.

Christ, the dog has to be at least a hundred and thirty pounds and looks built of solid muscle. It's got luxurious, long black fur with a white chest and brown cheeks and eyebrows. Its legs are brown with white stocking feet, and I feel like I should know what type of dog this is, but I'm still discombobulated from the fact that it's growling at me.

And not a warning growl, but rather one that appears to signal imminent attack as its lips peel back to reveal long,

gleaming canines.

I stand utterly still, remembering somehow that you shouldn't run from a bear as they'll consider you prey, and give chase. Does that apply to dogs? I don't know as I have no experience with them. My mother abhorred any animal with fur that could mess up her meticulously clean house.

The dog continues to advance ever so slowly.

"Um... would you like to call off your dog, lady?" I mutter uneasily.

The woman settles back in her chair, crossing one leg over the other. She drums her fingertips on the armrests and looks amused. "I don't know... do you have a good reason for barging into my office uninvited and without an appointment?"

"I'm Stone Dumelin."

"Yes," she says lazily. "I recognize you."

"Well, you wanted to see me, and now I'm here. So call off the damn dog."

She seems to consider my request, and I'm not sure what she'll do. Eventually, she says *Odin* in a soft voice, and the dog stops in its tracks.

It doesn't move, though, lips still peeled back. We engage in a staring contest, and I feel a slight sweat break out on my neck.

But then the woman calls him to her side with a snap of her fingers. "Come lie down."

The dog immediately turns and pads back to her side, a testament to how well trained he is. I bet she could have easily said *attack*, and I'd be history.

The dog doesn't lie down and instead sits beside her chair so that he remains visible.

I think the fucking dog is sending a clear message that he's watching me.

The woman leans to the right, locking eyes with the receptionist. “It’s okay, Bonita. You can close the door behind you.”

“Would you like me to bring in a coffee or tea service?” Bonita asks politely. I keep my eyes on the dog.

“No, that won’t be necessary. We only offer that to our polite guests.”

My gaze slides to her, my irritation growing deeper at this predicament I’m in. I thought I was going to be able to walk in, bully her into backing down, and walk out in peace. Instead, the attorney I’m looking for isn’t even sitting behind the desk, and I came pretty close to having my throat ripped out by her dog.

“I’m looking for Harlow Alston. Can you tell me where she is so I can have a few moments of her time to discuss the fact that I don’t want shit to do with my brother’s estate?”

The redhead leans forward in her chair, clasps her hands on her desk. “You did see the sign outside the door that said Harlow Alston, did you not?”

I roll my eyes. “Of course, I did. I also googled the woman, and she’s about thirty years older than you with gray hair.”

The woman nods in understanding and stands from her chair. “That would be my aunt, Hayley Alston. Her firm is across the river, downtown. I’m Harlow, and I’m the attorney who contacted you.”

This throws me off. I came in hell-bent on putting this woman in her place, but in my mind, I’d envisioned me going to battle with that older female attorney who looks like she eats nails for breakfast.

I’m not prepared for this stunning woman who doesn’t look like she could be more than her late twenties and more suited to a fashion runway than behind a desk practicing law.

Also, she's not dressed like I imagined a lawyer would be. She's wearing jeans and a colorful sweater, and her hair is up in a ponytail. She most definitely doesn't look like the bulldog litigator I'd been expecting.

She'd be exactly the type of woman I'd hit on in a bar, and if I was lucky, would go home with at night.

She holds out her hand across the desk. "I'm glad to meet you finally, Mr. Dumelin. May I call you Stone?"

I refuse to shake her hand or give her permission to use my first name. But I move closer to her desk so that my imposing height speaks to her. "I'm not staying. I'm merely here to tell you that whatever I need to do to get you to leave me alone, just tell me. If I have to sign a release, I'll sign it. I don't want anything to do with my brother's estate. Most certainly don't want you contacting me again."

Harlow seems neither offended nor angry by my proclamation. If anything, she looks sorrowful. But that makes no sense, so I disregard it.

"I wish I could do that, Stone. But I made a promise to your brother—"

"You mean, you took money from my brother to carry out his legal wishes," I snap.

She takes a breath and lets it out slowly to maintain her composure. "There are certain things we must do for his estate ___"

"Which I'm not interested in," I growl. "And you're not hearing me."

"I'm hearing you loud and clear." Her tone is tight, eyes flashing like dark emeralds with fire behind them. "But you're clearly determined to be a jerk about this. Your brother went out of his way—"

"My brother never did anything out of his way for me," I roar at her, stepping backward and stumbling over one of her guest chairs. It enrages me further, and I swipe at it, sending it

tumbling end over end. I faintly hear something crack—maybe one of the legs—but I’m beyond giving two fucks.

The dog beside the attorney utters a low growl but doesn’t move. I expect my outburst to have her attention riveted on me, but she’s instead looking at the chair lying on its side.

I glance at it, note it looks delicate with spindled legs, brocade covering the seat, and intricate, inlaid carvings on the back. Not my taste at all, and the leg is clearly broken at the base where it attaches.

Not an ounce of shame for that.

“Do not contact me again,” I warn ominously. Her eyes slide my way, wary and passive. “Email me whatever I need to sign to release you from whatever obligation you feel you need to soothe your conscience for the work my brother hired you to do. I’ll get it back to you immediately. Contact me again, and I’ll report you to whatever agency governs people like you.”

Gone is the wariness, and her eyes blaze again with anger, but she watches me mutely. I stare at her resolutely, conveying the silent message I’m not to be fucked with. When I think she understands, I pivot sharply and head for the door.

Past the broken chair.

I glance down at it but not at her. “Send me a bill for that, and I’ll gladly pay it.”

I don’t look back as I storm out of her office and hopefully toward a life that is now free from my ghosts and demons.

CHAPTER 5

Harlow

MY HEART THUMPS hard after Stone Dumelin leaves my office, slamming the door behind him. And despite that very unpleasant experience, I honestly had not expected any different. Over the course of my friendship with Brooks, I had come to know Stone, and I'd been steeling myself for this confrontation.

It's why Brooks hated to ask me to be the one to make sure this all gets settled. It's why he hated to name me trustee, but he knew I'd fight tooth and nail to see that his wishes were carried out. More than just Stone being a thorn in my side regarding the estate, I was contacted by his father yesterday asking about "his share" of things.

I don't know if Stone told his father to contact me, but I doubt it. I know they weren't on the greatest terms when Brooks died. I could see that firsthand at the memorial service where Stone would try to comfort his mother, but she'd pull away. I saw it when his own father ignored him, and it was clear by his words at the service that he felt he only had one son worthy of mention.

This behavior was also not a surprise. In fact, Brooks had told me once that his family was so fractured, nothing would ever put it back together.

I believe him now.

There's no sense in calling his father back yet. I have to advise Stone about Brooks's will and trust, which is the first order of business. Once I do that, I will call his father and tell him what he's entitled to, but I'll put it off for now.

I move around my desk and squat to the broken chair. The leg is completely snapped off, and I want to grind my teeth

with how blasé Stone was about breaking it.

Send me a bill, he'd said.

As if anything could replace the broken leg on this eighteenth-century Hepplewhite that is part of a matching set. It's not only worth a small fortune, but more importantly, it was my great-grandmother's, lovingly passed down to the eldest daughter in each generation. My mother gifted me with them two years ago when I opened my law firm, believing I'd enjoy them far more than she would.

Sending Stone a bill wasn't going to undo the damage.

"Well, he was as pleasant as a cornered porcupine," Bonita says from my doorway. I look up to see her wringing her hands. "I'm sorry... I tried to stop him."

"Oh, it's okay," I assure her as I rise, holding the chair leg. "He's just like Brooks described him, and I would never want you to try to stop someone that much bigger than you."

"If only I'd had time to get my Mace out of my bag," Bonita muses.

"No," I drawl in exaggerated censure. "We do not mace clients either."

"Pity," she quips, and I snort with laughter. Stepping forward, she holds her hand out. "Let me have it, and I'll see if I can superglue it back on."

Rather than give her the broken leg, I pull it into me protectively, my mouth gaping.

"Just kidding." She laughs, pushing her hand closer. "I'll go put it somewhere for safekeeping, and I'll start contacting antique repair stores to see how we can get it fixed."

"Thank you, Bonita." I give her the wooden leg, my fingers grazing over the intricate carvings down to the rectangular spade foot. "I'm going to take Odin for a walk and grab a salad down at the deli. Want something?"

“No, thanks,” she replies. “I brought in a sandwich. Did you finish the Graves’ discovery?”

“I’ve got about another hour.” I really should sit down and finish it now, but after that encounter with Stone Dumelin, a walk would do me good as well. “I’ll dive into it when we get back.”



FOUR HOURS LATER, I can’t finish the damn Graves’ discovery. It’s due in three days, and I’ve got a little extra time, but I always like being ahead on my deadlines. I’m a planner, and I had planned for today to be the day I’d finish it. I can’t do it tomorrow as I’m in court most of the day, and the day after I’m taking a continuing legal education class. It has to be finished today so I’m not scrambling on the due date, and I’m not reduced to asking for an extension, which isn’t my style. I like getting my stuff done to show I’m prepared and ready for battle at all times.

It’s that stupid Stone Dumelin who’s thrown off my entire day. Just a two-minute exchange with him, and I can’t stop worrying about Brooks’s estate and whether Stone will cooperate.

Actually, I don’t wonder about that. I know he won’t, and I know he’ll never step foot in this office again. It makes it infinitely harder to carry out Brooks’s wishes, and the most I can do is reach out in writing and give him a bit more explanation.

And until I send out that communication, I know I won’t be able to concentrate on anything else.

I save the draft answers to interrogatories for the Graves’ case and exit out of it. I pull up the template letterhead in Word, prepared to start my letter to Stone Dumelin.

I type in bold letters, all caps: VIA CERTIFIED MAIL, RETURN RECEIPT REQUESTED.

No email to Stone. I want to know he has this letter in hand so I can be assured he's on official notice of the bequeaths made to him. What he chooses to do with that is up to him, but I'm hoping to spark enough of his interest that a future conversation might occur.

After typing in the reference to his case, I start the letter formally: *Dear Mr. Dumelin.*

It's as far as I get before I have to lean back in my chair and think how to handle this. It calls for a bit of mental manipulation, and I'm not above that. Especially after the jerk broke my Hepplewhite.

But I knew he'd be a jerk. At least Brooks had me convinced of that.

Glancing down at Odin happily snoozing beside my desk, I do wonder if Stone has any good in him. Odin is a gentle dog, but his breed can be wary of strangers. Rather than hang back by my side while sizing up Stone, he went into full-on protection mode. Was that because he sensed something sinister? Brooks painted his brother in a not-so-flattering light over the last year, but nothing that would cause me concern for my safety.

And yet Odin growled and advanced on him. He's never done that before, and that includes getting harassed by men sometimes when we go out for a run. Usually his size is enough to keep most men a good fifteen feet back.

"What did you sense about him?" I muse, and something in my tone brings Odin out of his sleep. He lifts his big head and tilts it, staring at me speculatively. "Is he a bad person, or have circumstances just made him extra ornery?"

Odin chuffs—not sure if that's an agreement with one of my options or an indication he's as perplexed as I am, but he sets his head back down. It's after his eyes slowly close in slumber that I lean forward in my chair and start typing.

I always smile as I type the first few sentences of any document. My father, the esteemed Robert Frederick Alston

III, current managing partner of the Alston Law Group—where my aunt Hayley works—would be appalled to see me doing my own work this way. Over at my dad’s chrome-and-steel office in the sky, there are pools of secretaries who do nothing but transcribe dictations from the attorneys. Even the younger ones who are all adept at typing their own stuff don’t bother to flex their fingers. It would be beneath their hourly billing rate to waste on typing when they could bill out legal theory and strategy.

I guess it’s a status symbol, but I think it’s a waste of resources, especially when I can type faster than I can dictate, and I can make changes as I go along. I’m far more efficient, and I don’t bill nearly the hourly rate that my family members across the river charge.

If I sound disapproving, trust me, I’m not. I love them all and have mad respect for their prowess. They are one of the best-regarded firms in the entire state.

Just as they don’t disapprove of my desire to own a small firm to help more of the downtrodden than the elite rich. Sure, I get teased at get-togethers, and it’s a well-known fact that this is little more than a hobby versus a means to live. My career is immensely enjoyable because I can freely help those I want.

At least that was the case until Stone Dumelin got dumped in my lap.

So, dear Mr. Dumelin... listen up, asshole.

I’m sincerely regretful our meeting today—although spontaneous and spur of the moment—was not more productive. I’m afraid you’re laboring under some deep pain and simply don’t know how to relate to the fact that you have always been on your brother’s mind, even if it hasn’t felt that way.

There. A little tease that I know far more about his family dynamics than he could have imagined. He made reference to me handling this case for the money, and he’s so wrong about that. I’m doing this because I loved Brooks.

Since we were not able to have a serious discussion, I'm going to outline in this letter some important key things for you to consider. It is my hope that you will want to be a willing participant in this process, but after receiving this letter, should you choose not to, I will help extricate you from any obligations.

And here's where I decide to give him the bare facts, so he's forced to at least respond to me in some way. I decide good old-fashioned bullet points are the way to go for simplicity.

- *Upon his death, your brother's trust appointed me to become his successor trustee. That means I am in charge of ensuring his estate is parceled out pursuant to his wishes. Please note that I am doing this free of charge.*
- *You are not the sole beneficiary of the trust and the pour-over will, but you are by far the main recipient. This includes not only substantial savings and investments, but two homes here in Pennsylvania.*
- *If you do not want what your brother has left you, he has given very specific instructions that his estate be doled out to various charities. I mention this only because you told me to contact your father, but Brooks was adamant that your parents not receive anything other than some specific bequests he has made.*
- *Lastly, your brother has left you some personal effects that I must hand over to you in person. You can either arrange to meet me here for such transfer, or we can meet at a place of your choosing. At that time, you can sign either documents transferring the estate assets into your name or the necessary paperwork for the assets to go to charity. Whichever course you choose, you will have to sign paperwork.*
- *If you refuse to sign the paperwork, I will be forced to ask the court to compel you to do so, which will be a nasty affair and a complete waste of our time. Please just get off your high horse and come do the right thing.*

It is my hope after you read this letter, you will call my assistant, Bonita Hernandez, and set up a mutually convenient appointment. Please do not show up and expect to be seen. Please do not walk into my office again uninvited, because I will let Odin eat you next time.

Lastly, I'd send you a bill for the broken chair, but unfortunately, you can't put a price on an eighteenth-century Hepplewhite passed down through our family to each eldest daughter from my great-grandmother. But your gesture was somewhat thoughtful.

I smirk at those last lines. If the man has a conscience at all, that should at least prick. If he doesn't, he's a bigger asshole than I thought, but regardless... I just want him to accept his fate so I can get this over with.

I consider how to end the letter and decide to do it with complete formality.

In sincere appreciation of your consideration, yours truly,

Harlow Alston, Esq.

Perfectly written, if I do say so myself. I read it over one more time, save the document, and then shoot it in an email to Bonita.

Standing from my desk, I move to the reception area just as Bonita is pulling the letter up on her screen.

"I know it's late in the day, but do you mind getting that out certified mail?" I ask.

"Don't mind at all," she says as she reads over the letter. I watch as she makes a few proofing changes, not bothering to ask if I agree with them. She's far better at that stuff than I am. I'm about the substance—she's about making it pretty.

"You know," Bonita drawls as she spins her chair toward the printer to grab the letter. "Stone Dumelin is a hottie."

My eyebrows jet upward. "You think?"

"Oh, come on, Harlow," she chides, knowing I'm being intentionally obtuse. "He and Brooks look just alike, and we both know Brooks was a hottie too."

Shrugging, I lean against her desk with my hip. "You can be the hottest thing since Stephen Amell in *Arrow*, but if you're a jerk, it makes you unattractive."

“But is he really a jerk, or is he in pain and doesn’t know how to be any other way?” she queries.

“Stop it,” I order, laughing at her immensely huge bleeding heart. She does it with all my clients, looking for that inner trauma that causes them to do the things they do. She immediately forgives them for it and fosters a loving atmosphere while they’re clients of mine.

It’s sweet sometimes, but right now, I don’t have a lot of sympathy for Stone. I’m still grieving for Brooks, and I don’t like that Stone doesn’t like Brooks.

It makes us enemies, actually.

Bonita hands me the letter and a pen, and I sign my name to it.

“Well, let’s see if that letter gets him to man up and treat us with some respect.” I turn toward my office, intent on jumping back on the Graves’ discovery, hoping that this letter will light a fire under Stone’s butt, especially now that he knows his brother left it all to him and not his parents.

CHAPTER 6

Stone

THE SIGN ON the elevator says Out of Service, and I sigh. It was leg day in the gym, and I hit it hard. Climbing six flights of stairs is doable, but given the choice between the two, I'd prefer the elevator right now.

Hefting my bag over my shoulder, I take the stairs two at a time, double-timing it just to show I can.

Not that anyone's watching.

Pulling my keys out, I unlock the apartment door, jiggling it a bit to work past the rusted springs. I've put in a request to the landlord to fix it, but I'm not holding my breath.

Stepping inside, the aroma of something divine hits my nose, and I can hear Aunt Bethany humming a tune in the kitchen. She's leaving tomorrow, having declared that I am sufficiently set up in my apartment and should be able to function without her. I may be a grown-ass man at twenty-seven, but I'm not going to lie—it's been nice having her here.

It's not just having her support as I settle into a new city, but she's also been fielding my father's calls. He's started bugging her since I'm not responding to him. She's often stepped in as mediator, but she hasn't had to play that role in quite a while as it was months before Brooks died that my father and I last talked. The most recent Christmas, I stayed in Cleveland, holed up in my apartment with some brunette named Cherry, but I swear I didn't pick her up in a bar or strip joint.

Met her at the gym, which might be just as cliché, but she was a good diversion over the holidays when I didn't have hockey games.

Of course, I'd not been invited home by either of my parents, nor did they acknowledge me in any way. No call. No card. No gifts.

Which is fine. I didn't do any of that either, but I knew it wasn't expected or wanted on their end. We had come to a point in our relationship where we were virtual strangers.

Brooks was a little different. We at least communicated on Christmas. He called me and left a voicemail, wishing me happy holidays and that he'd see me at home if I was going to make it in. He knew I wouldn't, or maybe he didn't want to know I wouldn't.

I didn't call him back but sent him a text. I tried to make it as jolly as possible: *Thanks for the call. Going to stay here for the holidays. Schedule too busy. Great hearing your voice.*

Brooks responded with a thumbs-up emoji.

And that was the extent of our communication for Christmas.

We didn't reach out to each other for New Year's.

He died on February 20.

I'd saved his last voicemail, and I play it sometimes just to hear his voice. Also to punish myself for not trying harder. But sometimes, guilt doesn't get me. It's anger that he didn't try harder either.

Dropping my duffel bag on the couch, I walk into the kitchen separated from the living room by a half wall. Bethany is preparing to move a heavy pot of something boiling to the sink, and I spring into action.

"Let me get that," I say, moving in to take the potholders from her.

"Thank you," she breathes out, stepping back as I turn to the kitchen sink and dump the potatoes into a colander already there. "What smells so good?"

“Meatloaf,” she replies, and my stomach rumbles. It’s one of my favorite comfort foods, and Bethany does a mean one. I expect she’s giving me my last taste of home cooking.

Potatoes dumped, I put the empty pot back on the stove while Bethany pulls milk and butter from the fridge.

She nods toward the kitchen table. “You got some mail today I had to sign for.”

Frowning, I move that way as I shouldn’t be getting much mail at all. Just my stuff forwarded from the address change in Cleveland, but even that was only a slow trickle.

I see the envelope with two green strips left from a certified-mail ticket that had been pulled off. I flip it over and clench my teeth as I see Harlow Alston’s name and return address in the left corner. The envelope is thin and probably contains no more than a sheet or two.

Fuck, that woman moves fast. We just had our “exchange” yesterday when I offended her, her dog almost ate me, and I broke a piece of her furniture.

It’s probably the bill, which I’ll gladly pay.

I run my finger inside to open it up and pull out what is not a repair invoice but a two-page letter from Ms. Alston.

Glancing up, I see Bethany mashing potatoes, so I take the time to read it.

My eyes rove over the words, mostly formal but with enough bite to know she’s still pissed about yesterday.

I start to read the bullet points, and I freeze when I make it to the second one.

I’m the main beneficiary of Brooks’s estate?

My head snaps up, and I look to my aunt. She catches my movement and raises an eyebrow. “What’s up?”

“This attorney said Brooks left his estate to me,” I mutter in disbelief, and read the bullet point again. I skim the rest of the words and summarize the contents for my aunt. “He left

me almost everything, including two houses here in Pennsylvania. Looks like he might have left something for my parents, but the bulk to me. The attorney says there are some personal possessions he wanted me to have. And if I don't want to accept, he wants it to go to charity.”

Bethany stands with the potato masher in her hand—a utensil she certainly went out and bought to stock in my kitchen as I've never owned one—surprise etched on her face. “Got to say, didn't see that coming.”

“So, it's not just me, then,” I murmur, alluding to the fact I had no relationship with Brooks and clearly, it was obvious to other family members.

“Your dad is going to be upset,” she says quietly, returning her attention back to her task.

I snort, because I'm quite sure he's assuming he and my mom are the beneficiaries.

Hell, I assumed that.

I expect his calls and texts will pick up in frequency, and I also expect he might even demand I hand some of it over.

Continuing on with the letter, I get to the part where I apparently broke more than just some chair she bought at IKEA, and wince. I have no fucking clue what a Hepplewhite is, but the description *eighteenth-century* has me thinking it's going to ding my savings account.

Not a big deal. I was a smart investor when I played for the Eagles, and I've lived frugally as a Badger, given that my pay was nothing compared to what I made in the majors.

“Any idea what a Hepplewhite is?” I ask Bethany.

“Furniture,” she replies. “He was a cabinet maker in London but also made other stuff. Sort of like Chippendale, I think.”

Now Chippendale I've heard of, and I know this is going to cost me big.

“Why do you ask?”

Pulling out a chair to the kitchen table, I sink into it with a sigh. “Remember when I came home in a bad mood yesterday?”

“Uh-huh,” she replies with a smirk.

She’s smirking because I snapped at her for something, and she laid into me good. It was a lot of “you need to show respect” and “don’t take it out on the one family member who supports you” and “get your head out of your ass.” She put me in my place, and I was overly solicitous the rest of the night as we watched a movie before she went off to bed in my room. I’ve been sleeping on the couch, which is horribly uncomfortable.

“Well, I was in a bad mood yesterday because I went to see this attorney handling Brooks’s estate.”

Bethany stops mashing, giving me her full attention.

“It wasn’t a good meeting. I sort of stormed her office. She had a dog that wanted to rip out my throat. I kicked over a chair and broke it. Apparently, it’s a Hepplewhite.”

“Oh, wow,” she breathes, eyes tender with commiseration, though I’m not sure if it’s for me or the Hepplewhite.

“And apparently, it was a piece handed down through generations.”

“Ouch,” she quips.

“Yeah, ouch,” I agree, silently ruminating if there’s any way to make that better. But it’s not a top priority. I have to decide what to do with Brooks’s estate. “Why would Brooks leave me with everything? We weren’t close in the end. He was close to our parents.”

“Are you sure about that?” Bethany asks, her tone suggesting she knows something I don’t.

“I know he and I weren’t close, so I’m assuming the converse, that he was close with my parents. They’re the ones

who divided us. They're the ones who doted on him, proclaiming him the water walker of the family."

Bethany puts the masher in the pot and walks over to me. She pats my cheek before taking the chair to my right. "I don't know what your parents think, as they don't tell me anything. They know my allegiance to you. And I didn't talk to Brooks about those sorts of things. We had a fun aunt-nephew relationship. Maybe I should've pushed more, but honestly, it was enough to just be there for you. However, I suspect that you and your brother were far more united than divided in relation to your parents."

"I don't understand how it happened," I grumble angrily. I want to blame my parents and Brooks, but no matter what, I'm part of the cause. I could have called him back during the Christmas holidays rather than text him.

Maybe I should've tried harder. If I had, I probably wouldn't be weighed down with this oppressive guilt now that he's dead.

"What are you going to do?" Bethany asks, nodding at the letter tossed onto the table.

Scrubbing my hands over my face, I give her a tortured look. "I don't know. My ego wants to tell her to give it all away. But I'm curious about the personal things he left me that she mentioned. I think my first order of business, though, is to figure out how to repair her chair."

"Assuming it can be fixed," she points out.

"Yeah, assuming," I mumble.

"Start googling," she advises and pops up from the chair. "I'll finish dinner."

"I need to make a call first."

Bethany hums a tune while I slide my phone from my pocket and pull up one of the attorney's emails. Her phone number is linked at the bottom, and I use it to call her office.

I recognize the receptionist's voice when she answers. "Law offices of Harlow Alston, this is Bonita. How may I help you?"

"Um... yeah, this is Stone Dumelin." I cut a glance to Bethany, intently mashing potatoes, although I know she's listening.

"Ah," Bonita murmurs with exaggerated recognition. "Breaker of chairs and potential dog food."

I tamp down my temper—I probably deserved that. I mean, it's totally disrespectful to a potential client, but somehow I doubt Harlow Alston would fire her for impertinence.

"I need to make an appointment with Ms. Alston," I say, my tone polite, which is really hard because anything dealing with my brother's death induces a simmering irritation.

"Of course, you do," she says merrily, and I hear her clacking away on her keyboard. "I know how busy you are, Mr. Dumelin. What's convenient for you and your game schedule?"

I wasn't expecting that level of consideration, given that I pretty much barreled past her into her boss's office.

"I have a home game tomorrow, so that's out. Friday, we'll have a mid-morning meeting and light skate, so I could do Friday afternoon, if she's available."

"Hmm." More clacking on her keyboard. "She can see you at three p.m., if that works."

"That works."

"Dress warm," she says.

I blink in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"It's going to snow, and she likes to have fun with her clients. She insists on making snow angels out on the sidewalk."

Pulling the phone away from my ear, I stare stupidly at it before putting it back. “Snow angels?”

“Just kidding,” she chirps, laughing at my bewilderment. “But I know she wants to take you to your brother’s condo, which is only a few blocks away, so it’s easier to walk. In other words, wear something you can walk through the snow in.”

“Um, okay.” I still have that feeling like I’m in the Twilight Zone with this woman, a bit on edge she might spring something else weird on me. But then I remember something more important. “The chair.”

“Ah, yes,” she says, voice dropping low in sorrow. “Poor chair. Poor Harlow, her legacy destroyed.”

I wince, not knowing if she’s exaggerating the personal loss. “I’d like to have it fixed.”

“That’s wonderful!” she exclaims joyfully. “I’ll call up Mr. Hepplewhite to let him know and... oh, wait... he died in 1768.”

“Now listen, lady,” I growl.

“Hourglass Restoration,” she cuts in over me.

“Hourglass Restoration,” I repeat, it dawning on me that’s the name of the company that does such things.

“I did some research yesterday after you left.”

I take that to mean she’s got the repairs well in hand, and it would be very easy for me to direct her to send me the bill. But while my guilt-riddled conscience would never let me take any affirmative steps toward reaching out to my brother, it’s pushing me to do something more than just pay for the Hepplewhite’s damage.

“I’ll take the chair with me on Friday and handle the repairs.”

The woman seems dumbstruck, because she doesn’t say anything. The silence is so extended, I say, “Are you there?”

“Yes, sorry... had to pick my jaw up off the floor.”

I roll my eyes, and I have a feeling I’ve awoken her inner sarcasm monster, and it’s not going into hiding with me. “See you Friday at three,” I mutter.

“Can’t wait,” she quips, and I can almost envision the joy on her face in giving me a hard time. “It will be all I’ll think about until then.”

I almost smile.

Almost.

Instead, I just hang up.

CHAPTER 7

Harlow

GLANCING DOWN AT my laptop clock, I note that it's getting close to three. I'm drafting a Complaint against a slumlord who refuses to fix the heating units in several apartments, asking the court to grant immediate relief. In other words, tell the landlord to get off his cheap ass and give these people some heat.

Three of the families just hired me today, and I've been researching and working on nothing but this case since. I'll have Bonita run over to the courthouse to file the Complaint, and I've asked the court to set a hearing for Monday. I hate that I can't do anything until then, but the justice system closes down on weekends.

I save the Complaint and shoot it over to Bonita via email with instructions to get the accompanying documents and filing fee ready. She'll have it for me to sign on my way out the door to show Stone the condo Brooks left him. No matter what he decides to do—keep the properties or give them to charity—those will require the most work, and I want to start on that first. Thus, the reason I want him to see the condo today.

Bending over, I rub my hand along Odin's hip as he snoozes. It wakes him, and he stretches his legs, lifting his head to give me a bleary but lopsided loll of the tongue, which I equate to a smile.

"You going to be good and not eat Mr. Dumelin today?" I ask him.

He pants happily as I scratch his butt, then lets his head flop back down.

The intercom on my phone buzzes, and I tap the button. Bonita's voice rings clear. "Your three o'clock, Mr. Dumelin, is here."

"Send him in," I reply, and she disconnects.

I stand from my chair, tugging down the hem of my Fair Isle sweater I wore today over fitted jeans. Because I knew it was going to snow, I have on a pair of weatherproof boots with shearling inside.

My office door opens, and Stone Dumelin walks in. Bonita had called him a hottie, but I couldn't appreciate any of it. But as I take him in—walking calmly rather than stomping—I can definitely see the resemblance to Brooks. Same dark-golden hair that somehow looks sun-streaked, longish all over and messy in a styled looking way. They definitely share the same hazel eyes that are on the lighter side, and the propensity to not shave. He's got a good three days' growth on his face, which he wears very, very well, but I don't think it's intentional. He doesn't seem the type who gives a shit what he looks like. Overall, it's a gruff, masculine aura he presents, but whereas Brooks always had a perpetual light in his eyes, Stone's seem a little dead.

Walking around my desk, I hold out my hand. "I'm glad you came back."

As we shake, his eyes cut to my left. I glance back to see that Odin has risen and is staring intently at Stone. He's not growling, and his ears aren't pinned back, but he radiates a little hostility, if I'm reading my dog right.

"He won't hurt you." My attempt to reassure Stone is met with a skeptical look as our hands separate.

Damn, his eyes really are pretty up close. Lighter than Brooks's were, and I swear, his lashes are downright thicker.

"Have a seat," I say, motioning to the two placeholder chairs Bonita brought in from the small conference room. I have no clue what she did with my Hepplewhite pair, but she said she'd take care of finding the best repair place.

Stone glances at the new seating before giving me what appears to be an earnest look of apology. “I didn’t mean to break your chair. I’ve arranged with your receptionist to take it with me today, and I’ve found a good place that will restore it.”

I blink in surprise. Bonita hadn’t said a word to me about it, and it’s far more than I expected from him. I didn’t even expect an apology, to be honest. I don’t think Stone is inherently a dick, but whatever his emotional malfunctions, he’s clearly acting out poorly. I decide to give him a little grace.

“Thank you,” I reply as I step back around my desk to sit. Odin moves to my side, lowers his haunches to the floor, and keeps his eyes pinned on Stone. He’s never acted this way with anyone, and the only thing I can assume is that the negative impression Stone made earlier this week has lasted.

Settling into one of the chairs, Stone gives Odin another wary glance.

Ready for this meeting, I pick up a sheaf of papers I’d prepared—the contents of the trust, the will, as well as a listing of all assets—and hand them across the desk. Stone leans forward and takes them.

“I thought we’d go through the trust first, and I’ll explain it as we go along.” I pick up an identical copy of what I just handed him, prepared to translate the legalese into layman’s terms.

“Let’s not,” Stone says, settling the documents on his lap. “How about you give me the short version instead?”

“Um, okay,” I reply with uncertainty. I mean... I don’t have to make sure he understands this stuff. He’s not my client. Neither was Brooks, for that matter. I’m merely the trustee, which is technically a position not meant to interpret the trust or give advice about it.

So, I boil it down for him in practical terms. “Your brother put all his assets into this trust so that when he died, it would

not have to go through probate within the courts. This includes not only personal and real property, but life insurance, checking and savings accounts, and his IRAs. The rough value of everything, including the fair market value of the two homes, is close to twelve million dollars. He has named you the sole beneficiary of the trust, but with specific bequeaths in his will for your parents.”

“Which are...?” he prompts.

“He would like them to receive five hundred thousand dollars to do with as they wish, along with a small stipend of a thousand dollars a year to each parent on their birthdays until their deaths. The remainder goes to you. There is more than enough in the liquid assets to make that transfer as soon as we can move money into your accounts.”

Stone frowns as his elbow goes to the armrest. He rubs at his stubbled jaw, gaze moving out the window as he ponders. When he looks back to me, he says, “In the grand scheme of his net worth, my parents aren’t getting much. That doesn’t seem like something Brooks would do... cut them out like that.”

“With all due respect,” I say softly, “it’s exactly something your brother would have done.”

Stone’s scowl deepens. “With all due respect to you, how would you know? You’re just his attorney.”

“I’m not his attorney.” I lean back in my chair, cross one leg over the other, and reach an arm out to scratch Odin’s neck. “He asked a personal favor of me to be the trustee. My job is to get everything distributed and then close it down.”

“But that’s what an attorney does,” he insists.

“Some do, yes. But in this instance, Brooks asked this of me personally, outside of my scope as an attorney. You don’t have to be an attorney to be a trustee. In fact, it’s a pain in the ass to do all this, especially dealing with wily family members. But I wouldn’t ever deny him this favor.”

A pang of grief hits me. I loved Brooks—he was one of my best friends—and I wouldn't have ever thought to refuse this assignment, even if he didn't have the guts to ask me to do it while he was alive.

“So, essentially, Brooks left me everything but five hundred thousand and a small yearly stipend to my parents.”

“Correct.”

“Your letter implied he left me some personal items that you had to give me.” His voice is almost apprehensive, as if said personal items might be a rattlesnake poised to strike.

I nod. “It's best if we go to his condo as that's where the personal items are. I need to show you the unit, too, so you can determine if you want to live there or sell it.”

“I don't want to live there.” His denial is too swift to give it merit, but I don't argue. I'm going to let him make his own decisions. As of now, I've pretty much accomplished what Brooks really wanted me to do.

Or, at least once we get to the condo, I'll pretty much have fulfilled my obligation. What Stone does with it is up to him.

“Up for taking a walk?” I ask, rising from my desk. “It's about three blocks from here.”

Stone nods as he stands. “Bonita told me we'd be walking there.”

“I like walking in the snow. So does Odin.”

I grab my dog's collar and leash off a hook on the wall, and Odin prances happily, knowing a walk is on the horizon.

“What type of dog is that?” Stone asks, his tone grumpy and telling me he hasn't forgotten Odin's disdain for him.

“A Bernese Mountain Dog. We've always had them in our family, but Odin is the first one I've had all to myself. He's three years old.”

I fasten Odin's collar and clip on the leash, turning toward Stone and bringing my dog to heel on my left.

“Are they all so vicious?” Stone asks, glaring suspiciously at Odin.

“He’s not vicious at all, and neither is the breed. He’s a gentle giant.”

“With big fangs and a deep growl,” Stone reminds me.

“Only toward jerks who storm into his space uninvited.”

I receive a dismissive snort, and Stone steps back, giving me room to precede him out of my office. He’s sending the clear message he’s not about to let the dog walk behind him, not trusting me or Odin.

Which is fine.

In the lobby, I stop a moment at Bonita’s desk as she has the documents for the lawsuit we’ll be filing. Odin sits obediently while I give a quick flourishing signature where necessary. As I push them back across the desk, she hands me the keys to Brooks’s condo. I’ve had her keep them in our small safe built into the credenza behind her chair.

Stone never took off his coat, but I take a moment to grab my heavy parka hanging from the coatrack and slip on my gloves.

Once we’re outside, Odin goes back on my left and Stone walks on my right. The snow has lightened some, but it’s still coming down and completely covers the sidewalk. The sky is gray and overcast, but there’s little wind blowing.

As would be expected of a mountain dog, Odin is in his element. He’d lie outside in the snow for hours if I let him. He walks obediently at my side, head down and nose plowing through the powder. He pauses once to pee on a trash can, but for the most part, we keep a solid pace as we head west from my office.

“This is a nice area of Pittsburgh,” Stone says offhandedly.

“It’s called Allegheny West.” We stroll along, not many people out in the snow, but traffic is steady. “It used to be the premier neighborhood for the wealthy elite back in the late

nineteenth century. It went into disrepair between the two World Wars, and then about fifty years ago, a huge restoration project started. I love the Victorian architecture here.”

Stone doesn't reply, and we're silent again until we hang a right three blocks down and then walk another half block to Brooks's building.

“This is modern,” Stone says as he takes it in.

“It's a converted warehouse, definitely not Victorian.” I give him a moment to check out the red-brick exterior with black trim on the windows and doors. “It's a smaller warehouse that was converted into five luxury condo units—the first floor, double-car garages for each home and the second and third floors, the living spaces. Above each garage unit is a balcony that exits off the main living room for each condo, so if you're friendly with your neighbors, it's nice to sit outside and talk over an evening cocktail or morning coffee. You have outdoor space on the roof as well.

“There're three units on this side and two larger ones on the other side.” I lead Stone to the bottom entrance lobby, which is nothing more than a locked foyer with wide-plank hardwood floors and the unit mailboxes. There's a staircase that leads up one floor to the main hallway where the five units are accessed, as well as a refurbished freight elevator.

“The key to the condo opens the foyer door as well,” I explain.

I start toward the stairs, Odin at my side when Stone says, “You're just going to take the dog into Brooks's house?”

“Odin's been in there many times before, and your brother never had a problem with it.”

“But maybe I do,” he grouses.

“Fine.” I shrug, because I don't need to go inside with him. I toss the keys and nod up the stairs. “It's unit four. Alarm code is 3985.”

Stone catches the keys easily and stares down at them. “Of course, he’d pick that number.”

“Pardon?”

He looks up at me, green-brown eyes turbulent. “It was our street address for our family home back in Ithaca—3985 Banks Street.”

I nod in understanding. “That’s right. I didn’t make the connection until now.”

“You know where we grew up?”

I smile, leaning against the wall, Odin at a patient sit beside me. “I went there after the funeral services.”

Stone’s eyes bug out of his head. “You were there?”

“Yes, and I went to your parents’ home after to offer my condolences.”

His voice is inordinately sharp. “I didn’t see you.”

“I don’t think you were noticing much that day. It was tough on everyone, but more so on you and your parents. I wouldn’t have expected you to remember me there.”

Our eyes lock, but I can’t read anything in his expression. His posture is stiff, and if I had to name an emotion emanating from him, it might be anger. But he gives away nothing as he moves past me and Odin up the staircase.

“Bring the keys back to my office when you’re done,” I call after him.

He doesn’t answer.

CHAPTER 8

Stone

THIS BUILDING IS stunning, heavy on the industrial design. The brickwork continues inside, the staircase done in maple and black iron. At the top, the hallway's been done in the same light maple with three doors on the left, which Harlow said were smaller units, and two on the right.

I walk down the hall. Unit four is the first on the right and sits an equal distance between two and three on the left.

Taking a breath, it hits me that I'm getting ready to see my brother for the first time in forever. He won't physically be inside, but his spirit will be. There will be evidence as to the type of man he'd become while we were estranged these last few years.

If I take that step inside, it means I can no longer ignore our differences. I can't continue to be angry with him for not doing more, for perpetuating the way the family dynamics had shifted to me becoming the outsider and to him taking all our parents' attention and devotion.

It means I'm going to have to attempt to understand him.

Christ, this is hard as hell.

It takes some resolve, but I make myself open the door, thankful that Harlow didn't come up with me. It really didn't have anything to do with that damn dog, but more that I didn't want her witnessing any potential vulnerability I might exhibit. Hell, just the hesitation in entering would have embarrassed me as she could never imagine the extent of our family dysfunction.

Or maybe she could.

I don't know how close she and Brooks were, but she came to his funeral. She's talked about him with clear grief in her expression. At first, I thought she was merely his attorney, but if she came to the burial service, I can only conclude they were together. Maybe just dating, maybe serious. She said Odin had been in his place many times, so they were lovers, for sure.

Not sure why that bothers me, but it does. Thus, I'm really glad she's not here to go through the condo with me.

Once I disarm the security system, I take my first gander at what was a piece of my brother.

His home.

I'm shocked at how refined he'd become. Two years younger than me, he was only twenty-five when he died. He came into the league at twenty-one, an immature but driven hockey player with a solid work ethic. I was with the Eagles and he was with the Titans, and we often made news—brothers in the league was newsworthy.

Those were the days when we were still close, and we'd visit each other when we could during the season. If we played in the other's city and the team stayed overnight, we'd crash at each other's place and catch up. The year the Eagles won the Cup, Brooks came to every single playoff game to cheer me on.

That summer, Brooks and I went to Australia and New Zealand. Spent three weeks traveling around together, and it seemed that our perfect lives couldn't get more perfect.

What I didn't know then was that it could go downhill so fast.

That summer was the last good time I remember with Brooks. At the start of the next season, I got injured and started my struggle to stay within the professional ranks. Over the next four years, I was either recuperating from my injury, fighting to stay on the Eagles, or battling down in the minors for a shot to return to the pros. It was back and forth, another

injury, and suddenly, my perfect world was as imperfect as it could be.

And that's when Brooks and my parents left me behind.

My parents jumped ship immediately, only going to see Brooks play. They never came to one minor league game of mine.

Brooks's abandonment came slower, and I might have helped perpetuate it. He'd reach out to check on me, but I'd often play it up that there were no problems. He'd think all was cool. I never really checked up on him, because I could see in the stats and on ESPN he was doing very well for himself.

Because I was in the minors and he was not, we didn't have multiple visits a year in each other's cities. The summers I was working, teaching hockey camps for extra cash while he and my parents traveled. It was gradual, but by this past year before Brooks died, we were almost completely estranged, other than the odd check-in call or text such as we had at Christmas. I hadn't seen him in well over a year and my parents in even longer than that.

I was an island unto myself.

I shake my head, dispelling those morose, lonely memories, and take in Brooks's home.

It shocks me at first, because it's stunning, really. I hadn't known he'd bought something. I knew when he joined the Titans, he started out in a really nice apartment that was just a one-bedroom. He said he'd hardly be there, so why bother with more space to clean up?

As if he'd ever clean up.

My brother was the perpetual slob from childhood to adulthood, the type who would let dirty dishes accumulate until he ran out and was forced to wash them. The type who would leave clothes lying around and a thick layer of dust on things.

His condo is pristine, nothing out of place. It's beautifully done, with the light maple floors running throughout, some of the walls done in brick and others painted a grayish-blue with black, exposed ductwork running overhead. The living area is bright with lots of windows on both sides, the furniture is high-end but comfortable looking, and built-ins are tastefully filled with books and sculptures. The art on the wall is modern and plentiful with big canvases strategically placed to make it seem like you're walking through a gallery.

I roam the place slowly, running my hand over furniture, picking up framed photos to try to get insight into his life. Many of the photos are of him and his friends on the Titans. Always smiling, always having fun.

Brooks was what many professional players are when they're young and just starting out—brash, cocky, and always eager to have a good time. Hell, I was that way too. Brooks liked to party, always seemed to have one or two ladies on his arm when we were all out together, and was one of those guys who seemed to get more jovial the more he drank.

He was a lot of fucking fun to hang out with, and I just now realize that I miss that. I had for so long refused myself the ability to confront the things I'd lost that it robs me of my breath for a moment.

There are some photos of Brooks with Harlow. Often within a group of other people, but they have their arms around each other's waists. They made a beautiful couple.

There are even photos with Brooks and that damn dog Odin.

As I take it all in, a few things become clear. There are no photos of me anywhere in his house. There are also no photos of our parents. And there seem to be no photos that I'd gauge to be older than a year or two. Maybe with purchasing this place, he decided to fill it with only new memories and not old, and that seems to hold with the fact that he had no qualms with leaving me behind as his star rose and mine fell.

Now the anger starts, and it fills me up with a tarry blackness deep in my chest. I try to push it away, but bitterness has become a way of life for so long, it's difficult. This place isn't just Brooks's home, it's a mausoleum of his life without me, and I know I could never live here.

I decide to check out the upstairs and climb the freestanding staircase upward. The two guest rooms are large and tastefully decorated, a bathroom in between. Back downstairs, I find the master is spacious and has a brick accent wall behind the massive bed—the other walls are in that same grayish-blue as downstairs. The furnishings are modern and contemporary, tasteful art graces the walls, and my eyes spy one lonely, framed photograph on the dresser.

I walk up to it, a lump forming in my throat.

It's of me and Brooks after the Eagles won the Cup. I'm still in my gear, sweaty and grinning like a fool. He's beside me, our arms slung over each other's shoulders, and he's grinning just as wide. I have no clue who took the photo. Probably my mom, but I don't even remember that moment. Winning the Cup was a blur.

But Brooks chose to frame that photo to commemorate days gone by, perhaps as a shrine to our relationship before it died.

Fuck.

Fuck him and the feelings.



I TRUDGE BACK to Harlow's law office, knocking snow off my boots before entering the foyer. I stomp more off on the thick mat just inside and shrug out of my coat before entering the reception area.

Bonita is at her desk and looks up at me pleasantly. "Finished with your walk-through?"

I nod, moving to her desk and handing over the keys.

She looks disappointed as she takes them. “You’re not going to keep the condo? I thought for sure you’d want it.”

“I do,” I reply. Her eyebrows shoot up, and she smiles. “I don’t own it yet, though, so I figured I’d turn the keys back in until Harlow has to do whatever paperwork.”

“I’m pretty sure you can move in immediately,” Bonita says, then nods at Harlow’s office door. “But why don’t you go in and let her know. There are documents you need to sign.”

I start to pivot away, but the jangle of keys grabs my attention. She holds them out to me. “You’ll need these.”

I accept the keys to Brooks’s condo.

No, my condo.

Well, our condo. I think Brooks’s ghost will be there for some time to come. Maybe permanently.

Harlow’s head pops up as I enter. Odin’s does the same, and he emits a low growl.

Stupid dog.

“Odin,” Harlow says, warning in her tone. He looks up at her, eyes innocent, and his tongue falls out the side of his mouth.

She’s utterly charmed and scratches his head, and I realize how devious that dog is. I’d say I have to make sure I never turn my back on him, but truth is, after this meeting, I won’t ever see him or Harlow again.

I sit down in the chair I’d used earlier. “I’ll take the condo. What do I need to do?”

Harlow smiles, genuinely pleased. “I think that’s awesome. I know it would make Brooks happy.”

I hold my tongue because I’m not doing this to make him happy. He’s dead.

She grabs a folder and pulls out documents. “I have some stuff for you to sign to transfer ownership. You can move in immediately, of course. You’ll need to decide what to do with the Potter County house. It’s really a gorgeous, upscale cabin. Your brother spent a lot of time there in the summers, fishing and hiking.”

I struggle to keep my expression placid.

Hiking and fishing? I didn’t even know Brooks liked to do those things.

“Have you been to the cabin?” I ask her. “Is it a good investment?”

“I’ve been there a few times,” she says, her smile going soft and fond. Maybe she’s remembering romantic times with my brother, and that’s not something I want to think about.

“I don’t get it,” I say, before she can answer my question about investment potential. My tone is slightly accusatory.

Harlow scowls. “Get what?”

“You and my brother.” I think about that condo and how it wasn’t like him at all. I think she might have had a hand in helping him with it. “I mean, that condo wasn’t his taste at all. It was so neat and nicely decorated, things he never really cared about. And you—”

“Me?”

“Yeah, you.” I wave my hand in a flourish to indicate her, the dog, the office. “You’re educated. Successful by all appearances. Brooks never gravitated to that. Never wanted to settle down. He was more apt to have a puck bunny on each arm than play house with a businesswoman. You don’t seem his type.”

Harlow’s eyes flare slightly before they get a warm burn of what I think might be empathy. I don’t like it. I feel like I’ve miscalculated something.

“I think you’re very keen in some observations, but others, not so much. I am absolutely not your brother’s type. We were

just incredibly close friends.”

“So you and he weren’t...?”

She shakes her head, a long lock of dark red hair falling loose from her ponytail. She brushes it back, tucks it behind her ear. “I know this is going to be a bit of a shock, but when I tell you I wasn’t Brooks’s type, I mean, he wasn’t into women.”

I hear what she’s saying, but I’m not sure I understand.

She clarifies. “Brooks was gay.”

“No fucking way,” I murmur, shaking my head. “I would have known.”

“Would you?” Her pointed expression makes it clear I wasn’t a part of Brooks’s life for a long time. I didn’t know things.

“I’ve known him his entire life,” I growl in disbelief. “We may have been estranged the last few years, but I would have known. He would have told me.”

“Your brother struggled with it since he was eleven,” she says, and her tone is so sure and level, I know she’s telling me the truth right from Brooks’s mouth. “He was afraid of your dad. Couldn’t come out to him. As he got older, that fear increased. I hadn’t met your father until the funeral, but Brooks said he was strict... intolerant.”

I nod, because that’s accurate. “Very conservative.”

“And when Brooks played college hockey and then made it into the league, it wasn’t feasible for him to come out. It’s just not done. So, he put on a persona, and everyone thought he loved the ladies, but he most certainly did not.”

“Jesus,” I grumble, rubbing my hand along my jaw. How could he not have told me? He had to have known I wouldn’t care. I mean, I understand why he didn’t these last few years because we hardly talked, but prior to that... “He should have told me. He had to have known I would’ve had his back.”

“You and your brother liked to play the blame game,” she says softly. “Many times he would tell me you should’ve done something too.”

She may have a point.

More guilt piles onto my shoulders as I try to think of what I might have done in our youth to make him think it was something he had to keep secret. Was it because, while we were close as kids, I was the apple of our dad’s eye? I was the oldest, the one with the greatest potential to make something of myself in hockey. Attention was poured into me, and I’m not going to lie—I relished it.

Did that make Brooks believe I was more aligned with my father than he was? Because I wasn’t. My dad was a tyrant on the ice and in the house. I busted my ass in hockey because he made me.

Brooks was the good part of my childhood.

In the course of just a few hours, Harlow Alston and this damn trust left by my brother have managed to throw my emotions into disarray. Everything I thought I knew, and now I realize I knew nothing at all.

“I’ll take the cabin,” I murmur.

“Good,” she says softly and shuffles more papers as I stare down at my lap. “I’ve got everything prepared for you to sign, hoping you’d take everything he wanted you to have.”

I nod, thinking about arranging movers to get me over there. Poor Bethany just spent all that time this past week making my cheap little apartment look nice. She left this morning, proud of her accomplishments. I’ll call her later and fill her in. She’ll want to rush back and help, but I’m going to insist she not. I want to tackle this myself because I don’t know exactly how this is going to go.

It takes about twenty minutes to review all the paperwork. Bonita comes in as I sign and notarizes where appropriate. When it’s done, she slips out and I stand, a folder in hand with my copies of the trust paperwork.

“One more thing,” Harlow says as she rises from her chair. “Your brother journaled, and he kept several notebooks over the years, especially the last few. He specifically wanted me to make sure you got them. That you read them.”

I stare at her, trying not to let those words penetrate. Because I’ve already confronted enough ghosts for today.

“They’re in his bedroom. In his closet.”

She stares at me, and I’m wondering if she’s waiting on me to agree to read them.

Not fucking doing that.

“Thanks for all your help,” I say politely. “I appreciate it.”

Harlow’s green eyes darken with sadness, but she simply nods. I pivot and walk out of her office, glad to be done with this but a little unsettled that my dealings with her are finished. She’s the closest thing I’ve got to Brooks.

I shrug it off and stop by Bonita’s desk. She has the Hepplewhite in the conference room, so I take it off her hands, along with the broken leg. I’ll drop it by the restoration place and pay them. I’ll also make arrangements to have it delivered back, and then my business will be officially concluded with Harlow Alston, Esquire.

CHAPTER 9

Harlow

I'M A TRUST-FUND kid, and I own it. I've had the privilege of growing up in Pittsburgh's East End in a historic mansion built in 1924 by my great-great-grandfather, the original founder of the Alston Law Group. It's a gorgeous French Normandy-style Tudor sitting on a rare lot of over an acre on Beechwood Boulevard. The grandeur of Juliet balconies, arched windows with leaded, mullion windows, and vaulted ceilings make it a work of art in and of itself.

The grounds are magical with trimmed hedge paths and pockets of spring and summer blooming cottage gardens hidden throughout. Currently, it's covered in snow, and Odin is romping around in it with my parents' two Berners, Loki and Freya, while I stand on the back patio to watch. The property isn't fenced, and while they're highly obedient when called, we don't want to take the chance they'll run off chasing some squirrel.

The house, just over nine thousand square feet, has been passed down through the family, and my parents still happily live here, even though it's far too big for them. Mom keeps telling me that she wants lots of room for the grandchildren that are sure to be coming. As to who will live here after they pass on—me or Brian—my parents joke it's the first to get married and have kids. Brian and I cringe every time they mention it, because neither of us is ready for that. I'm too busy with my career, and my brother is too busy being a playboy in Europe. He's been unofficially known as “the wonder” since he showed no interest in pursuing a legal career or producing heirs, as in we all wonder what the hell he'll do with his life.

Personally, I admire Brian for forging his own path, even though he's a little shiftless and lazy and content to just play

with his trust money. But he's a good man, and we all figure he'll mature one day.

My mom, Celia, opens the back door. At fifty-eight, she's a great beauty, which makes me happy when people say that I look just like her. She's also a lawyer—she and my father met in law school—but she hasn't practiced in years, content to be a stay-at-home mom as we were growing up and then doing charitable work.

“Dinner's ready, honey,” she says, crossing her arms over her chest to ward off the cold.

I whistle for the dogs, and all three heads pop up and look my way. “Let's go. Dinnertime!”

All three black beasts know the word *dinner*, and they come hurtling toward me across the yard, snow flying and their tongues lolling in anticipation. They barrel past me toward the open door where my mom stands, now with a towel in hand that she keeps in a basket just inside.

She utters one word. “Halt.”

The dogs skid to a stop and patiently wait for her to wipe the wet snow off their feet before they walk on the polished hardwoods.

“Dog whisperer,” I joke as I come in after them, shutting the door. Mom has always had the best touch with our family dogs, and she even helped me train Odin. For the longest time, she enjoyed doing versatile activities with our dogs, such as carting and herding, but she's so busy working with her favorite charities, she doesn't have the time anymore.

My dad, Robert, is at the dining table when we walk in, taking his place at the head. He's only sixty-two, but his hair is already streaked iron gray with silver at the temples... something that happens prematurely in our family. I have a theory that's why Brian is partying his brains out and living the high life. He wants to take advantage before he goes gray because he's slightly vain.

Their housekeeper, Carina, is bringing in a soup course. While my parents come from old money built on the backs of hard-working attorneys in our family, which is a noble and formal profession, they are very laid back in their home. They might have staff to care for them, but the staff don't wear uniforms. In fact, Carina is wearing a mauve velour tracksuit, although when working with our food, she wears a hairnet—her choice, not theirs.

The dogs rush en masse to my dad, as he's the softie in the bunch. Mom and I don't feed them from the table, but Dad can't help himself. He makes them sit pretty and then takes a piece of crusty bread and feeds them dainty nibbles, each taking their turn with extreme manners.

I sit to Dad's left, and Mom is to his right. When Carina brings me a glass of ice water, I take a moment to grip her hand in greeting. She's been with the family for nearly twelve years and is as dear to me as she is to my parents.

"You need to eat with us more often," Carina says as she takes my napkin before I can reach it, snapping it out and placing it on my lap. "You're skin and bones."

I snicker because I am most definitely not skin and bones. I'm tall but curvy, a body style I both embrace and accept as my own. I exercise habitually because I want to be healthy. What I don't do is eat like a rabbit because I like food too much.

"You're good for my ego," I reply with a smile.

Carina clucks at me in disapproval because she knows I'm not taking her words seriously, patting me on the shoulder before she leaves the dining room.

Odin, Loki, and Freya all have their faces practically in Dad's lap, now that they've tasted Carina's fresh bread. Mom snaps her fingers and says, "Loki... Freya... down."

The two dogs drop obediently, lying beside Dad's chair, but they still look up at him longingly. Odin moves in closer, noting the competition has been cut down.

“Odin,” I say with warning, “down.”

He cuts a short glance at me, then looks to Dad wistfully. My dad, in turn, reaches for another piece of bread.

“Don’t you dare,” I growl, and my dad’s hand freezes.

“Odin... down.”

He looks at me, then to Dad, then to me again. We lock eyes, and he knows I mean business.

And with the speed of a turtle on sedatives, he lowers himself into a down position, looking at me the entire time in case I change my mind and release him from the command.

I don’t, and when he finally settles with a chuff of disappointment, we dig into our soup.

Our mealtime chatter is what it normally is—Dad fills us in on interesting cases happening with the firm, and he asks me and Mom for our opinions. While Mom no longer practices, she graduated first in her class at Yale and has an incredibly sharp mind. He likes my opinions because I have tremendous common sense. I did not graduate first, but I worked my ass off and still do.

Next, we have the requisite conversation whereby Dad wants me to consider coming back to Alston Law Group to carry on the legacy. I, in turn, remind him that I don’t enjoy that type of law.

Mom then adds the obligatory, “We’re proud of you no matter what you choose to do with your career.”

Dad then huffs with indignation. “Of course, I want you to do what you want. There’s no pressure here.”

And we all have a good laugh.

My parents are the absolute best because while the Alstons are heavy on tradition, heritage, and legacy, more than anything, they want me to be happy.

With all of that out of the way, my mom asks, “How are you doing, honey?”

She's not talking about career, but about Brooks. My parents know about our friendship and have had Brooks in this home many times for meals and holiday gatherings. They knew of his struggles and liked him very much.

They know I loved him deeply.

"I'm okay. There are moments I think to call or text him, and then I remember he's gone."

"He was a special man," my mom murmurs.

"The best," my dad says in agreement.

They're not wrong. Brooks was one in a million.

"I met his brother this week."

Mom pauses while cutting a tomato. Dad still moves a forkful of salad to his mouth, but they both look at me. They know Brooks asked me to be his trustee, and since I don't represent Stone, I'm not violating any attorney-client privilege. "Brooks left almost everything to him."

My parents also know that Brooks and Stone were estranged. Over the past two years, they got to know Brooks well, and through conversations, it came out that he wasn't close to either his parents or his brother.

My mother stabs half a tomato. "How did it go?"

"Odin wanted to eat him," I say, figuring the easiest way to describe the meeting is to let them know my super chill, loving, and easygoing dog wanted blood.

Mom's eyes widen. She's more in tune with the dogs than my dad is.

"He's got a lot of feelings stirred up," I explain. Or at least, that's my best guess as to his behavior. "Our first meeting, he knocked one of the Hepplewhites over and broke the leg."

My mom gasps, hand going over her mouth. "That behemoth."

“It broke cleanly at the base, and he’s getting it restored,” I rush to assure her. “But he was very reticent about having anything to do with Brooks or the estate.”

“That’s understandable,” my father says. He may be all business most of the time, but he’s also got a keen sense and respect for people’s feelings and emotions.

“What did he decide to do?” Mom asks.

“He took the estate. Lock, stock, and barrel. I notified Brooks’s parents yesterday, advising them of their share of the estate. I’ve already had my email and voicemail blown up by his dad. He’s convinced it’s some sort of mistake or malfeasance on Stone’s part.”

“Fighting over money is so gauche,” my mom murmurs.

I don’t disagree, but I don’t think regular rules apply to the Dumelin boys’ parents. Especially their dad who seems to labor under a sense of entitlement when it comes to his sons.

“He’s doing well with the Titans.” My dad has long been a season ticket holder to every professional team in Pittsburgh. While he doesn’t get to all the games like he wants to, the tickets always get used as he often gives them away to other attorneys in his firm or to family and friends.

“He is,” I agree. I watch the Titans religiously. Sports and Pittsburgh go hand in hand. While I never followed Stone’s career when he was with the Badgers, Brooks did and would tell me about him. He’s a great player who seems to have gotten stuck down in the minors.

Dad starts discussing more of the Titans’ roster. We talk mostly about Coen Highsmith, the star of the Titans whose play seems dimmed lately. But it’s early on, and frankly, Titans fans don’t have high expectations. We’re just happy to have a team in the process of rebuilding.

Mom and I spend the rest of the meal trying to stop Dad from feeding bits of prime rib to the dogs and discussing other things in my practice. Unbearably, my mother asks about my nonexistent love life.

When Odin and I leave for our home close to nine p.m.,
my belly and my heart are full.

CHAPTER 10

Stone

I'VE THOROUGHLY EXPLORED Brooks's condo—no, my condo—when I've been able. I took possession a week ago, but I had back-to-back away games in Phoenix and Houston. I leave in two days for New York as we have games with the Vipers and the Phantoms, so I'm enjoying some time off. We'll have a light practice tomorrow, and of course I'll work out, but in between, I intend to relax and settle into my new place.

I only bothered packing my clothes for the move, leaving behind the new kitchenware, curtains, and linens Bethany set me up with. She used my credit card, so I'm not worried about the cost, but I do hate to see them go to waste. I'll arrange for some charity to pick them up when I find one that can do so.

Someone in Team Services can help for sure, which is a benefit we didn't have in the minors.

I've opened every closet, drawer, and cupboard—taken stock of everything Brooks had that has been passed down to me. Before I left Harlow's office last week, she told me that Brooks had one vehicle in his two-car garage, which she would handle the transfer of title to my name. Inspection revealed that Brooks drove a Ferrari F8 Spider, and that did not shock me. That's the Brooks I thought I knew. Growing up, he had posters plastered all over his room of performance sports and muscle cars and extreme SUVs. If it had a motor, Brooks was enamored, and so I expected him to have something worthy of his love.

It was comforting to learn that there were things I knew about him as a kid that stayed the same. I'll probably keep the car for a bit, just for nostalgia, but I prefer SUVs, so I'll eventually sell it.

I'm still a little off that there's so much about Brooks I didn't know at all. Harlow's revelation that he was gay still troubles me. Not that he was gay, but that he didn't have anyone in the family to talk to about it. He was right not to come out to our parents as our father would've flipped. If Brooks had revealed himself when he was younger, Dad would've either tried to beat it out of him or sent him away to some conversion camp.

I'm bothered, though, that he couldn't tell me... especially if, as Harlow said, he knew it when he was a preteen. It calls into question the type of relationship I thought we had before it all went to shit.

It makes it hurt a hundred times worse that he died before things could be patched up between us.

Not that repairing our relationship was something we were actively working on. I know I wasn't, and Brooks wasn't making moves either.

But still... I suppose the lesson is, don't take a fucking day for granted, because you never know what will happen tomorrow. Brooks died before all kinds of things could be rectified, and now I have to live with that regret.

It's close to ten p.m., and I've just finished a movie. Brooks has a built-in, eighty-inch TV in the living room and a huge selection of DVDs that I pawed through before settling on *Iron Man*. I've seen it before and didn't want something that required too much of my attention. Settled into an incredibly comfortable couch, I was hoping I'd be able to fall asleep.

It never happened because the condo next door is having a party of some sort. I'm guessing the unit's layout is identical to mine but flipped as it sounds like our living rooms might butt up against each other.

Not sure what's going on over there. No loud music, but a ton of laughter that while not preventing me from sleeping is grating on my nerves as it's been going on for a long damn

time. I don't want to live next to people who can't respect that other people live here as well.

I consider ignoring it and heading to bed. I've been sleeping on the second floor as Brooks's master suite on the first is the one room I've yet to explore fully. I've avoided it completely, as a matter of fact. It was his personal space. It was private.

He kept the only photo of us together in there, and I don't think it had anything to do with shame. He didn't want it where other people could see it because it was more special to him than the others.

That bedroom was also a space where he could be himself, and I'm talking about his sexual orientation. It doesn't offend or bother me that his bed may have seen things that aren't my jam—if they made him happy, I'm glad. I don't want to disrupt anything that might obliterate the last of his presence because then he'll be gone for good.

But mostly, I don't want to go in there because I'm afraid the closet will call to me. The place where Harlow said he kept the journals he wanted me to read.

I'm not ready for that. Thus, I'm staying in the guest room for now.

Another round of laughter interrupts my thoughts, and because they were centered around all the confusion my brother has caused in my life recently, a flash of irritation rolls through me. It's probably time to introduce myself to my neighbors, and by that, they need to know I'd like the noise to be kept down.

I slip on my tennis shoes, pocket my house key, and exit the condo. I turn right and head to my next-door neighbor in unit five.

When I reach the door, the laughter is louder—male and female—and I hear some faint music behind it.

After knocking sharply, I step back, punching my hands down into my jeans pockets.

The talking and laughs don't subside, but I hear someone opening the door. It swings wide to a blond woman about my age, a smile on her face, but my eyes drop to the large Bernese Mountain Dog standing beside her.

Our eyes connect, and he issues a warning growl. It's that damn dog, Odin.

The woman—not Harlow—puts her hand on the dog's head. "Stop being a jerk, Odin."

Her eyes come back to me, apologetic. "Sorry. He's usually a sweet dog."

"He's yours?" I ask, confused as to how that dog is standing there.

In the condo next to mine.

Before the lady can answer, Harlow appears at her side, and now things are making a bit more sense. Her green eyes take me in, warm with welcome. "Hi, Stone. Happy St. Paddy's Day."

"Happy what?" I'm confused again.

The blond woman melts back, pulling Odin with her. Harlow steps up to the threshold. "It's the seventeenth. St. Patrick's Day. We're having a little get-together."

"We're? As in...?"

Harlow waves a hand behind her—to whomever is in the unit—and grins. "The residents of this building. We're all friends and we get together more often than not. St. Paddy's Day seemed like a good idea. You're not wearing green, but I'm going to invite you in, anyway."

"Wait a minute." I can't help but scowl because I'm still confused as fuck. "You live in this building?"

"I live in this unit," she clarifies and then waves her hand, stepping back. "Come in and meet your neighbors."

I don't budge an inch. "You were neighbors with my brother? Is that how you met?"

She shakes her head, and I note for the first time just how long and glorious her hair is, flame-red licks around her shoulders and down her back. She's wearing a fitted green turtleneck, dark jeans, and fuzzy socks—also green, and covered with leprechauns.

“I lived here before Brooks. When that unit became available, he bought it.”

“Oh,” I mutter, looking back down the hallway at my new home and wondering how I feel about living next to this woman who was such good friends with my brother.

A woman who clearly knew his deepest secret, which means she knew far more than the fact he was gay.

While she could be the answer to all the questions I've never even considered asking about my dead brother, I'm not sure I want that knowledge.

I take a step back. “I just came by to ask if you could hold the noise down.”

Harlow's face flushes, and she ducks her head. “Oh my God. I'm so sorry. I didn't realize we'd gotten loud.”

“Yeah, well... alcohol can do that,” I grumble as I start to turn away.

“Wait,” she exclaims, reaching out and touching my forearm. “Please come in. At least meet everyone. You're going to be neighbors for a long time, and it's a great group. We all help each other out.”

“I could be back down in the minors next week,” I growl, and then immediately hate myself for admitting that insecurity.

Harlow snorts. “Please... you're playing superbly. You and Gage Heyward are carrying the team right now. You're going nowhere.”

My eyes flare with surprise that she'd be in tune with the Titans and our progress so far. It's been barely a month since the plane went down. It's been two weeks since our first practice.

We've played five games, winning only one, on the road yesterday in Houston. That was a good game, which made up for the ass-kicking we took in Phoenix the day before.

"Come on in," Harlow urges me again, jolting me out of my thoughts. "Just stay for ten minutes. I'll make introductions, then you can feign exhaustion and head out."

I glance down the hall to my door and back. Cocking an eyebrow, I ask, "Is your dog going to attack me for entering his abode?"

Harlow grins and leans forward. "Here's a tip. Bobby and Marcia brought meatballs tonight. Slip Odin one, and he'll be your friend forever."

I stare at her skeptically, thinking that could be good advice, or she might be willing to let me lose a hand in retaliation for storming her office that first day. Frankly, it could go either way.

Having spent so much time isolated from people the last few weeks and refusing to develop relationships while I was down in the minors, my comfort level will be stretched by accepting the invitation. I'm an introvert by nature, whereas Brooks was always the outgoing one.

I really don't give a fuck about meeting my neighbors, and I don't feel like tangling with that beast of a dog, but ultimately, I nod in acceptance.

The true reason I step over the threshold is because Harlow intrigues me. She's the key to the mystery of my brother, and perhaps the mystery of my family's dysfunction.

But if I'm honest, she's also fucking gorgeous and sexy, and I'm attracted to her. Knowing she and my brother weren't a thing means she's not off-limits due to the bro code.

Not that I'm looking for a relationship. That's totally not my jam. But a hot-neighbor fuck buddy isn't a bad thing to strive for. If she's interested, of course. I'll have to judge that over time.

For now, I want to keep her close in case I decide I want to learn more about my brother.

“Hey, everyone,” Harlow announces to the group as we enter. “I want you all to meet our new neighbor, Stone Dumelin.”

I look around and note that her unit is the exact flipped layout of mine, but her décor is far more casually comfortable. Brooks’s house—rather, mine—looks like an art museum. Harlow’s looks like a mishmash of styles that range from quirky, a harlequin-checked moose head over the fireplace—to the downright weird, a painting going up the staircase of a dragon in a tutu doing a handstand on a gymnast’s balance beam.

Her furniture seems to have been chosen for comfort, with thick, deep cushions that look perfect for settling down to watch a movie. The floors are covered with lush rugs of varying colors and patterns, but they seem to complement each other.

“Hey, man,” someone says, and I blink to find a guy standing there with his hand held out. “I’m Bart, down in unit one. My wife, Shannon, is an emergency room doctor. She’s on duty tonight. You’ll have to meet her some other time.”

I shake Bart’s hand, manage a smile. They all come up to introduce themselves.

The blond who answered the door is Marcia of the famed meatballs that will apparently win Odin to my side. Marcia is a lawyer, like Harlow, and Bobby is a financial planner. They’re in unit three.

Lastly are Liz and Natalie Finder, a lesbian couple who are newest to the building before me, having moved in a few months ago. Liz is a pharmacist and pregnant with their first child through a sperm donor but using Natalie’s egg. Natalie is a headhunter specializing in global marketing, whatever the fuck that is, and I’ve learned more about them in a fifteen-

second introduction than I knew about my brother in the last two years.

“What do you feel like?” Bart says, clapping me on the back. “We’ve got Smithwick’s or coffee with Irish cream liqueur. So essentially, beer or coffee. We’re not very multidimensional, but we’re keeping it holiday related.”

“Smithwick’s would be great,” I reply, and Bart heads off.

Harlow reappears, a small plate of meatballs in hand and Odin by her side. I swear he’s glaring at me, but in all honesty, it could be that he has two angled brown eyebrows against the black fur that make him look humanly expressive.

She hands me the plate, which I have no choice but to accept, and gives me very specific instructions. “Take a meatball and tell him to sit. Be very clear in your command while showing him the meatball.”

I do as she says, and to my relief, the dog’s ass hits the floor as his eyes lock on the treat pinched between my thumb and forefinger.

“Now, lower the meatball,” Harlow says, her tone like a warning. “And say the word *gentle* as you offer it.”

My head snaps her way. “What happens if he doesn’t heed the word *gentle*?”

“You might lose a finger,” she quips, eyes sparkling with amusement. Which means she’s joking.

I think.

I wait for the real answer and finally, Harlow rolls her eyes. “He’s got a very gentle mouth, but he’s really not allowed people food, so he could get a little excited. I’m making this exception to help you bridge the divide with him. You might get a little slobber on you, by the way.”

Our eyes stay locked for a moment, and I know that this could be a pivotal point where I decide to trust her.

Looking back to Odin, I say in the softest—perhaps a bit pleading—tone I can muster, “Gentle.”

Odin licks his chops—for my hand, for the meatball, who knows—but I go for it and hand him the food.

Surprisingly, not a single tooth grazes my skin as he daintily nips the meatball from my grasp and swallows it whole.

Odin stands, takes a step closer, and sits again without me having to ask. His eyes are pinned on the plate, his meaning clear. Feed me the rest, or I’ll kill you.

I hand him the remaining two meatballs with the request for him to be gentle, and he takes each one without injuring me.

I had thought that might make us friends, and I even consider petting his head, but once he sees the plate is empty, he pads away as if he has no further use for me. I watch as he goes to Liz, sitting on the couch. Odin steps right up onto the cushion next to her and lays his big body down with his head resting on her lap. She strokes him without missing a beat of her conversation with Marcia and Natalie.

Bart returns with my beer as well as a fresh mug of coffee for Harlow. “Just the way you like it,” he says as she takes it from him.

She sniffs and takes a sip, a tiny moan of appreciation. “It’s perfect. Thank you.”

“Liqueur in coffee,” I say, glancing down at her cup. “Good combo?”

Harlow smiles and shrugs. “Wouldn’t know. Never tried it before, but I don’t drink now.”

I blink at her, slightly embarrassed by my off-handed comment. Her saying that she doesn’t drink now means that she did at one point. There could be a hundred reasons why she doesn’t, but I don’t ask because I don’t know her all that

well. Hell, even if I did know her well, I wouldn't ask. None of my business.

She seems nonplussed, though, and Bart doesn't seem to think there's anything weird about it either.

"You played great in Phoenix and Houston," Harlow says, changing the subject.

"You and Gage Heyward are really clicking," Bart adds, and then launches into a speech on his thoughts regarding the viability of a winning season. Harlow pipes in, and I find myself offering insider knowledge. It's clear that both Harlow and Bart are die-hard Titans fans.

Neither one of them mentions anything about some of our obvious problems. Maybe it's uncouth for them to point out that Coen Highsmith has no more consistency in his play, and there's no talk about the emotional devastation the plane crash brought out onto the ice. It's all stats and strategy and trash-talking other teams.

It's... fun. No, not fun.

But a nice way to spend a bit of time having a beer and meeting the neighbors.

CHAPTER 11

Harlow

WHILE WE STILL might get another snowfall, I'm taking advantage of this beautiful mid-March day to run to work. Last week's snow has fully melted, and there's only a few spots of wet sidewalk left behind.

The three-block jog between my condo and the office is too short to do me any good, so I take off through the hills of Allegheny West with Odin and follow a route that will give me almost three miles by the time I make it to work. During the warm spring and summer months, I do this at least four times a week, usually running between five and six miles, making full use of the private bathroom and shower I have in the back of the building and the extra clothes I keep there.

But Odin hasn't been running during the winter, unless you count trips to the dog park and my parents' house, so I go easy on him. I still use a treadmill at home, so I'll do something extra this evening to make up for the shorter run.

I'm breathing hard by the time I enter the reception area, bending to unclip Odin's collar and leash. I look up to Bonita in greeting. "Good morning."

Bonita's eyes cut to my left as Odin trots off to my office where his water bowl is kept. I straighten, turn that way, and see a man sitting there looking irritated.

"Harlow," Bonita says, a hint of forewarning in her voice, "this is Mason Dumelin. He wanted to see you, and I explained you didn't have anything available this morning, but he insisted on waiting."

In other words, Bonita tried to get rid of him until such time that she could set an appointment where I'd be prepared to deal with him. Because I'd want to be prepared to sit down

with Stone's father, who I'm sure is here to argue about Brooks's trust and what was left to Stone.

Or more importantly, what was not left to his father.

As it stands, he's caught me off guard in my running gear, covered in sweat. I haven't read the trust since my first meeting with Stone and before I emailed Mason and Nancy Dumelin a letter outlining their share of the estate. I'd at least want a few minutes to peruse it again because while the outcome was straightforward, there was a lot of legalese in between I'd have to explain.

"Mr. Dumelin... this is unexpected," I say, removing one of my gloves and walking his way with my hand extended.

He rises, shakes my hand, and sneers at me. "Surely you must've expected I'd want a better explanation than the letter you sent."

"Perhaps," I reply smoothly, but my tone is censoring. "But politeness dictates you'd set an appointment rather than show up unannounced."

The man's face flushes red, not with embarrassment but with entitled anger. Before he can open his mouth to lash into me, I cut him off at the knees. "However, since you're here and have clearly traveled a long way, I'll be glad to spare you a few moments."

I cut a look to Bonita that says, *Don't bother offering coffee. He won't be here that long.*

She gives a barely perceptible nod, and I motion Mr. Dumelin into my office.

I watch him carefully as he walks past me. I've seen pictures of him before while hanging out with Brooks. He'd shared some he kept on his phone, but he had no framed photos of his parents in his condo. That space was reserved for the people he felt loved and secure with, and I was fortunate to count myself so lucky to be in that group.

Mr. Dumelin gave his boys his height, his brawn, his golden hair and hazel eyes. Brooks's easygoing personality clearly did not come from his father, and I don't know Stone well enough to know what he got from the man. He certainly likes to show up at people's offices unannounced, but whereas Stone merely irritated me, Mason Dumelin strikes up intense dislike. That's because I know the mental manipulation game he played against Brooks and how negatively that affected him.

I motion to a guest chair as I pull off my running jacket and knit cap. While unseasonably warmer this morning, it was still a little chilly out. Mr. Dumelin sits and casts a disapproving look at Odin, lying beside my desk.

Taking my own seat, I spin toward my credenza to grab the file with Brooks's trust in case I need any of the supporting documents to explain things.

Facing him again, I ask, "Now, what can I do for you?"

"You can explain to me why my son left the bulk of his estate to his brother who he's not had contact with in years."

I stare at the man in disbelief. I know that isn't exactly true. The brothers actually did communicate, just infrequently. But to reveal that would reveal my friendship with Brooks, and I'm not about to give this man any insight into his son's life. He treated Brooks like a meal ticket and nothing more.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Dumelin, if that's the information you want. I didn't draft Brooks's trust documents. Another law firm did, so I'm not privy to his reasoning."

"Bullshit," he snarls. "I might not be a high-and-mighty lawyer, but I'm smart enough to know he wouldn't have appointed you to handle his trust unless he knew and trusted you. Now, he had no reason to leave everything to Stone. His mother and I were his full support system since he joined the Titans, and I know he wouldn't forsake us and keep away what's our due. Stone has done something illegal. I'm sure of it, and I want to know what my remedies are."

“I’m not your lawyer, Mr. Dumelin. I can’t advise you—”

“Cut the shit, lady. As the trustee, it’s your job to know the ins and outs of the trust, and I know there’s got to be some wiggle room.”

My patience with this man has almost worn thin, but I take one more stab at civility. “I’d be glad to call the attorney who drafted the trust, if that will help—”

“What will help,” Mr. Dumelin growls as he stands and slams his palms on my desk, “is for you to get your pretty ass in gear and tell me what I need to know.”

It’s no surprise that at this point in the conversation, Odin decides to have his say. He lunges to his feet, hackles raised, his lips peeled so far back, he’s all gums and teeth. This is a far different Odin from the dog that gave Stone a bit of a warning when he stormed into my office.

This Odin is prepared to attack at a moment’s notice, and I’m not sure I can restrain him.

Luckily, his presence is enough to penetrate Mr. Dumelin’s thick skull as he immediately scrambles back, his ass slamming into the chair he just vacated. Arms outstretched, he says in a quavering voice, “You better get control of that dog.”

“And you better get out of my office, Mr. Dumelin. You are no longer welcome here, and the next time you step foot on my property, I’ll call the police to escort you off.” I reach a hand out to stroke Odin’s back. “Or maybe I’ll just let my dog take a piece of you.”

I fully understand now when Brooks used to tell me his father was a master manipulator as I witness the change come over his expression. Mr. Dumelin offers a chagrined smile, ducks his head, and holds out his palms. “Now, wait a minute... we got off on the wrong foot. I’ve just been so devastated since Brooks died, and now my only other son has forsaken me. He won’t return my calls when all I want to do is check in on him.”

I know, without a doubt, this is a lie. I saw just how worried Stone's father was for his only remaining son at the funeral. He wanted nothing to do with him. The man was too busy preening for the TV cameras to be so much as bothered with comforting his own family.

Hell, I actually shook the man's hand and expressed my condolences, and I don't even think he recognizes me. He barely spared me a glance that day as well, instead focused on someone behind me that he was pandering to with fake tears.

"You really need to leave," I say politely, standing from my desk to indicate the conversation is over. "I sent you the details of how and when you'll receive your portion of the estate. If you believe something is wrong, you may hire your own attorney to help you figure it out."

Mr. Dumelin stands and practically whines. "Brooks would want you to help me."

Something inside me snaps, that this man would dare to even suggest he knew his son well enough to know what he would've desired. "You know nothing of what Brooks wanted," I say softly, but my voice is laced with ice. "You didn't know him at all."

Eyes flaring with shock, Mr. Dumelin opens his mouth, but I cut him off, rounding my desk. "You never once tried to be a true support to your son."

I walk up to him, stand toe-to-toe. "You merely jumped on his coattails and wrapped your arms around his throat hard to hang on. You rode his star because it made you feel good, and you never offered him anything in return."

Mr. Dumelin's mouth opens and closes, like a fish out of water gasping for oxygen.

And while I don't know exactly how Stone feels about his father, I know how Brooks felt about the way their father treated Stone. "And while you were so obsessed with your son playing in the big leagues, you forgot all about your other son who was struggling down below in the minors. And now that

he's got stardom again, and the bulk of Brooks's estate, I imagine it's only a matter of time before you try to hop on that train, if you haven't tried already."

The man finally seems to get his wits because he draws himself up and glares at me in outrage. "How dare you talk to me like that! How dare you assume those things when you know nothing of my son."

"I know your sons better than you do," I hiss.

"We'll see about that." Mr. Dumelin brushes past me, casts a wary glance at Odin standing there, and heads to my door. Glancing back, he growls, "You'll be hearing from my attorney. And I'll be lodging a complaint against you for unethical behavior. And I'm calling animal control on that dangerous mutt."

I smile pleasantly at the man. "Have a good day, Mr. Dumelin. Don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out."

The door slams so hard, my law degrees on the wall rattle.

CHAPTER 12

Stone

I TURN ONTO my left side, tucking my hand under my pillow. The nightstand clock says it's almost four a.m., and I haven't been able to sleep yet. I've dozed a few times, brief snatches where I almost go under, but then my thoughts wake me back up. I never sleep well on the road, and this is a four-day trip, given we're playing both New York teams.

I should've gone out with the team to celebrate. I played fucking amazing tonight against the New York Phantoms, racking up a goal and an assist, and still... I feel like a fraud.

Like I don't belong.

Which is why I passed on celebratory drinks and came straight to my room. This trip, I'm sharing hotel accommodations with Coen Highsmith. Team Services has us rotating through road roommates in an attempt to speed up the process of us getting to know one another. I roomed with Gage in Phoenix, and I'd prefer that because at least he doesn't attempt to force conversation.

Coen's not bad either. He's still out partying—or most likely, with a woman—so I've had the room all to myself tonight. I enjoyed watching sports highlights, then caught *Fight Club* on TV. I surfed my phone, deleted emails and voicemails from my dad, and even thought a few times of reaching out to Harlow to check on the status of moving Brooks's money and investment accounts into my name. I want to get my parents paid their share so I can be left in peace.

I didn't, though. She gave me her cell phone number before I left her St. Patrick's Day get-together and told me to call if I needed anything while I was out of town. She even

offered to get my mail for me, but I wasn't ready to ask her for anything.

In the last four days, I've been thinking a lot about her. She's more than just a trustee, and she's more than just a friendly neighbor. She's probably the person who knew my brother best, and knowing that has all kinds of curiosities plaguing me.

More than anything, I have a feeling she was someone my brother counted on. Perhaps the one person who gave him unconditional support. She knew he was gay... a very tightly held secret, apparently, and I can't imagine how lonely he must have been holding on to it.

There's something special about Harlow Alston, and part of me wonders if I'm so lonely myself that maybe—

Nope. I stop my thoughts right there. I don't need a close friend or someone I can count on. My family alone has proven those things are built on glass bridges, ready to break at any moment. Brooks might have needed a Harlow Alston in his life, but I don't. I'm fine just the way things are.

Just like I'm fine leaving Brooks's journals alone in his closet. I'm not ready to get to know my brother again. I'm afraid it's going to make me feel even worse about stepping into his shoes and his life, all at the expense of his own. I know without a doubt it's going to make me feel regretful for not attempting to patch things up with him, and I'm not sure I can handle one more negative emotion about my brother's death without it consuming me.

I start to turn back to the right, begging my body to let go of all my worries so I can sleep, but my phone rings. I'm so startled by the noise—no one should be calling me at four a.m.—I don't automatically reach for it.

Nothing good comes from a call at this hour.

But I lift my head, glance at the screen, and frown at a number I don't recognize. It's a New York area code.

Telemarketer?

Maybe.

Something more serious?

More likely.

I nab the phone and answer. “Hello?”

“It’s Coen.”

I blink into the dark. Did he lose his cell phone? Why is he calling me from an unknown number since he, along with the entire team, is programmed into my contacts? “What’s up?”

“I’m in jail. I need you to bail me out.”

“What the fuck?” I growl, sitting up in bed and reaching for the bedside lamp to switch it on.

“I got drunk,” he says flatly with no remorse. “Might have started a fight in a bar.”

“Jesus,” I mutter, scrubbing my hand through my hair. Why in the hell is he calling me? I’m just his damn hotel roommate and nothing more.

Well, I’m also his linemate, so maybe that’s why.

“Stone,” Coen snaps irritably. “Will you come get me?”

No need to think about it. Of course, I’ll go get him. “Yeah... let me grab a shower and I’ll head out. Where are you?”



IT’S NO FUN trying to get an Uber and finding a police precinct in a completely different borough from where the team is staying in Manhattan. I arrive at the Brooklyn precinct just after five thirty a.m., but Coen didn’t bother to tell me he wasn’t exactly ready to be released.

I guess the wheels of justice need a lube job, because I sit there for two hours before they’re ready to even start processing the paperwork and accept my payment for his bail. Turns out the charges are drunk and disorderly and assault, and

it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out he's in deep shit with the team.

It's another hour until he's brought up from wherever they were keeping him, and while he does offer a "thanks" as we go to an area to collect his belongings, he looks in no way repentant for either the actions that landed him here or the fact I'm on hour four of this fun trip to bail him out.

I order an Uber from my app as we head for the lobby, but just as we're approaching the doors, I see reporters with cameras outside. My first thought is there must be some big criminal case occurring, but then it hits me... they could be here for Coen. High-profile people in custody get tipped to the media all the time.

"Shit," I grumble as I hold out an arm to stop Coen from reaching for the door. "Reporters outside."

He glances through the glass curiously but doesn't appear to care.

"Let's wait until the Uber arrives," I say, and we move off to the side.

I watch the driver's car on the app and as it's pulling up, I say, "Let's go."

The minute we step through the doors and Coen is recognized, they swarm in on us. Questions are hurled at Coen, and then I'm recognized and my name is yelled too.

Lowering my head, I push through the small mob toward the Uber, and Coen follows. We slide into the vehicle as the cameras roll, and I know there's going to be hell to pay.

Fifteen minutes into our drive back to Manhattan, my phone dings. It's Gage. *Heads up. You were both on the news.*

I grimace, hating how fast word travels.

Coen's phone starts chiming, clearly a flurry of texts. He looks at them, shrugs, and tucks his phone back in his pocket.

“Keller?” I guess, figuring he would be the one most likely to contact him at this point.

“And Derringer,” he says, leaning his head against the seat. He looks terrible, now that I have a chance to study him. Face is pale, eyes bloodshot, and clothes rumpled. He has an abrasion high on his cheekbone near the temple and cuts along his right knuckles.

“What happened?” I ask, curiosity getting the better of me.

“Some guy’s face connected with my fist,” he drawls nonchalantly. “He was a bitch about it and insisted the police get involved.”

I don’t even know what to say. I’m getting the vibe he was looking for trouble. I’d bet a hundred bucks Coen probably instigated it—I’ve heard he’s been quite the dick when he’s drinking. Such a dick that no one wants to go out with him, and I know for a fact he was specifically not invited tonight.

When he didn’t show up in our room, I knew he’d gone out on his own, and I didn’t think twice about it. Now I’m thinking the guy needs a damn babysitter.

“You’re going to face some consequences, you know.” An ass-chewing, for sure. I’d guess a hefty fine, too, most likely by the league, but I wouldn’t put it past Derringer to fine him as well. Suspension is just as likely.

“I have no fucks to give.” Coen’s tone is one of absolute disregard. He truly doesn’t care what they do to him. Doesn’t even attempt to justify his behavior, and there is no brash claim that he’s too valuable to the team to suffer a consequence.

It’s almost as if he wants to be punished, and it doesn’t take a psychologist to figure out he’s probably grappling with some survivor’s guilt. I wonder if they’ll take that into consideration when dealing with him.

I settle back into my seat and look out the passenger window. Nothing left to discuss with Coen, and whatever happens to him isn’t my problem. He’s made it clear that he

doesn't want any commiseration, so I, too, have no fucks to give about the guy.

What happens, happens.

It's silent the rest of the ride back to the hotel, and when we arrive, more reporters are camped on the sidewalk. Coen walks in with his head held high—not that I think he's proud of what he did, but because I don't think he really cares.

Inside the lobby, a few of the guys mill about. Coen walks without breaking stride to the elevator. I have no clue if he's heading to our room or straight to a meeting with Keller and Derringer. Regardless, I'm not going up with him.

I see Gage by the small coffee kiosk across the lobby talking to Baden, and I head their way.

Their conversation halts when I approach.

Gage attempts some levity by playfully backhanding me in the stomach. "In case you were wondering, the camera really does add fifteen pounds."

"Christ, what a nightmare," I growl, stepping up to the counter and ordering a large black coffee.

"Did he say what happened?" Baden asks.

I shake my head. "Not true details. Just that his fist connected with a guy's face. Completely flippant about it all."

"Keller's about ready to explode," Baden says quietly, and I can tell he's worried about Coen. Good thing someone has some fucks to give.

I grab my coffee, handing over my credit card. "What do you think's going to happen?"

Gage shrugs and Baden shakes his head. "Nothing good. Probably just a fine if Coen is appropriately apologetic, but somehow, I don't think Keller's going to get the good little boy routine from him."

"I wouldn't be surprised if Coen takes a swing at him," Gage muses.

“Derringer will keep things cool,” I say, and I hope that’s true.

Baden claps me on the shoulder and nods at Gage. “I’d like to stay and discuss all the ways this can get worse, but I have a beautiful woman waiting for me in my room.”

My eyebrows raise, completely shocked at this radical change in subject, and also, because Baden doesn’t seem the type to just hook up.

When he leaves, Gage must see my confusion and laughs. “It’s Sophie. She came to see him because he was sick.”

Dawning hits me, and I nod. “Got it.”

I don’t know much about the relationship between Baden and Sophie. Gossip has made its way around, especially after Baden stayed behind in Phoenix to give his victim impact statement when one of his attackers took a plea deal. The team traveled on to Houston, and it was then I learned who Sophie was—the girl he saved—and heard rumblings they might have something more going.

I wasn’t sure until now.

The way Baden mentioned her waiting in his room—not in a lewd way, but in a manner that said he’s the luckiest son of a bitch to have someone.

It’s a concept I have no experience with nor have I ever strove for such a thing. Relationships have never been a priority.

I wonder if they were with Brooks. Did he ever find someone to love?

And what about Harlow? Is she the type of woman who dreams of big white weddings, or is she more of a one-night stand type?

And why the fuck am I even wondering about her in that light? I’m not interested in her in that way.

I mean... unless she’s a one-night stand type, then maybe.

Well, not maybe.

That would be a hell yes.

“I’m sure there’ll be a team meeting soon,” Gage says, and my head snaps his way.

“About what?” I ask, my brain a bit fuzzy from thinking about Harlow and berating myself for the same.

Gage shakes his head, amused. “About this thing with Coen. I’ll bet you ten dollars he won’t play tonight. I bet they move Rivers up to our line.”

“That’s not a bet I’ll take,” I reply before sipping my coffee. “He’ll be out of tonight’s game at a minimum. And yeah... Rivers is the right call.”

Our conversation delves deep into options regarding not only our line, but if Boone Rivers is moved up from the second line, who will take his place? The depth of the third line is weak at best.

The entire time Gage and I volley scenarios, I can’t help but continue to wonder about Harlow and what type of woman she is.

CHAPTER 13

Harlow

“NO, YOU CAN’T go.” Odin looks at me with chocolate eyes drooping with sadness. His gaze shifts pointedly to his leash hanging by the door. “I’m sorry, but no. Dogs aren’t welcome, unfortunately.”

I scrub behind his ear, vigorously enough his back leg shakes with delight. “We’ll cuddle when I get home, and there might be a treat involved.”

He can’t understand the words, but he seems to accept my departure as he swivels his head and licks my palm.

I smile as I grab my coat from the rack and shrug it on. “You’re the bestest boy. The keeper of my heart. My reason for living.”

I swear the dog rolls his eyes and trots off toward the kitchen where I hear him slurping water from his bowl as I exit my condo.

Locking the door, I head toward the staircase, surprised to see Stone coming down the hall with an empty recycle bin in hand. He must have been emptying it downstairs in the main receptacle as pickup is tomorrow. I haven’t seen him since St. Patrick’s Day, but he’s been in New York for two games.

“There’s the hope and savior of the Titans,” I say with a cheeky smile as we approach each other.

Stone snorts and shakes his head. “Couple of lucky breaks.”

He’s being humble. He played fantastically in New York and is currently the leading scorer on the team since they took to the ice two weeks ago, with Gage Heyward only one point behind him.

I could gush about his play, but I can tell Stone's not the type to eat it up. His brother was, though. God, Brooks used to glory in the accolades and would strut around like the king of the world after a great game. I loved him for it, just as I admire Stone's ability to exist without those affirmations. I have a feeling he's built up that strength over the last few years as the Dumelin family fractured.

A change of subject is in order. "I'm going to send you an email tomorrow with some documents, but I have all the bank and investment accounts transferred into your name. It will be encrypted as I have log-on information and passwords attached. You can change them when you sign in for the first time."

"Awesome," he murmurs. "Now I can get my dad paid so he'll stop calling me wondering where his money is."

I don't comment nor ask for added explanation. I would bet my britches, though, that those calls never come with genuine curiosity about how Stone is doing personally.

Instead, I tell him the other good news. "I should have the deeds of trust finished to put the properties in your name later in the week. And I've requested a title transfer for the Ferrari."

"I really appreciate you getting all this done," he says, but his eyes shift to his door, as if he's eager to get inside and perhaps out of my presence.

"It's my job," I reply with a quick smile, then start to move past him. "Have a great night."

"Yeah, you too," he murmurs, but when I'm just a few paces down the hall, he asks, "So, where are you headed tonight?"

I pivot to face him. Stone has one hand in his jeans pocket, his shoulders hunched slightly forward. He seems uncomfortable initiating conversation, yet he looks hopeful at the same time. Almost as if he's trying to figure out how to be social. I find it endearing.

My answer might set him back and send him scurrying, but honesty is always the best policy. “I’m going to an AA meeting.”

He’s shocked. I figured he would be. Eyebrows shoot up, head pushes forward slightly as his mouth gapes. “AA?”

“Alcoholics Anonymous,” I explain.

Stone’s lips purse as if irritated. “Yes, I know what it means. I just... didn’t know you were a member.”

“Well, it’s not like a social club I wanted to join,” I quip, trying to ease the awkwardness. “But I’ve been in AA for a little over two years now.”

“Um...” Stone’s gaze shifts away, as if he’s horrified he brought this to light.

“It’s okay.” I take a few steps toward him, and his eyes come to mine. “I’m not embarrassed by it. It’s not a secret. I’ve been sober two years, one month, and seventeen days today.”

Stone lets out a long breath. “I’ve never known anyone in AA before. It just took me by surprise.”

“It’s a lot to throw at someone as we’re passing in the hallway.”

“It’s why you said you didn’t drink anymore... at your St. Patrick’s Day get-together,” he says. When I nod, he asks, “But it doesn’t bother you to be around others who drink?”

“Sometimes,” I admit softly. “But those times are few and far between. I had some urges when Brooks died.”

Something passes over Stone’s expression that I can’t identify. “You two were really close.”

A statement.

Not a guess.

“Stone,” I say softly, garnering his attention. “I met Brooks in AA. That’s where our friendship started.”

He takes a step back, as if I somehow slapped him with my words. Shaking his head, that thing in his eyes I couldn't really identify a moment ago is clear now.

It's torture.

"I knew nothing about him," he mutters. Each syllable sounds agonizing.

"You knew plenty," I assure him, reaching out to touch his shoulder. "And he always wanted you to know more, he just didn't know how. It's why he wanted you to read the journals."

"I can't..." Stone's gaze falls to the floor as he rubs at the back of his neck. "I'm not ready."

"You will be one day," I promise.

His eyes lift to mine, and his voice is hollow. "I can't even fucking sleep in the master bedroom. Those goddamn journals in the closet scare the shit out of me."

It's an admission I don't think he intended to make, but it's huge. Such an intensely private fear to share with a near stranger.

"Listen." My voice is gentle as I get the feeling he could bolt at any moment and shut down completely. But I think he needs a nudge forward. "Why don't you come to the meeting with me? Tonight's an open meeting so nonalcoholics can attend. On the way over, I'll tell you a little about how Brooks and I met, and you can maybe get a sense of how the AA community works. It will give you perspective. And you can ask any questions you want, and I'll be glad to answer."

I fully expect him to decline. While he happily stood and chatted at my party last week, it was surface conversation and he gave nothing away about himself. He held all his neighbors at a polite arm's length.

So, when he nods, throwing a thumb at his door and says, "Let me get my coat," I almost do a double take in disbelief.

I manage an encouraging smile and nod. "Awesome."

Stone dumps the recycle bin just inside his condo and grabs his coat. As he locks up, I tell him, “The meeting’s a few blocks down at the Episcopal church.”

“Is AA a religious group?” he asks as we head down the staircase.

“No, but they often rent church halls for the meetings. AA is definitely spiritual, though. Tonight’s an open meeting so anyone can come. It’ll be members talking about their experiences, but no one is required to participate. Many just come to listen.”

“You said nonalcoholics are welcome?”

“Family members of alcoholics will often come, not only to support a loved one but sometimes because their loved one won’t recognize the issue and they have nowhere to turn.”

We take a right out of the condo and head down the block. It’s a beautiful, cold night, busy with people out strolling amongst the stores and restaurants.

We’re silent for a while until Stone says, “I never knew Brooks had a problem with alcohol. I mean, we drank beers together and he liked to party, but I didn’t know it was a problem.”

“I guess the word *problem* is kind of relative. With Brooks, it became an escape. A way to numb himself against pain.”

“Being gay and not able to be out?” he guesses.

“That,” I murmur, “and your father. He put a lot of pressure on Brooks to be the perfect son, the perfect hockey player. I think your brother sometimes felt caught in a web by your dad and didn’t know how to get out. So he drank to ignore it all.”

“Christ, I hate that man sometimes,” Stone growls, and then immediately apologizes. “I mean... he’s my father, and I love him, but—”

I stop mid-stride and touch Stone’s arm. “You don’t have to apologize for your feelings about your dad. We don’t

choose our parents, nor are we required to love them just because of who they are. Love is earned, always.”

“I didn’t do enough to earn Brooks’s love.” The tone of his voice cuts deep.

“And he didn’t do enough to earn yours back. No one was at fault, but everyone had their part to play in this by their apathy. You can’t change the past, but you can accept it, learn from it, and move on.”

“I don’t know if I can accept my father,” Stone says, his tone bristling with anger as we start walking again.

I hadn’t intended to tell Stone about his father’s visit, but I think he might need to know that I can certainly understand his feelings. “Your dad came to my office four days ago.”

“Did he make an appointment to see you?” Stone asks in disbelief.

I snort laugh. “No. He showed up unannounced. That habit must run in the family.” I give Stone a pointed look, and he rolls his eyes.

“But he was a much bigger asshole than you were,” I say with a cheeky grin. “No offense.”

“None taken,” he admits apologetically. “I was a dick.”

“Let’s just say your dad provoked Odin to want to take a piece out of him.”

“He wanted to take a piece out of me,” Stone says.

I shake my head and laugh again. “No, Odin was just giving you a little warning. But he was ready to launch at your dad.”

Stone is quiet, but I make him ask his curiosities. I’m not going to tell him anything unless he wants to know. Finally, he asks, “What did he want?”

“He wanted to know why Brooks left you everything. Was sure you had something to do with it and wanted me to help him change things. It wasn’t pretty, but let’s just say I kicked

him out of my office and told him if he came back, I would let Odin bite him.”

Stone tips his head back and lets out a bark of a laugh that morphs into belly rumbles of amusement. It occurs to me that I have never seen him be as free with his emotions as he is at this moment. The man who guards everything like a pit bull now releases out to the world a joyous burst, and it touches me.

It also feels nostalgic—Brooks could be quite dour at times, and I always loved making him laugh.

I point up ahead to the next block. “That’s the church. Just to let you know what will happen, we’ll go in and grab coffee. I’m going to introduce you because unfortunately, you’re going to be recognized, and everyone there knows Brooks and about my friendship with him. But you won’t have to engage. The meeting will open up with the Serenity Prayer, and then anyone who wants to talk about their problems or their recovery are free to do so. It’s very casual and informal.”

“Harlow,” Stone says, and my neck twists so I can look over at him. “In case I forget to say it later, thank you for sharing this with me.”

I smile. “I’m an open book.”

CHAPTER 14

Stone

I'M NERVOUS AS hell as we walk into the church hall. I knew when I accepted Harlow's invitation to this meeting—especially after finding out that Brooks was a member of AA—that people would recognize me. I steel myself against the inevitable sympathetic looks and more likely than not, the verbal condolences that will be offered. I don't want to hear them, but I also recognize that these people were probably a very integral part of my brother's life, and they might need to express themselves. I sort of get the impression that expression of one's feelings is important in this community.

It's antithetical to my very being, but I do recognize that people need it.

The meeting room is toasty warm, and Harlow and I remove our coats to hang on hooks along the wall. A table's been set up with coffee, tea, and cookies. I grab a cup of water while Harlow makes herself Earl Grey. The introductions begin, and to my surprise, while I am indeed offered condolences as I meet members, they are unobtrusive and politely understated. It's almost as if they know to treat me with kid gloves.

I'm sure they're also following the creed that Harlow told me about, that no one is required to engage.

After a few minutes of socializing, an older man who looks to be in his mid-sixties with longish hair and a graying beard asks people to take seats. Metal folding chairs are placed in a circle with one in the middle. We sit, and by my count, there are seventeen people in attendance.

The older man moves to the center chair. "Welcome, everyone. My name is John, and I'm an alcoholic. I'm also

your chairperson for the evening, and this is an open meeting.”

Everybody in the group, including Harlow, sitting to my right, says, “Hi, John.”

“I’ll start off by reading our preamble,” he says, then pulls a sheet of paper from his pocket. It’s a short statement about the mission of Alcoholics Anonymous. When he’s done, he bows his head and says, “Now, let us recite the Serenity Prayer.”

Everyone bows their heads, and Harlow holds out her hand to me. I take it automatically and glance to my left. A burly guy sits on that side, holding out his hand expectantly. I take it and bow my head. John starts the prayer, and everyone joins in.

God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.

At the end of the prayer, I release the man’s hand but don’t voluntarily let go of Harlow’s until she tugs it free. Make of it what you will, but it felt good with her palm pressed against mine.

John opens the floor to anyone who wants to give testimony about their journey.

A young man in his early twenties across the circle from me says, “Hi. My name is Alan, and I’m an alcoholic.”

The group resoundingly greets him. “Hi, Alan.”

I listen with almost morbid curiosity to Alan’s story. It’s not so different from my own in that he had parents who were unsupportive, and he started drinking first as a means of rebellion, then as a means of avoidance.

A woman goes next and talks about her alcohol dependency, which started when she was only fourteen. That blows my mind.

Two more people volunteer their stories, each one different, yet they all have the same common thread. They

want to be free of this hold that alcohol has over them, and while they work hard to battle, they all live under the knowledge that sobriety is fragile.

To my right, Harlow lifts her hand, and when John nods at her, she says, “Hi. My name is Harlow, and I’m an alcoholic.”

“Hi, Harlow,” I say with the rest of the group. She glances at me and smiles.

“I’ve had a good week. Work has been good, and while I had one stressful case that tested the limits of my patience, not once have I wanted a drink.”

There are murmurs of praise throughout the group.

“As you know, it was a rough few weeks prior to that with the death of my friend Brooks.”

I’m not surprised she mentioned my brother’s name, but with it comes a jolt of awareness that my brother’s problems were very real and known by some of the people in this room. A few nod their heads in empathy.

“I’m processing. It’s getting easier to accept he’s gone. I know there were several days when I wanted nothing more than to rip into a bottle of vodka, which was my drink of choice. I even went on a walk one day with the intention of buying a bottle, but when I got to the store, I kept on walking. I kept on walking because I knew Brooks was watching over me. I knew how much he battled for his sobriety, and I knew he would walk past that store too. I also knew Brooks would never want me to crumble over my grief for him. He would have been so disappointed. Probably would’ve haunted me.”

A rumble of laughter echoes through the room, and I can’t help but smile.

“I just want everyone to know that it’s okay to have those weak moments. I know I will have more in my lifetime. But I also know that I have the strength to overcome them. Everyone in this room has the strength to overcome. And if you find yourself in a weak moment and you feel like you need just that bit of a bolster—like the way I felt when I

walked by that liquor store and I knew Brooks was up above, supporting me—I'm here for you. AA is here for you. There's always a meeting within reach where our community can help you."

Harlow sits down, and the woman on her other side puts an arm around her shoulders and draws her in for a quick hug.

Harlow glances at me, and I say, "That was amazing."

After Harlow's testimony, three more people offer their stories. One is a young woman whose husband is an alcoholic and used to attend AA regularly but has fallen off the wagon. She's here to support the others and to be supported in return. I don't know this lady, but the fact that she feels like an island because her husband is drinking again and won't get help makes me want to seek out the motherfucker and beat some sense into him.

Within the space of about an hour, listening to a handful of people battle this addiction, my eyes have been opened to a world I frankly never knew existed.

For the first time in a very long time, I have a deep, burning admiration for my brother for taking the steps to get help and for working hard to stay sober.

When everyone is done sharing, a contribution basket is passed around. "AA is self-supported by its members," Harlow murmurs as she drops a twenty in the basket. I whip out my wallet and grab the same, offering it to the till.

John closes with some information on upcoming meetings and seminars, then finishes up with the Lord's Prayer. We make quick goodbyes, although Harlow told me that she often stays to socialize and meet new people. I think for tonight, though, she knew that might be hard on me.

Harlow and I walk back to our building, and I ask her questions about Brooks that start percolating while I process the meeting.

Did he stay sober the entire time?

How did his drinking affect him?

What did he like to drink?

Did it affect his playing?

Did people on the team know?

Did my father know?

As with many things in my brother's life, his alcoholism was a secret to most people. No one in the family knew about it, and only his coach on the team.

And Harlow, of course, who attended every meeting with him. She said sometimes they would only go to a meeting once a week. In the off-season, sometimes they would go every day.

“There were times when your brother would have a really bad day. He was seeing a guy once, and he really cared for him. The guy broke it off because Brooks wouldn't come out of the closet, and that was the closest I'd ever seen your brother to breaking down and drinking. We stayed up all night talking, and we went to a meeting early the next day. He fought that battle and won, knowing the war would never be over. Your brother was one of the strongest men I've ever known.”

Her words cause me both happiness and sadness at the same time. These glimpses of my brother make me proud of how he handled things with limited support, but I ache knowing he had to face these things with only Harlow by his side.

Having satisfied some of my curiosities about my brother and his dependency on alcohol, I have others brewing. It might be intrusive, but I can't help myself. “How did you get in trouble with alcohol?”

Harlow smiles and nods, as if she expected this question. “Did you know the rate of alcoholism in the legal profession is twenty-one percent, and thirty-six percent are what are termed *hazardous* drinkers?”

“I don’t know much about lawyers at all,” I reply as we stroll along. “You’re the first I’ve known on a personal basis.”

“By the very nature of our work, our profession is filled with people suffering from anxiety, depression, and other mental health issues. Add in that culturally, we’re also a profession that networks in environments where alcohol is usually free-flowing, and that the job stress is almost catastrophic, and, well... you get alcoholics.”

I stay silent and let her tell the story.

Her tone is almost painfully wistful. “I didn’t handle the pressures of being a lawyer in a big corporate firm very well. There were a lot of expectations I found hard to meet.”

“Were you at your aunt’s firm?” I ask.

“Not just my aunt’s firm,” she says with a chuckle. “My family’s law firm. It’s heritage, started by my great-great-grandfather. My dad is managing partner now, but I have aunts, uncles, and cousins who work there.”

“No siblings?”

“My brother Brian didn’t want to be a lawyer. He likes being the shiftless black sheep, as we affectionately call him.”

I suppress a laugh. I don’t consider myself shiftless, but I know about being a black sheep. It seems her family uses that term almost as an endearment, whereas that’s not the case with me.

“Is that why you practice on your own now?” I ask, referring to the stressors she mentioned.

“That’s part of the reason. But the other part is that I wasn’t getting personal fulfillment in the corporate and business law that my father’s firm specializes in. I was just really miserable with my career, and when you add the stress of meeting expectations, alcohol was way too easy to latch on to.”

“Did your dad understand what you were going through?” It’s the question I’m more interested in than any other. Did

Harlow get the support that Brooks didn't?

Her eyes shimmer with warmth. "Yeah... my parents are amazing, and they recognized my crisis right away and confronted me."

"Bet that was awkward."

With a light laugh, Harlow nods. "It was. But I've also found that you're only as sick as your secrets. It was freeing to admit my struggles. My dad took me to my first AA meeting."

"He sounds amazing," I say. Compared to my dad, he sounds like a saint.

"He is." The love in her voice is palpable. "And while my dad held great pride when I practiced law with him, it was more important I was happy. So he sort of pushed me to open my own firm, even though at every opportunity, he laments I'm not practicing with him. I think he still holds out hope I'll return to the fold."

"That's a big step," I murmur, wondering how one goes about doing that. "A big risk, too, but it looks like you're doing very well."

"Um... not really."

I look over at Harlow and see she's smiling sheepishly. "My family is filthy rich, and I have a very generous trust fund. It basically pays for my living and business expenses, so I can dabble in cases that matter to me. I don't make a lot of money as a lawyer."

"Money doesn't equate to success," I point out.

"Truer words were never spoken, my friend."

It's a casual comment, but I realize... I actually am her friend. The way she opened her door today and let me into a deeply personal part of her life, one that was conjoined with my brother's to some extent, means I can't keep her at arm's length anymore.

Which must be why I'm comfortable in saying, "I feel guilty for not reaching out to Brooks. For not being proactive. I assumed his life was perfect and mine was shit, and he didn't need my help."

"It wouldn't have mattered," Harlow says.

My head snaps her way. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, Brooks wasn't ready to share his secrets with you. He wasn't ready to talk about being gay or being an alcoholic. Not just to you, but to anyone."

"I still could have tried."

"Maybe," she admits with a soft sigh. "But only Brooks could save himself from his demons, and he was doing an amazing job at it. I do believe he would've told you at some point, though, regardless of who initiated contact. I think it's why he specifically asked me to have you read his journals."

"I feel like I'm letting him down by not reading them." It's a vulnerable admission.

"You're not letting him down," she assures me. "Only yourself."

That startles me, and she can see it on my face.

Harlow smiles. "If it helps, I think you'll ultimately find solace in knowing your brother better. The journals are the way you can do that."

"Did you read them?" I ask.

She shakes her head hard. "Never. Those were personal to him. I know he wrote in them religiously, and he specifically asked me to have you read them. But that's all I know."

"Then how can you know they'll help me?" I ask, desperate for her to give me some truth that will make it easier to find the courage.

"Because while I don't know what he wrote in those journals, Brooks talked about you so often, I know he wanted

only the best for you. I know he loved you deeply. I know there's nothing in those journals that can hurt you."

Christ... that's exactly what I was looking for. Some reassurance that I wasn't getting ready to read something that could destroy me, but I'm still not sure if now is the time to delve into it.

When we reach the condo, we move silently up the stairs and come to my door first. Harlow pauses, her hands tucked in her coat pockets. "I'm glad you came to the meeting with me tonight."

And even though this might open me up to pain—because tonight has opened a door with Harlow—I can't help but admit, "I'm glad too."

She smiles again, starts to turn away, then looks back as if having second thoughts about something. "Want to grab dinner or something? Watch a movie?"

Her request shocks me almost as much as her telling me she was going to an AA meeting. Is she asking me on an impromptu date? Is this just a friendly invite to lighten the remainder of the evening?

Are we expanding a friendship? Is this something more?

Admittedly, any of these options freak me out.

I toss my head toward my unit. "I've got a mid-morning practice, and I think I'm going to turn in early."

Not a lie at all about the practice, but I don't fall asleep on any given night until close to midnight.

Harlow smiles brightly, not in the least offended. "Well, that's a standing neighborly invitation if you want some company. I know it's hard starting out in a new place."

So... it was just an attempt to expand friendship, which should relieve me, but instead I feel slightly disappointed. I have an overwhelming urge to grab her by the shoulders, haul her in, and kiss her.

The imagery of that is so real and so disconcerting, I step backward into the wall. Harlow stares at me, head slightly tipped as if I'm confounding her.

Hell, I'm confounding myself.

"Well... good night," I say, and turn to unlock the door.

"Good night," she says, and I hear her walk down the hall away from me.

Once in my condo, I lean against the jamb and let out a long breath. My heart is pounding, and I have no clue why.

I glance down the short hallway to the immediate left that leads to the master suite. Having been in Harlow's condo the other day, I know her unit is the mirror of mine, and her room is just on the other side of the wall.

I also know that within this master suite are the journals detailing my brother's life. The thought of reading them makes me slightly nauseated.

But something Harlow said tonight reverberates in my head.

We're only as sick as our secrets.

Hiding truths and the stress and pain that come with it is not good for anyone. If I ignore Brooks's secrets stored within those journals, am I perpetuating my own pain? Is that cost greater than the torment of ignorance?

All that is an unknown.

But what I do know is that I feel like I'm doing Brooks's memory a disservice if I refuse to acknowledge those things. It would be as if Brooks showed up on my doorstep and told me he had secrets to share that might cause me distress.

Would I invite him in? Or would I ask him to leave?

The answer to that is so stupidly simple, I push off from the doorjamb and head to the master suite, determination fueling my strides.

This is only the second time I've been in this room since moving into the condo—the first time to peek inside and make the absolute decision I wasn't going to sleep in here, and the second time when I checked the closet and found the box holding his journals. But I didn't touch it.

Now I move directly to them, taking the white banker's box down from a shelf and carrying it to the bed. I toss the lid to the floor and peer in at the contents.

I'd envisioned Brooks—with all his good taste and designer strengths I've seen throughout his home—would have slick, leather-bound journals. Instead he kept his thoughts in spiral-bound notebooks of varying colors.

After a slight hesitation, I make myself reach in and pull them out, knowing that if I waver, I'll go scurrying out of this room and might never come back in.

Spreading out the notebooks, I count five in all, each holding two hundred pages' worth of my brother's personal life.

I grab a purple one, open the cover, and see the page filled with lines of words in blue ink. There's a date at the top of the first page and then words just start flowing. No delineated paragraphs. No doodles. Just lines and lines of my brother's thoughts that I gloss over and don't read in detail.

I go through the other journals, looking at the dated entries, and put them in order. The first journal—a dark-green spiral notebook—starts in his junior year in high school. That was my freshman year of college.

He didn't journal every day and some were just a few lines long. Other days, he might write a several paragraphs.

For some reason, I don't start on the first page but rather flip through and skim until certain words catch my eye and cause me to read with more depth.

Many of the entries are tirades about our father, and perhaps I focus on them because I understand them so well. Our father was a tyrant when it came to school and hockey,

riding us both hard to perform greater than his greatest expectations and coming down on us if we didn't. He used his hands on us, never meek about slapping if we didn't measure up.

I learn quickly that Brooks got double the pressure once I left for college because he was the only target for my dad's control and abuse.

One entry dated in the spring of Brooks's junior year strikes hard.

I'm so tired of Dad comparing me to Stone. I'm tired of hearing about Stone's greatness all the time. I'm never going to be as good as him on the ice, and I wish my dad would understand that. Sadly, I can't tell him this because I don't want the repercussions.

It pains me my father did that, especially since he wasn't especially proud of my college years on the ice. At least he never told me such. He wasn't big on affirmation, more on instilling fear.

The one thing I do marvel at is that Brooks's entries have nothing but good things to say about me. While Dad may have been shoving my supposed greatness down my younger brother's throat, Brooks still looked up to me. Recounted our phone calls, my visits home, and his excitement of me returning for summer break.

In other words, my brother's feelings for me were still pure and untainted by our father.

Lifting my head, I glance around the bedroom. It doesn't seem as off-putting as before. My gaze moves to the other journals, and I know I'm not going to be able to stop reading. It doesn't matter that it'll probably take me hours upon hours or that I've got a mid-morning practice.

Now that I've started, I want to see it through.

I move over to the bed, prop myself against the headboard, and dive back into the journal.

CHAPTER 15

Stone

THE SUN ROSE about an hour ago, and I'm exhausted.

Tired to my bones, sick to my heart, my gut full of volcanic fury at my father.

There's some mental self-flagellation going on for being so passive the last few years, and reading Brooks's journals has only made that burn brighter.

And I'm still not done.

I push up from the floor where I've had my back propped against the side of Brooks's king-size bed. I haven't left the room all night, alternating between lying on top of the bedspread while I read to pacing around with a notebook in hand as I absorbed his memories. Occasionally, I perched on one of the two chairs near the window, and this past hour, as my eyes grew heavy, I moved to the floor and leaned against the bed with the frame digging into my back, hoping the discomfort would help keep me awake and on task.

I've got a handful of pages left, but I take a moment to push up off the floor and ease my cramped muscles and aching joints. I stretch, the last notebook in dark purple still in my grip, and then yawn deeply as I glance at the bedside table.

Almost seven thirty a.m., and I've got to be at the arena by ten.

I've absorbed so much information in the last several hours, I feel like my head is about to explode.

There was a lot of good—so many entries where my brother memorialized moments we spent together. Calls I would make from college when we would spend hours on the

phone talking. Brooks wrote that it was “one of his favorite escapes” when I called because things seemed normal.

He wrote about his excitement as summer approached after my first year of college, knowing I would be coming home and of all the trouble we would get into.

I devoured the words with a smile plastered on my face about how ecstatic he was when I got drafted by the Boston Eagles. It wasn't nearly the same level of enthusiasm as when he got accepted into college, but he was determined to follow in his big brother's footsteps.

When I was with the Eagles and won the Cup, it was the one and only time he made drawings and doodles in the journal. He wrote of his pride and joy and punctuated it with rough sketches of the Eagles' logo and of my jersey number.

There was a touching entry about his realization that he was gay. He'd suspected as much since he was a young boy, but he chronicled his first kiss with a guy who went to our high school who, in a million years, I never would've thought was gay. But then again, I never suspected Brooks either.

That entry was quite detailed, and it moved from a fumbling kiss to roaming hands, and I had to stop reading. I didn't want or need the details. That was private to Brooks, and I'd no more read his accounting of his first time if it was with a woman than I would with a man.

I can imagine how my brother felt, though. The validation that must have come that he knew who he was. I remember well the intoxication of being with a girl for the first time, and I imagine Brooks reveled in his experience as much as I had.

I skimmed to the last paragraph of that entry.

I feel like the weight of the world has been lifted from my shoulders. Things are clear, and I'm ready for my future.

The experience had brought solace to a young man who was tortured over his sexual orientation and whether his feelings were real.

I was a bit brokenhearted, however, by the very last sentence: *I can never let our parents know because I can't handle their hate.*

It was my brother's first real indication that there was going to be some level of isolation in his life because of who he was. He didn't mention anything in his pages about whether he would tell me, and I found that troubling.

Despite the good, there was a lot of bad shit that I read too.

My father was relentless in his harassment of Brooks after I left for college. With me no longer around to control, he focused all that extra on Brooks. He also used me as a means to motivate my brother, comparing my greatness with my brother's weaknesses. I found through numerous entries that if Brooks wasn't making my father happy between how he performed in school and on the ice, my father would throw me in his face. He would laud me as the successful one in the family and would say, "*Why can't you be as good as your brother?*" on almost every occasion where he found fault.

This was abusive. It may not have been delivered with fists or belts, but every word cut deep. I know, because I used to get the same when I lived at home. But Brooks had it worse after I left because there was no one to share the abuse with.

It was, in my opinion, the start of the systemic poisoning that my father insinuated into my brother's mind and is probably the foundation of all that was bad between us at the time Brooks died.

Other entries were incredibly bittersweet. When I first got injured while playing with the Eagles, Brooks was beside himself with worry. He knew just how catastrophic even a simple injury could be to a hockey career.

I had to step away from my reading after one particular entry Brooks made after I got released from the Eagles and sent down to the minors. Brooks was just starting his career with the Titans, and he was so conflicted over my fall from

grace. So much so, he couldn't even enjoy his fortune because he was far too worried about my misfortune.

During this time, he documented my father's continued mind games. He was no longer throwing at Brooks how great I was as a means to motivate him to perform better. Instead, it was a lot of shit-talking about my failures to help Brooks shine brighter. My father apparently spoke a lot of crap about me to my little brother and used it as an opportunity to launch from my coattails to his.

God, my dad was such a dick, and Brooks knew what he was doing. He never shared that with me, though, not wanting to cause me pain.

Learning about Brooks's struggle with alcohol addiction within his writings was very subtle, and I might not have recognized it had I not known now that he was, in fact, an alcoholic. There were lots of entries about parties he attended and good times with friends and teammates. Many of those ended in admitted blackouts.

A lot of his alcohol intake seemed associated with his sexual orientation, or rather, the isolation he had because of it.

He talked about men he would date and how he was only comfortable eating dinner or sitting at a bar with a man if alcohol was involved. It was his way to push past his fears.

He was very strict, though, when in the presence of other men out in public. He allowed absolutely no displays of affection and kept all that within the privacy of his home. He got pressure from the men he dated, most unwilling to live a closeted lifestyle. It tore Brooks between having safety from my father's wrath and truly being happy with his personal life.

And it wasn't just my father who made things difficult on Brooks for being gay. It was the league as a whole. Historically, male-dominated sports have a crude culture within the locker room that has kept gay men quiet. The unenlightened behemoths think being homosexual means weakness or frailty, and that leads to inherent bias. I myself

have heard so many gay jokes within the locker room, I know that if I were in Brooks's shoes, I would've never come out to my team either.

All those things weighed heavily on him, and I could see chronicled over time when he started needing alcohol to dull the pain. There were times when Brooks would come home after practice or a game or even a trip out shopping, and he'd crack open a fifth of bourbon. He would sit and drink all night until he fell into blessed sleep.

I learned within the journals that the breaking point was when my brother slept through an alarm and missed a practice with the Titans. In the grand scheme of things, not a huge deal. He was fined, which was expected. But it scared him badly to know that he could've slept through the alarm to make it to the airport for an away game. He went to his coach and explained he thought he had a problem.

His coach helped him that day find a place to go to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, and that is where he met Harlow.

Not only did I get to learn so many beautiful and awful things about my brother—making me feel closer to him than I ever have despite the fact he is dead—I got to know Harlow Alston through my reading.

Brooks had so much to say about his new friend. Not only the support she gave him to maintain sobriety, but in all other ways outside of their shared alcoholism.

They spent a lot of time together, either at his condo or hers. They often ate dinner together when he wasn't at games. They vacationed together. She went out on dates with him, playing the wingman so he would feel secure that he wouldn't be outed.

She was there for him during all his triumphs. She bought a season ticket to cheer him on, and she was always there to make sure he stayed on a sober path.

While he didn't necessarily say it, I guarantee he helped her stay on that same straight and narrow as well.

I don't regret reading a single word. Every bit of the information—good and bad—was healing to my soul. It's a bit devastating to know I could've learned this stuff myself had I just made better efforts to repair my relationship with Brooks, but it was enough to know he loved me in the end, so much so that he wanted these journals shared with me.

In addition to being exhausted from taking all this in, I have newfound anger toward my father, so much so I'm now feeling the need to hurt him in some way. Over this past year, things changed between me and my brother, and I can tell that the estrangement was actually manufactured by my father.

While Brooks had withstood years of my father using me as a weapon over him, either by making me a saint or a villain, it's clear that this past year, Brooks started to doubt me. There were entries that Brooks would write after talking to our father. Apparently, Dad was telling Brooks that I was talking crap about him.

Dad told me tonight that Stone is fueled by jealousy over my success. He told me that Stone wants what I now have and that he can't stand me for having it. He said Stone hated me for being in the pros... that Stone blamed me for his inability to make it back up. None of that seems like Stone, but Dad is insistent.

They were flat-out lies my father was telling in his efforts to keep injecting that poison. I know Brooks couldn't see it, but my father did it for purely self-serving reasons. Brooks's star was now on the rise, mine had been snuffed out, and my dad knew the one person Brooks loved the most was me. My dad knew if he could remove me, then he would have Brooks all to himself.

The thing that hurt was that Brooks started to believe it.

Stone is so standoffish, it makes me wonder if all the things Dad has been telling me are true. It's hard for me to believe

that, but I don't talk to Stone enough these days to know otherwise. We're trying to find some free time so we can get together, but I'm not sure it's worth the trouble.

I can't blame Brooks for his doubts, as that lays squarely on my shoulders as a failure to make things right.

Still clutching the purple journal, I move over to the window and look down onto the city street below. Rush hour is in progress, and I'm going to have to step it up if I want to finish this journal and make it over to the arena in time for practice.

I walk back across the room and lay the notebook on the dresser next to the framed photo of me and Brooks. My eyes locked onto that photo several times throughout the night. Sometimes I found myself talking to it, wondering out loud how things got so fucked up between us, even though the answer was right there in the words I was reading.

Flipping through the last few pages, I see the journal entries end in January of this year, and I'm just starting November. Knowing I'm getting short on time to get to the arena, I skim the words, looking for anything that sticks out that could be important to add to the overall story I've pieced together so far.

Really, searching for more tidbits that Brooks was happy when he died. That maybe he'd found love, or he wasn't buying into Dad's lies about me.

Something that would ease this anger that has been rekindled toward my father and seems to be on a low, threatening simmer. I need something to turn the heat down.

I flip until I hit this past Christmas Eve. What catches my eye is that the entry is short, the pen strokes deep and angry. Brooks had gone home for Christmas, only having the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth available. I actually had more days available, but being home was the last place I wanted to be. While I can't remember her last name, I shacked up with a

woman named Cherry who I hooked up with now and again in Cleveland.

My eyes move along the words.

I think I'm done with Stone and this battle to win our father's approval. I don't get it because his approval isn't all that special, yet Stone continues to throw me under the bus with Dad. I guess he figures if Dad's wrath is focused on me, it can't be focused on him. I don't get why he's doing this, but it's making sense. Stone hardly reaches out to me anymore, which sucks because while my dad's attention isn't what I'd like, it's better than nothing.

With every word, my skin gets hotter and hotter. I can actually feel a sweat on my forehead by the time I finish the last sentence. My dad had driven that wedge so deeply between Brooks and me that my brother felt my father's brand of love was better than nothing.

In the end... he'd thought I was nothing to him.

My chest burns with something akin to the fires of hell, and my hands shake uncontrollably. I stand there, staring at my hands as they rest against the journal, quivering like I've been electrocuted.

I'm not pissed. It's not even anger sweeping through me. Not fury. It's something dark and insidious, and I want to claw at my own skin just to avoid this feeling.

But I can't, and it continues to build and build until I feel like I'm about to shatter.

"Motherfucking asshole!" I bellow, the words so loud, they sound like cannons booming throughout the room. I press my palsied hands onto the journal and with a roar, I sweep it to the left off the dresser. In its path is the framed photo of Brooks and me, caught up in my torment. It all flies so viciously, the frame smacks against the wall and obliterates into fragments of glass and wood.

I'm pissed I broke the frame, but I'm more focused on my dad and Brooks.

My dad for being such an unholy dick—a nonparent—and my brother for buying that shit. My fist strikes out at the same wall that just demolished the picture, and I hit it so hard, it knocks a hole through the drywall. Pain shoots up the bones in my hand, and I can feel my knuckles shred.

Vaguely, I hear the doorbell, but it seems so far away... so unimportant... that I ignore it.

I spin, eyes locking onto the other notebooks scattered on the bed. The ones I'd already read and that fed me Brooks's story bit by bit. The joy, the pain, and the fucking hope that there was something good waiting for me.

Only to find out that my dad had gotten his wish and poisoned Brooks against me in the end.

Something is still banging... dull and distant. I think about punching the wall again, but that incessant thumping seems to get closer and closer, distracting me.

Then I hear a voice.

Harlow's.

“Stone... open this damn door now.” More banging.

That's her fist crashing against my door.

My anger doesn't abate, but something else takes hold deep inside me, forcing my legs to move. I stumble out of the master bedroom and lurch down the hall like a drunk.

I jerk open the door, needing to bob my head backward to avoid Harlow's fist in mid-flight.

“Jesus!” she exclaims as she takes me in, eyes round with worry. “It sounded like your place was being torn apart. Are you okay?”

Am I okay?

Fuck no.

Not okay at all.

There's no accounting for the driving force behind my actions, but I step into Harlow, my palms to her face, and I pull her into me. I dip my head and kiss her hard, feeling my body go blissfully numb at the first touch of her lips against mine. In the back of my mind, I wonder if this is what it was like for Brooks to use alcohol to numb his pain.

The nothingness only lasts for a second, but the tempest of wrath that had hold of me a moment ago is replaced by pure lust.

Yes, this is exactly what I need.

One hand goes to her back, and I pull her in close, increasing my assault on her mouth. I have satisfaction when she returns the kiss.

Fuck... she even moans.

My other hand drops from her face to her breast, full and heavy under a very soft sweater that tickles my palms. It feels good, but I know her skin would feel better.

“Stop,” she says, tearing her mouth from mine and locking her hand around my wrist.

I look down at where she's trying to pull my hand away, my knuckles dripping blood onto the cream yarn woven into a pattern with blues and grays.

And yet, I don't move my hand. My gaze lifts, locks onto hers.

She appears slightly dazed—I hope it was the kiss and my touch that's doing it. Surely, she doesn't want me to stop.

I lean back in, attempting to capture her mouth again as I whisper, “Give this to me, Harlow. Let me have something good.”

It's the closest I've ever come to begging a human being for anything.

“It might be good for you, but it won't be good for me,” she says before my mouth touches hers.

I rear back, shocked by her words. My hand falls away, leaving a smear of blood on her sweater. I'm almost offended. "You can be damn sure it would be good for you."

Harlow shakes her head, a sad smile playing at her lips. "I'm not talking about orgasms. I'm talking about my self-esteem. If I let you use me in this way, it won't be good for me personally."

It's like a bucket of ice water dumps over me, and every bit of lust and desire evaporates.

On the plus side, so does my anger. It just empties and leaves me feeling weak and nauseated.

The way Harlow looks at me right now—pretty sure it's pity—makes my stomach roll.

"I'm sorry," I mutter, taking another step back.

"It's fine," she assures me, reaching a hand out, perhaps to touch my arm.

I stumble away from her. "I've got to get to the arena."

Harlow doesn't move, and my eyes drop to her chest. "I got blood on your sweater. I'll buy you a new one."

Stupidest fucking thing in the world to say, but it seems to knock the pity off her face.

Instead, she becomes alarmed and tries to grab for my hand. "You're hurt."

"I'm fucking fine," I growl, pulling my hand away.

She freezes, eyes wide, and then warily takes a step back. "I'm sorry."

My anger ignites again. It's truly not because of her, but she's the easiest target to direct it toward. "Why the fuck are you apologizing? I attacked you."

"You didn't attack—"

"Just leave," I cut in.

She doesn't move.

So my hand again goes to her chest, this time not in an erotic gesture but one of rudeness. I push her—gently, but firmly—until she's forced out of my foyer and into the hallway.

It takes all my strength and power not to slam the door in her face, but it's with resounding finality when I do shut it, her surprised expression the last thing I see.

CHAPTER 16

Stone

THE TITANS' WORKOUT facility is housed within the arena at street level, one level below the main concourse and two levels above the basement locker rooms. It faces the river with the downtown cityscape behind it, the idea in mind to provide the players with an enhanced experience, given the amazing view. The glass is reflective and you cannot see in, so the players have privacy. It's the same on the concourse above and the levels above that, plus the glass is energy and pollution efficient.

Whatever that means.

Let's just say you won't see me driving an electric car anytime soon. I like my big SUV, and unfortunately, it guzzles gas.

There's over six thousand square feet of workout space that runs the oblong length of the building's river-facing side. All the equipment is state of the art and has been upgraded within the last two years. While most of the men prefer to work with free weights and barbells, there are numerous machines, including all the standard cardio torture devices like treadmills, bikes, rowing machines, and stair-climbers.

Despite the fact I had absolutely no sleep last night and came into practice after that awful encounter with Harlow, I actually killed it on the ice this morning. And when I say *that awful encounter with Harlow*, it's not just because I made a complete ass of myself, but because my fucking pride got trampled when she turned me down.

Oddly, I'm in a lighter frame of mind right now as I enter the workout facility, intent on punishing my body with some heavy weights.

I'm not quite sure why my mood is so good, but it's probably a combination of things. Getting to know my brother through his journals has given me some peace with his death. I think purging my anger with that brief, albeit violent, rampage through the condo helped. Hell, part of it might even be that soul-stealing kiss with Harlow, but my level of play this morning was focused, and I've never felt such connection to the sport before.

Fuck... maybe it's Brooks's ghost inhabiting me. Whatever it is, I'm grateful for it.

I do have to give credit to Gage, though. He and I are clicking in our respective positions of left and right wing. Normally, you want a dynamic trio, which would include the center, but Coen is playing so inconsistently, he's almost a nonentity. That's never been truer than lately as he's been suspended after his arrest last week in New York. He'll be out for the next two games, but he doesn't seem to give a fuck. I've reached out to him via text to see how he's doing since he did call me to bail him out.

His response?

Doing great.

Absolute lie, so I haven't tried to contact him again.

Just inside the workout facility is a lounge area where the guys can hang and relax. Baden and Gage are there talking.

I take it Baden just finished a workout as he's sweaty, whereas Gage is not.

Gage sees me and waves me over. When I approach, he asks, "You getting ready to work out?"

"Nah... thought I'd paint my nails."

Baden snorts and Gage rolls his eyes. "Want to work out together, asshole?"

"Sure," I reply and give my attention to Baden. "Anyone talked to Coen lately?"

“I haven’t,” Baden replies, a frown creasing his forehead. “Something up?”

I shake my head. “Not sure. He just seems to be blowing off the arrest, and it’s not like him. I mean... not that I knew him before, but by all accounts of what his reputation was prior to the crash, he’s clearly spiraling.”

“Yeah.” Baden’s troubled expression intensifies. “I know Callum has talked to him a few times.”

“He needs counseling or some shit,” I offer, knowing that’s probably not helpful. “When I bailed him out, he didn’t think there was anything wrong with what he’d done. I texted him recently, and he said it wasn’t a big deal. But this is a big deal, and he needs to get his head straight. A trip to a shrink or whatever, but the dude needs help.”

“Not sure we can mandate that he seek professional help,” Baden replies neutrally. He is a coach, after all, and won’t get into organizational policy with us. “But I’ll reach out to the appropriate folks and ask about it.”

“Good enough,” I reply.

Gage and I make our farewells and head deeper into the facility. It’s by silent agreement we’ll work barbells together, since that’s really the only time it’s wise to have a partner, especially if you’re lifting heavy, which I intend to do.

“I need to hit legs today,” I advise Gage.

“Works for me,” he replies casually, and we find an empty squat rack next to Jesper. He’s got a bench set up and is working on chest presses.

When he finishes, he sits straight and wipes his face with a towel. “What’s going on?”

Just a short greeting not really requiring a verbal response.

I nod toward the barbell. “Let us know if you need a spotter.”

“Appreciate it,” he replies as he stands. “But that was my last set.”

We shoot the shit as Jesper takes the plates off his bar and Gage and I load up for our first set of squats.

When Jesper leaves, Gage shoots a glance at his retreating back and says, “I’m glad he’s secured the starting goalie slot.”

“Me too.”

And we’re not the only ones. Baden used the first two weeks of the Titans return to the ice to let the goalies go head-to-head, giving them both an opportunity to play in home and away games. While Patrik has a slight edge in talent over Jesper, his emotions are all over the place. Sometimes he channels them positively into his play, but one time, he let it practically destroy his confidence, and we lost a game we should’ve won in New York.

Word came today at the end of practice that Jesper—who is cool as a cucumber in all instances—will get the primary slot, and Patrik will be backup. He wasn’t happy about it, but that was just by reading his expression.

“How are things going with you?” Gage asks. The question surprises me, because by his tone, he’s talking about my personal transition here, alluding to my inherent battle with ghosts he assumes I’m suffering in the wake of my brother’s death.

“Going good,” I reply automatically, not once considering that I’d give him the truth. I slide a twenty-five-pound plate onto the bar on my side as Gage matches on his side.

“I’m just asking because I know how intense the pressure must be on you to make your own way, all the while knowing you’re being compared to Brooks.”

I blink at Gage, momentarily stunned by such a direct statement regarding my brother. No one on the team has so much as breathed his name in my presence.

I thought I'd be mad about it, but oddly... I find I'm relieved that someone is interested.

"We weren't close," I admit. "At least not for the last few years. I find myself not knowing a lot about Brooks and whether comparisons between me and him are even valid. It sucks living with that regret... that he died with some stuff left unsaid."

"*Not for the last few years* implies you were close prior to that," Gage says, leaning a shoulder against the rack and ignoring the plates. "What went wrong?"

I shrug, not because I don't know, but because I'm now suddenly not sure if I should share. This is some fucked-up stuff.

But Gage patiently waits me out, and finally, I admit the ugly truth. "My father drove a wedge between us. It was pretty calculated on his part."

Gage frowns but leans forward a bit, captivated. "That's shitty. Why would he do that?"

"Because he's a narcissist. Thinks the world revolves around him. When I was a star with the Eagles, I was the golden boy, and his attention was on me. When I got sent down, I became a nonentity in his life. Not worthy of notice or effort. Then Brooks became the shining star in the family when he joined the Titans. That's the short story, but it was years in the making, or so I've recently learned."

Gage tips his head, curiosity evident on his face.

So I explain to him about Brooks leaving his estate mostly to me and about the journals. "I stayed up all night reading them. My dad started his head games back when I left for college and Brooks was still finishing high school. He systematically drove us apart, playing us against each other, and while I can't speak for Brooks, I was an idiot for letting it happen."

"I'm sorry, man," Gage says, his tone heavily laced with sympathy. "I'm really close to my parents... think they walk

on water. I can't even imagine a parent doing that to their kids. It's got to be hard on you."

My laugh is mirthless. "In the journals... I learned things about Brooks. Private things, but he wanted me to know them. I always thought my lot was the worst, because I was down in the minors and our dad was a dick to me. But really, I didn't have half the pressures Brooks had, so I truly don't have a right to be pained about much."

Gage's eyes lock with mine. "Your brother died. I'd say you have plenty to be pained about."

I nod. "Yeah. So many regrets. Wish I would've made more of an effort... you know?"

"Yeah," Gage replies in a low voice full of commiseration. "But... you learned something important in those journals."

My smile reflects gratitude that Brooks left me those notebooks. While that last entry I read ended with him giving up on me, I'd read enough elsewhere to know there was still love. "I learned he loved me as much as I loved him. Despite everything my dad tried to do to us, it wasn't enough to accomplish his goal of destroying that. It's made me feel a little settled. All of this is still a little too surreal for me." I extend my arms, indicating being here, in this facility, in this arena, playing for this team. "I still wait for it to be taken away. For the rug to be pulled out from under me."

I stop short of admitting to Gage that I have some abandonment issues. My father dumped me once I went down to the minors; Brooks became detached and then died. It's not easy to form attachments, and I'm still not willing to admit this new lease on a professional hockey life could be my star rising again.

"You know what you need?" Gage pushes off the rack and pulls a plate from the side peg. He puts it on the bar. "You need to solidify your connection to this city... to the people who live here. Form some relationships... on this team and off."

I frown in confusion. “Why’s that?”

“To help affirm that you are here to stay. You have a right to be here, not because your brother died, but because you’re talented. This is your city now, and you’re going to be a hero to these people.”

A bark of laughter escapes because that last bit is ludicrous, but I get what he’s saying. I’ve been holding people at arm’s length, not wanting to talk about my pain stemming from Brooks’s death. Not wanting to form relationships, because in my experience, relationships are never built to last. I couldn’t even make one work with my father or brother, so what does that say about trusting people enough to let them into my inner world?

“Maybe I’ll join a knitting circle,” I quip, sliding the last plate onto the bar.

“I’d maybe do some exploring of the city, consider buying a place to put down roots, get to know your neighbors.”

I can’t help my strangled laugh, and Gage looks at me funny.

“Sorry... it’s just... I have a place. Brooks left me his condo, and I’ve met my neighbors. One in particular who I probably scared off from ever wanting to talk to me again.”

Gage grins and leans back against the rack, crossing his arms over his chest. “This sounds interesting.”

Shaking my head, I smirk. “Not sure interesting is the right word. But it is something.”

I tell Gage everything about Harlow. Not sure why I spill it, but perhaps she’s more confounding than all the shit with my dad and brother, and well... he seems interested. More than anything, I’m feeling the need to make things right with her, and I don’t know how to go about doing it.

I tell him about getting her letter, our first meeting where I thought her dog would attack me, finding out she lives next door, and that she was incredibly close to my brother.

“She knew him better than I did,” I explain.

I don't tell him about going with her to AA, just as I don't tell him about Brooks being an alcoholic or gay. But I do tell him I kissed her, and she wasn't happy about it, and fuck... this is embarrassing. Now I'm regretting being so vocal.

Gage looks at me with his mouth slightly agape. “You don't have any game, do you?”

“I wasn't trying to romance her,” I snap, irritated that he's amused.

“Then what were you trying to do, Don Juan?”

I roll my eyes. “I don't know what the hell I was doing. I was acting on instinct.”

“Bad instinct.” Gage snickers and then holds his palms up in apology as he takes in what I'm betting is a murderous expression on my face. “Okay, joking aside... what's the real deal with her? Do you like her?”

My voice is as dry as a sunbaked desert. “I'm not going to ask her to go steady, if that's what you mean.”

“You know what I mean, smart-ass. Is there a spark between you? You said she kissed you back for a moment.”

“Yeah, but... then she stopped it.”

“Okay,” Gage says, as if he's got a plan in mind. “First, you need to let go of your pride and ego for a minute and focus on the fact that she actually kissed you back. That means she's attracted to you. No matter how it ended, for a moment, you were both on the same page. You flipped the page and she didn't, so now you have to figure out how to go back and do a reread.”

My brows knit together. “Are you talking about kissing or going to the library?”

Gage laughs and moves around the rack, taking his place behind the bar so it's chest level. He rests his forearms there. “You know what I'm talking about. There's interest, going

both ways. The question is, what are you going to do about it?”

That’s a good question. I’m not big on relationships. I’m not morally opposed to them, but it’s hard to have one when your career involves so much travel. I’ve never really connected with a woman who would be worth the effort.

And admittedly, the last few years, I haven’t wanted to open myself up to anyone. Parental abandonment issues fuck with your sense of trust.

But Harlow is different from any woman I’ve met in the near or distant past. I like her. She also had a relationship with Brooks, so I know inherently she’s trustworthy.

Or at least Brooks felt like she was, and I trust my brother’s judgment.

Well, I mostly trust it. The fact he started buying into our father’s lies makes him a little squirrely, but Harlow seems genuine.

Still, his journals were filled with not just his opinions about her but stories as well. Everything I took from them said she was kind, funny in a smart-ass way, and a free spirit. She loved deeply and was loyal. She and Brooks went on adventures together, even sometimes vacations. She went as his wingman to gay bars, and they watched sappy movies together.

She’s got a wild side, too, which I liked reading about. One entry I liked a little too much. She and Brooks went to a gay bar where they had a male wet T-shirt contest. Even though she would’ve been of absolutely no interest to the male bar patrons, she entered the contest, just to be funny and share the experience with Brooks.

Of course, now I can’t get the image of Harlow in a wet T-shirt out of my head.

Gage snaps his fingers in front of my face, making me blink away images of what fantasy Harlow might look like.

“Where’d you go there, Skippy?”

I went to places I’ll never admit. I ignore the nickname, resist calling him an old man, and instead ask for advice. “I probably screwed things up with Harlow. Not just the kissing part...I might have landed myself on the outs with her, even as a neighbor. Not sure how to fix it.”

Gage doesn’t hesitate, spreading his hands on the bar and then ducking under so it rests across the back part of his shoulders. He looks me straight in the eye. “You need a big fucking gesture.”

“Like what?”

“Something more than flowers,” he advises and then straightens his legs to lift the weights clear of the J-hooks.

I move to stand behind Gage as he does his first set, prepared to spot if needed. But I think about what kind of grand gesture I could make that would convey a significant apology.

Once Gage finishes, he backs up to ease the weights onto the hooks. I ask him, “Want to grab a beer later and you can help me figure out just how grand this gesture should be?”

“I’d love to, man.” Gage moves out from the rack so I can take my turn. “But Baden has a friend moving from Phoenix to Pittsburgh, and I promised to help him unload boxes and move some furniture around for her later.”

“Need any help?” I ask as I position myself, ducking to put the weighted bar across my shoulders.

“Nah. He said it shouldn’t take more than an hour. But I can help you with some ideas in between sets.”

I nod, prepared to start. “Just as long as it doesn’t involve me cooking—I’d probably poison her. Otherwise, I’d love to hear your ideas.”

I dip into my first squat as Gage laughs from behind me. An idea springs to mind that would definitely be grand, but

I'm not sure it will work. I'll need to make a call before the next set to be sure.

CHAPTER 17

Harlow

HUFFING WITH FRUSTRATION, I delete the sentence I just typed. The laptop resting on my thighs is getting hot, an indication I've been sitting here too long. It sucks because I have no productivity to show for it.

It's not unusual for me to work from home at night. In fact, I do most nights. But usually, it's going through emails I couldn't get to during the day and calling clients.

Easy stuff.

Not tonight, though. I have to finish a memorandum of law that I was supposed to do at the office today, but I was far too distracted.

I suppose that's what happens when a hot-as-hell hockey player surprises you with a world-spinning kiss, and sadly, you have to push him away.

Because it was for the wrong reasons and not the right time.

Had Stone kissed me without pain in his eyes, I would have let it go on.

Had he sought me out of pure desire, I would have given in.

But he wanted me as an escape.

A balm.

A distraction.

That was not something I was willing to be for him.

"Damn it," I mutter as I swing off the couch and put the laptop on the coffee table. When I stand, so does Odin, who's

been curled up on the love seat across from me. He steps off the small couch, leaving behind a smattering of hair, but that's part of loving a Bernese Mountain Dog. I keep coverings on my throw pillows and couch cushions and wash them regularly, but it's never occurred to me to not let him on the furniture. He sleeps in bed with me at night too. While all the Alston dogs throughout history have been well trained, they've been true family members and have no barriers within the house.

Usually not a problem, but it is annoying that Odin is obligated to follow me into the bathroom every time I go.

He pads behind me as I head into the kitchen. My anxiety thrums because I can't stop thinking about the encounter with Stone this morning. I'm worried I didn't make the right decision, I'm worried about him, and I'm worried that I can't stop thinking about what might have happened if I'd let it go on.

He'd said, *You can be damn sure it would be good for you*, and that shot straight to a place that caused an ache I haven't felt in, well... ever, really. Not like that.

The promise and determination to focus on my pleasure.

The understanding that yes, he'd be using me to ease his own pain, but that he would be the type of lover who would never leave me unsatisfied.

"Shit," I curse, hating where my thoughts keep going. Yes, I haven't had sex in a long damn time.

And yes, I like sex. A lot.

I'm a progressive woman, and I believe in taking pleasure if there's a genuine connection with a man.

Safely, of course.

I open the refrigerator, and Odin peers in expectantly. I'm not hungry, even though it's approaching dinnertime. My entire being is just "off," and it's Stone Dumelin's fault.

For the briefest of moments, I think about having a drink. Not that it would be an easy task since there's no alcohol in my home. The St. Patrick's party was a BYOB event, and at the end of the evening, it was a TYOBH—take your own booze home.

It's not even a desire for alcohol that I'm feeling. It's more of a memory than anything. The remembrance that when things got wonky in my life, a drink to steady myself was commonplace.

It was a necessity.

It's not that now, but it does enter my mind, and I know that will never go away.

Tonight, though, it's easy to push aside. I'm not stressed by Stone, but I am perplexed.

Not just because he's a conundrum and I care for him because he's Brooks's brother, but because I'm attracted to him and I don't want to be.

“Ramen?” I ask, glancing down at Odin. He looks up at with me warm, expressive eyes as if to say, “That's disgusting, woman. Let's do steak.”

I close the refrigerator and remind him, “You already ate your dinner, Bub.”

With a sigh, I turn to the counter and grab an apple from the bowl, knowing I need to eat something. I take a bite, enjoying the crisp, tart flavor, and my stomach seems to wake up.

Feed me.

As I chew, I hear a faint rustling at the door, as does Odin. He trots that way, and I see something's been pushed under the gap.

An envelope.

I'd like to say that Odin is trained enough to pick it up and bring it to me, but he's not. He sniffs at it, jowls chuffing as if

the scent is unpleasant.

Setting the apple on the counter, I head to the door and retrieve the envelope. It's white, regular size, and completely blank on the outside. The flap isn't sealed, so I open it and peer inside. There's a folded paper, which I pull out.

It says, OPEN YOUR DOOR.

Frowning, I look down at Odin and flip the paper toward him, as if he could read it. "Think I should open the door? There's a chance it could be a serial killer luring me out."

Odin wags his tail.

Shrugging, I unlock my door and swing it open. I immediately see a poster board taped to the wall across from me, bearing a message scrawled in black Sharpie.

I'm sorry. My behavior was atrocious.

Those words are big and easily readable. Something smaller is scrawled below, and I have to step across the hallway to read it. Under the word *atrocious*, it says, *I had to look up how to spell this one.*

Clearly, these messages are from Stone. While I don't know his handwriting, I do know he's the only person who owes me an apology.

There's one more line at the bottom. *Look left.*

Odin waits obediently at the threshold of my open door, but I glance back, palm outward and give him a command. *Stay.*

Taped to the wall about fifteen feet away is another poster board. I walk to it and read the message:

I ordered Chinese if you'd like to join me for dinner. There is more to the apology, and well, if you're reading this... you're already close to my place.

And down below that: *P.S. Odin is welcome too.*

My eyebrows raise. This is one serious apology as Stone and Odin don't exactly get along. When he was over for the St. Patrick's Day party, they essentially ignored each other, but there's clearly harsh feelings on Odin's part. He's a sociable dog and is always moving from person to person, seeking out head scratches. Stone was persona non grata—despite the meatball bribes—and he never approached him after that.

Do I want the apology? Chinese for dinner?

Yes to the apology, and also so I can see if Stone is all right because he was so upset this morning. I'm ambivalent about the food, though.

I move back to my condo and step in to grab my keys. I call Odin to my side, and we leave, pausing only to lock the door.

When I reach Stone's condo, I put Odin in a sit. Taking a breath, I knock.

He must have been waiting for us because the door swings open. Stone stands there with a bouquet in his hand. He looks unsure of himself as he hands them to me. "I've been told that flowers aren't quite dramatic enough for the extent of apology I owe you, but I thought they were pretty, so I grabbed them, anyway."

Shit. The absolute worst thing that could happen... happens. I'm so thoroughly charmed by his thoughtfulness, along with his awkwardness, that he's forgiven without even officially asking.

I take the flowers and give them a sniff. It's a spring mix, but there's a stargazer lily putting off a delicate, lovely scent. I tip them down to Odin to smell, which he does and then looks up at me expectantly. "Think we should forgive him?"

"Oh, not yet," Stone says and moves back from the door, indicating we should come in. "There's more."

I smile and step over the threshold, Odin following me. Stone regards him warily, and my dog ignores him. He's

familiar with this unit as Odin was always welcome when it belonged to Brooks.

Stone and I both watch as he struts into the place as if he owns it, moves over to a camel-colored leather couch that I helped Brooks pick, and jumps on it. I glance at Stone, expecting a tightening of his jaw at such blatant disrespect by my dog, but he seems nonplussed.

Closing the door, Stone leads me into the kitchen where containers of Chinese food have been set out on the counter. He starts to open them. "I didn't know what you liked, so I ordered a bit of everything."

"I'm allergic to Chinese," I say, and his head whips my way, jaw dropping. "Just kidding."

Stone laughs, and it's a nice sound. Easy, not forced. Genuinely amused. And damn if it doesn't quicken my pulse. He has a beautiful smile when it's given freely.

"Do we need to put your flowers in water?" he asks dubiously before turning to grab plates out of a cupboard. He clearly doesn't know his way around yet as he opens two cabinets before finding what he needs in the third.

I round the island to the silverware drawer, as I know exactly where it is, and pull out utensils. "The flowers will be fine until I get them home."

The most unbidden thought comes into my head. They'd be fine unless I stayed the night, and then they'd probably wilt without water for that long.

I shake my head, horrified that I would even think such a thing.

Stop being so trampy, I chide myself. Flowers and Chinese shouldn't get me in bed with a man.

When Stone sets the plates on the counter, he says, "Before we eat, I want to finish my apology."

"You really don't need to," I assure him.

“But I do,” he insists. “Let’s call it what it was, Harlow. I assaulted you.”

“You most certainly did not,” I exclaim.

Bracing both hands on the island opposite me, he growls, “I touched you without your permission.”

“You had my permission,” I murmur, and Stone’s expression becomes thunderstruck. His mouth drops open, eyes wide.

He doesn’t say anything.

I don’t know what to say. That just popped out, and I’m not sure how to explain it. The silence lengthens and becomes awkward. It’s like when you get caught doing something bad by your parents, and they just look at you, waiting for the heat to become so unbearable, you confess everything.

“What I mean,” I end up blurting, just to fill the tense quiet, “is that your kiss was not unwelcome at first.”

Stone scowls, confusion evident on his face.

“What I mean”—I repeat, rushing to try to make it sound like I don’t want him to kiss me again, although that would be a lie—“is that you had no ill intent. Malice wasn’t in your mind. I’m sure you had a lot of things on your mind, but you didn’t want to hurt me. So there was no assault.”

“I was going to use you.” His voice is low, pained. “That’s ill intent.”

“I wasn’t going to let you do that,” I reply pointedly. “I would never let anyone do that to me.”

His gaze drops to the counter.

“Besides... you promised you’d make it good for me, so I don’t think that was really ill intent.”

Stone’s eyes snap up, and a sizzle of electricity arcs between us over the marble-topped island. I just laid out a blatant reminder to Stone that he promised a very satisfying experience with him.

My entire body is taut, unsure of what comes next. Does he round the island and attempt to kiss me again? Will he indeed make it good for me?

Or will I bolt if he so much as blinks at me funny?

I'm not prepared for him to spin away and move to the back counter. He picks up a piece of paper I hadn't seen there and faces me again. There's something printed on the page, but he holds it to his chest so I can't make out details.

"This is my grand apology," he says, tapping the paper with a fingertip. "It covers not just the unwanted assault—"

"Kiss, and at first not unwanted," I clarify.

"Kiss," he agrees with one corner of his mouth struggling not to curl into a smile. "But I'm still really sorry about breaking your chair. I am assured by the antiques refinisher that the repairs are coming along nicely, but I also know it will never be the same."

I'm touched that he would call and check on the progress. I thought it was enough that he took it upon himself to fix the Hepplewhite, and I knew from looking at it that the leg broke cleanly under the seat's edge, making repairs easy and unnoticeable. I expected no more.

Stone moves around the island and approaches, the paper still against his chest so I can't see what's on it.

"I wanted to buy and give this to you tonight, but it turns out this isn't something you just walk into a store and buy."

My eyes drift down to the paper, and he flips it around. Printed via a color printer is a glossy picture of a small, round table with tapered legs and an inlaid design on top. I don't need the description below to know it's a Hepplewhite, yet my eyes fall to read it. It was built circa 1760, and I know that this cost a small fortune.

"Stone," I whisper, my skin tingling from the shock. "It's too much."

“That’s subjective,” he replies, those whiskey eyes locked onto me. We’re so close, a kiss would be easily accomplished by me going up on tiptoes and him bending forward ever so slightly.

But I also know he won’t do it. I pushed him away, and I know this man is the type to respect boundaries.

“I don’t know what to say,” I murmur, taking the paper from him.

“Thank you is usually appropriate.”

I smile, studying the picture. “This will go beautifully between my chairs.” I tip my head back to look at him. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. It’s shipping from England, so it will be at least eight weeks, maybe longer.”

Shit... I want to kiss him. Which would be wholly inappropriate, so I step back and place the paper on the counter. I busy myself with opening the remaining containers. “Well, as apologies go,” I say lightly while focused on my task, “that was about the best one I’ve ever received.”

“I’m glad,” he says easily, and moves to the other side of the counter. He passes me a plate, and we use the utensils I’d pulled out to take small portions from each container. I’m an adventurous eater, so I try a little of everything.

“Counter, dining room, or living room?” he asks. “I discovered Brooks has a set of TV trays in there, so I guess that was a meal hot spot.”

I laugh as I nod. “It was. We ate in there a lot.”

“I read in his journals that you shared a lot of meals.” He goes to the fridge and pulls out two bottles of water.

“Pretty much dinner every night he was home.”

I pick up my plate and Stone’s, leading the way into the living room. I don’t say anything to Odin who is curled on the couch watching us. He knows better than to beg for food, so

he stays in place. I don't tell him to get down, figuring that's Stone's call since this is now his home.

Stone ignores Odin, though, and sets up trays in front of two side-by-side chairs facing the TV. The remote control remains untouched as we sit.

There are a million things we can talk about, but I decide to cut to the heart of what I really want to know. "What made you so upset this morning?"

Stone tips his head as if considering how to answer. As he dips his fork into some fried rice, he says, "I read the journals all night. Most of the stuff I read was really good. Healing. But at the end, my dad managed to cause my brother to doubt me." He puts the fork down without taking a bite and swivels his head to me. "It's something he'd been doing since Brooks was in high school. Trying to pit us against each other. Using me against Brooks to control him. And for the most part, Brooks realized what it was, but in his last entry... he was wondering."

"No, he wasn't," I say, setting my own fork down. My eyes bore into his, so he knows I'm not making this up. "In every conversation I had with him, he loved and trusted you. Did he have a moment where your dad might have cast a little doubt? I can see that. But he and I ate dinner together two nights before he died, and he talked about you. He always talked about you, and it was always with fondness and respect and a desire for things to be better. He was just as lost as you were in how to make it happen, but his loyalty was to you, and not your father."

Stone soaks in my words, and I can see the yearning in his eyes to believe me.

"I'm not making that up," I assure him. "I wouldn't lie to you. If Brooks hated you, I'd break that dreadful news and help you cope. But he wasn't like that. Not in the slightest."

I can actually see the tension and worry lift from Stone. His shoulders relax, his facial features smooth, and he smiles

at me gratefully. “Thank you for that.”

“I’ll answer whatever questions you have,” I say as I pick up my fork.

He takes his in hand and shoots me a sly glance, eyes gleaming with mischief. “I did read about a wet T-shirt contest involving someone who I won’t name but who’s sitting in this room, and it’s not Odin.”

I laugh, shaking my head. “I plead the Fifth on that.”

“Pity,” he quips as he gives his attention to his food. “I’d like to hear more about it.”

And I’m not so sure I won’t tell him at some point.

But not tonight.

Tonight is about sharing a meal and becoming friends again.

CHAPTER 18

Stone

IT'S BEEN TWO weeks since what Harlow has termed “the Hepplewhite Scheme.” She teases me about it because she said the posters, my words, the Chinese food, and the flowers were enough.

I tease her back that I didn't want to take any chances, and I had it on good authority it had to be a grand gesture.

She rolls her eyes and calls it a manipulation into forgiveness.

Thus dubbed... the Hepplewhite Scheme.

I'm currently sitting on my couch, in my living room, in my condo... waiting for Harlow to come get me. We're trying out a new pho restaurant in our neighborhood, and she just got off work, so she asked for a few minutes to change clothes.

I look around my living room. Run my hand against the supple butterscotch leather of my couch.

Mine, mine, mine.

I've accepted that this is now my home and these are my things. Pittsburgh is now my city. The Titans are now my career.

Gage's advice for me to seek connection has worked, and I feel more settled. Harlow has been a big part of it, and we've hung out a lot in between her work and mine.

I went to another AA meeting with her, and we've shared meals together. Sometimes we go out—she introduced me to Primanti's, and my life has been changed—and sometimes she cooks.

Conversation is easy and originally was focused on Brooks. I learned so much from those journals, but they yielded questions too. Harlow has helped me understand more about my brother than I ever thought possible, and the more I've learned, the more I've castigated myself for not making a stronger effort to repair things with him. While my heart has healed in spades knowing how well he was doing, that he had good friends like Harlow looking out for him, I was still bothered by the things that were not good in his life.

I hated he couldn't be his authentic self.

"Why didn't Brooks tell me he was gay?" I asked Harlow the other night as we dined on her delicious home-cooked salmon and asparagus. I have a temporary truce with Odin—he essentially ignores me and I ignore him.

Harlow shrugged. "He was embarrassed."

"That's ridiculous. Brooks knew I didn't have anything against homosexuality. We'd have conversations about it... you know, in general. There was that football player who'd come out about five years ago, and we talked about it then. He knew I would've supported him."

"I think he was embarrassed that he didn't have the strength to come out. That he didn't want the scrutiny. I think he didn't tell you not because he was embarrassed he was gay, but because he was embarrassed he didn't have the confidence to be okay with it. He knew you'd want him to do it—to be his authentic self—but he wasn't brave enough quite yet. He was trying to find the courage, though."

"I'd have given anything to help him come out. I would have taken great joy in being the one to tell our father, followed by a very real threat of harm if he did anything to make Brooks feel bad about it."

"You're a good brother," Harlow said, and that surprised me so much, I bobbed a bite of salmon and it fell to the floor. She didn't notice it, but Odin did. He glanced at Harlow, then at me. I knew he wasn't allowed table food, and he was

obedient. He didn't make a move, although he licked his lips and his eyes yearned for a taste.

While Harlow talked about Brooks, I gave a subtle nod toward the salmon, not expecting Odin to understand me.

But to my surprise, he dropped to his stomach and belly-crawled stealthily toward the food until he was close enough to gobble it down.

"I saw that," Harlow chastised, her gaze pinned on me and not Odin.

I tried for my most innocent look. "Saw what?"

"Saw you give my dog permission to eat fallen food."

"Your dog doesn't even like me. Besides, I didn't say a word."

"You nodded," she accused.

"Your dog is smart enough to understand that?" I threw back at her with a smirk.

"Did you not see him drop down and scoot toward it, hoping I wouldn't notice?"

"Coincidence." I snorted.

Harlow shook her head in mock disgust and went back to eating and babbling about Brooks. I dropped my hand down below the table and gave Odin a thumbs-up. Maybe we could be friends.

I hope we can be friends, because I know that I will be friends with Harlow forever. I've figured that much out in the last two weeks.

There's a knock on my door, and I know it's Harlow. I rise and head toward the foyer, grabbing my wool coat. It's the first full week of April, and although we're seeing temps in the sixties during the day, it's still nippy at night.

When I open the door, it happens again. Same as every time I see Harlow. Something zings through my body, fueled

not just by how beautiful she is but by how much I enjoy being around her. Harlow is something that Brooks and I have in common, and I understand why he fostered a deep friendship with her.

She's stunning tonight, dressed all in black—black turtleneck, black pants that mold a little too well to her body, and knee-high black boots. She's got a black puffer jacket on with her long, red hair streaming in shiny ribbons over her shoulders and down her back. Her makeup is subtle, and I like she doesn't go heavy to hide the freckles across her nose. Her green eyes sparkle with intelligence and always a dash of mischief.

I'm totally fucking enamored, and I've never known a woman for whom I have an initial attraction that only builds the more I get to know her. The more I learn, the more beautiful she becomes. Sometimes, she's so radiant, it almost hurts to look at her—metaphorically, of course. I tasted her two weeks ago, and it was the best kiss of my life.

But I won't do that again. I fucked up when I made that move, and now we are firmly in the friend zone. Harlow put me there, and I'm not taking a step out.

"It's raining a little," Harlow says, holding up an umbrella.

"Won't kill us," I say and take the umbrella from her.

Outside, I open it up, and she moves in close to me. It's only misting, but it's enough that we'd get pretty wet by the time we reach the restaurant. I don't mind in the slightest when she slips her arm through mine and our hips press against each other as we traverse the sidewalk, talking about tomorrow's game.

When we arrive at the restaurant, I give them my name, as I'd made the reservation, and we're led to a table right in the middle of the seating area. I feel the weight of stares as we walk, and I'd forgotten what it felt like to have notoriety. I'm becoming well known in Pittsburgh. Callum Derringer even told me that my jersey is currently the number one seller in

their merchandising division, and my agent has been calling with endorsement offers trickling in.

It feels great—I can't lie about that.

But the pressure is on for me to continue to perform at this level.

I know this is going to become commonplace... no privacy. I remember it well when I was with the Eagles.

Not so much with the Badgers. No one recognizes minor league players in their city, and I could roam about Cleveland without anyone doing a double take.

Except for puck bunnies.

They somehow were always at our team hangouts, serving themselves up like platters on a buffet table.

I'm seeing it here, too, when I go out after games with my teammates. I've gotten a few solicitations since coming to Pittsburgh. Beautiful women willing to spread their legs for the bragging rights that come with sleeping with a professional hockey player.

And I haven't taken a single one up on an offer since moving here.

I'd like to say they were all wart-covered hags, but they weren't. They were beautiful and sexy and promised a good time.

But I said no because of Harlow, and for no other reason.

Which is completely fucked up as I owe her no amount of monogamy, seeing as how we're only friends.

Once we're seated, we're handed menus and a wine list, which I decline. We're offered drinks, which I also decline, instead ordering water for us both. The first time we had dinner at a restaurant, Harlow made it clear she didn't mind if I wanted an alcoholic drink, but I really didn't. I've never had a drink because I savored the taste with a meal. When I drank,

it was because I was with friends having a good time, seeking a buzz to heighten it.

None of that matters when I'm with Harlow.

Once the waiter leaves, I ask, "How was your day?"

"I was in court this morning." She grimaces slightly. "Had to wear a suit and heels."

I laugh. One of the things I love about Harlow is that she's so casual and down-to-earth. She hates dressing up, and I love a woman who loves jeans and a comfy sweatshirt. It seems more real to me.

"When I got back to the office, I met with the parents of a seventeen-year-old kid who's in trouble. And while I can't share details about the kid's case, I can tell you that the dad is a certifiable creeper. He hit on me right in front of his wife. I would have kicked him out, but the kid really needs help."

Fury hits me that someone would dare hit on Harlow, which is ridiculous for me to feel because she is in no way mine to protect, but it's apparently a very real emotion.

"Have you heard from your dad?" she asks, and I'm grateful for the change of subject so I can get out of my emotions where Harlow's concerned.

I shake my head. "Not since I paid him the five hundred thousand."

Prior to that, he'd kept calling and texting, waxing and waning between fury that I wouldn't return his calls to begging me to give him attention. It was pathetic, and I couldn't find any common ground with him. Since reading Brooks's journals, the one place my anger has not abated has been with regard to my father. I don't know if I can ever forgive the deliberate attempts he made to ruin my relationship with my brother.

More so, the deliberate decision he made to abandon me once I no longer served his purposes.

“I did talk to my mom the other day. Called her when I knew Dad would be at work.”

“And?” Harlow prompts hopefully.

Over the last few weeks, Harlow has learned more about our family dynamics that she didn't know of through Brooks. She's essentially learned my side of the story, including that my mom just doesn't have the strength to be anything more than my father's wife.

Harlow latched onto that. She's hopeful that perhaps with Brooks's passing, it might make my mom appreciate her remaining son more.

I'm not holding my breath.

And she shouldn't either as I succinctly explain our conversation. “She basically lamented about my dad being upset about me getting Brooks's estate. I tried to get her to another subject... tried to get her to tell me how she's doing, and she just didn't have anything to say. It was frustrating.”

“I'm sorry,” she says. Her tone is so soft, so pained on my behalf, something in my chest squeezes in response to her care.

“You say that a lot when I talk about my family.” I give her a pointed look that makes it clear she doesn't need to apologize.

“It's just not right,” she grumbles angrily.

“No, I suppose it's not, but it is what it is.”

I know this is hard for Harlow to understand. She has very loving, attentive parents. They supported her when she didn't want to work in the family firm. They never considered it a fall from grace but loved her even more for wanting to make her own way. They stood by her side when she admitted her alcoholism, and they've loved her without judgment or recrimination.

To try to understand that some parents just aren't good like that has caused her a lot of distress.

“Excuse me,” someone says from my left, and I turn to find three women standing there, looking at me expectantly.

I take it all in, understanding exactly what this is, while I can see Harlow is curious but out of touch.

Three young women, all dressed up, hair and makeup perfect. “Can we get a picture with you?”

Normally, I don’t ever decline this request. More often than not, it’s from true fans, often children. But I recognize the look of these women, one in particular. The blond who wears her shirt cut just a little higher than the others and whose gaze is intensely direct.

“Actually...” I glance over at Harlow, feeling horribly uncomfortable.

“No, please,” Harlow says, sweeping her hand toward the women.

It’s genuine. She sees nothing but excited fans. I can even tell by her smile she thinks this is cute.

“Would you do the honors?” one of the women asks Harlow, handing over her iPhone.

“Sure,” Harlow says easily, rising from her chair.

There’s shuffling as I stand and the women crowd around me, the blond to my right. Normally, I’d loop my arms around their waists, not in a sexual way but just to pull my fans in and take a fun, smiling picture. Instead, I hold my arms out bent, a silent command for them to loop their arms through mine.

It’s not as intimate.

This works fine as we pose for pictures, everyone in the restaurant watching. The women do model poses with hands on hips, except for the blond. She turns to the side, removes her hand from the crook of my elbow, and places it on my lower back. I stiffen as she scoots in, pressing her body against me. I feel her heavy breasts against my arm, and it’s awkward to me now. In a different life, I never would’ve minded.

And then I feel her push something into my back pocket.

A million bucks it's her phone number.

She fucking squeezes my ass before moving her hand up to my lower back again, and I try not to jolt. I don't want to give her the satisfaction that she's elicited any type of response, even if it's one of annoyance.

Jesus... what is wrong with some women? I'm out on a date and...

Whoa, wait.

Not a date.

I try to smile as Harlow continues to snap photos and the women do silly poses and pouty faces.

Then the blond's hand starts to slide south again, and I pull away from the group, growling. "That's enough."

Harlow looks shocked, so I try to smooth it over. I take the phone from her and hand it back to the owner. "My apologies, but I'd really like to get back to my dinner with my friend."

Two of the women thank me, but the blond looks pensive. Before walking away, she puts a fingertip to her lips and sucks lightly on the end before winking at me.

It infuriates me that she thinks I'm a done deal. That I'm going to appreciate the number in my pocket and call her.

She pivots away, but I stop her. "Excuse me."

Triumph lights her eyes, and she shoots a quick glance at Harlow, who has taken her seat again, watches with curiosity.

I pull the number out of my pocket. "You might as well take this back. I'm not interested."

The blond's face flushes and her eyes narrow. She cuts a sharp look at Harlow and then back to me. "Seriously? You're turning this down?" She waves a hand to indicate her curvy body.

"Yeah, you're definitely not my type."

Eyes flashing with anger, she flips her hair. “Your loss, baby. I would’ve made your eyes roll in the back of your head.”

“I’ll take your word for it,” I say politely and retake my chair. When the blond storms off, I give my attention to Harlow.

She’s smirking. “Wow. You’re a popular guy.”

“That shit irritates me,” I mutter. “Believe it or not, guys don’t like being pawed at any more than women do.”

“I don’t believe it for a second.” She laughs.

“Well, most guys and in most circumstances,” I amend.

Harlow twists and watches the blond leave before turning back to me. “Be honest. There’s been a circumstance or two where you would have called a woman like that.”

I can’t lie to Harlow, even though I’m not sure I want her to know this about me. “Yeah... there’s been a circumstance or two.”

She nods pensively, and I wonder if I’ve disgusted her. “Suppose it comes with the territory.”

“Not this territory,” I reply, waving at our table.

And I leave it at that.

The waiter comes with our waters and recites the specials. We need more time to look over the menus and as we do, we lapse into conversation that has nothing to do with puck bunnies, hockey games, dead brothers, or asshole fathers.

We talk about movies, books, and dogs. She offers recommendations for all the things I need to do here in Pittsburgh, and we make tentative plans to take a drive to the cabin Brooks left me so I can see it. I need to make a decision whether to sell or keep it.

Dinner is fabulous, and we stretch it out over two hours. It’s not a date, but it sure feels like it. Easy, flowing

conversation, shared stories, and hearty laughs. The type of evening you don't want to end, unless it were to end in bed.

But that's not what we have together, so I'm going to have to settle for an unexpected friendship that is very valuable to me, just the way it is.

Which means I don't want to do anything to ruin it.

CHAPTER 19

Harlow

THE RAIN ABATED, SO we have no need for the umbrella on the way back. That means no excuse to walk close to Stone. No excuse to walk with our arms latched at the elbow, smell his subtle cologne, and feel the strength of his body.

Brooks and I used to walk arm in arm all the time. It was what we did as friends, and it meant nothing on a physical level. It should mean nothing with Stone, so I shouldn't yearn for it.

But two weeks ago, Stone kissed me with such deep intimacy that every time he gets near me, I have a hard time thinking of him as a friend.

Frankly, it's driving me crazy.

And let's not even consider that when those women approached him in the restaurant, something happened that made my feelings toward Stone all the more confounding.

At first, I thought it was so sweet that fans wanted his autograph, as it symbolizes that Stone is truly becoming a member of the Titans. He's clicking with this community, which is something I know has recently become important to him.

But when that blond sidled in closer and turned her body toward his rather than standing hip to hip as the others were, something ugly and green flared within. I actually felt proprietary toward Stone, and it irritates the hell out of me that I felt that way. After all, I'm the one who drew the line between us.

I find it interesting that Stone audibly called out the woman for her temerity in front of me. I almost get the feeling

that he wouldn't have done that if I wasn't there, but I don't think he would've taken her up on the offer. She seemed a little too into herself, and while Stone admitted to partaking in those opportunities in the past, I know that he needs a bit of substance, and she clearly doesn't have any.

So why did he make such a point to call her out? Was he conveying a message to me?

Or am I simply looking for things that aren't there?

Do I want things to be different?

The nature of our relationship has almost flipped a hundred and eighty degrees since the first time he stormed into my office. In just a few short weeks, he's become one of my closest friends.

A horrible thought strikes me hard... am I using Stone to replace Brooks?

And if that's the case, am I focusing on my physical attraction and wondering if this could be something more because I'm subconsciously feeling like I'm replacing Brooks's friendship? It's not sitting right with me.

Christ... I'm fucked up.

"You're coming to the game tomorrow, right?" Stone asks.

I blink, startled by his question. That seems to happen a lot... getting lost in thoughts about Stone. I've even caught myself daydreaming at work about what could be.

I smile and tip my head at him as we walk. "Am I a season ticket holder?"

He glares at me. "I would hope you'd come to cheer me on and not just because you're a season ticket holder."

I shrug and tuck my hands deeper into my pockets. "I suppose there's that."

Stone laughs, and it feels like we are good friends, nothing more.

Inside our building, we approach Stone's door first. Normally, we just break apart at this point, wishing each other good night. But he doesn't hesitate and moves past it, walking with me to my door.

It's nothing more than being gentlemanly and seeing me to my home. I mean, there is no danger. Nobody's going to attack me between here and there, but he's being a gallant, good guy.

Or is this something more?

Does this mean that something has changed? Is this more than him just exhibiting good manners? Is he reluctant to leave my company for the evening?

Is he planning to kiss me?

The thought of it sends a thrill racing up my spine. If Stone were to kiss me tonight, it would be for all the right reasons. It would not be to ease his pain, and I would not be a distraction. It would be simply because he's attracted to me and he desires me.

My hands sweat in my pockets, so I pull them out and surreptitiously wipe them on the bottom of my coat.

I reach in my cross-body bag and pull out my door key. Stone waits quietly as I unlock. My security system starts beeping, but I have a fob on my key chain to shut it off so I don't have to walk in and punch the code into the panel.

I don't want to break the valuable proximity already established between us for a good-night kiss, if that is his intent.

I turn around, face Stone, and smile. His hands are still in his coat pockets, and he smiles back.

"Thank you for dinner, again." Every time we've gone out for anything, he always pays. He joked about it one time when I tried to get him to let me pay, saying he was wealthier than I was. Which is not true. I'm sure he's got a good contract with the Titans, but I'm old-money wealthy.

I didn't argue with him, though, because he makes sufficient money that it doesn't hurt his wallet to buy me a meal or two.

And maybe I like the fantasy that he enjoys taking me out.

Stone remains quiet and unmoving. Nervous, I start to babble. "Next time, dinner is on me. I insist."

"If you insist," he says with a grin.

Now, see? That's just confounding.

Gallant Stone, who I know is attracted to me but can't seem to make a move, just refused the bait. I gave him the opportunity to insist on continuing to pay for dinner, which would suggest something more than friends, right?

Oh my God. I'm actually going crazy. I have to stop this.

I take a step back to my threshold. "All right, then... I know I won't see you tomorrow before the game, so good luck. I'll be the one screaming the loudest."

Something warm flickers in Stone's eyes, and he nods. "I'm sure I'll hear you."

Damn it. If he's going to kiss me, do it already.

But the more time without a move, the less likely it's going to happen.

And I know I'm not going to press the issue. "Well then, hope you get a good night's sleep."

"You too. Good night."

Stone turns, and I grimace at the absolute failure of my expectations just now. But he spins back around, and I quickly wipe the look off my face, eyes wide and eyebrows lifted in faux curiosity.

Here it comes. My heart pounds.

"You're coming out with me after the game tomorrow, right?"

He knows I am. Is he asking because he doesn't want to walk away?

"I'll be there," I assure him. "Just let me know where."

Stone seems pleased by my answer. "Probably Mario's, but I'll text you the details."

"Good deal," I reply as I back completely across my threshold. I start to shut the door. "Good night."

He again bids me good night just before the door clicks shut and I turn around to lean against it.

I lift my head a few inches and let it fall backward with a thump. "Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid."

My eyes land on Odin, curled up on the couch, watching me with sleepy eyes. I obviously woke him up. His tail thumps on the leather cushion now that he has my attention, but I break it to gaze up at the ceiling.

How I let myself get immersed in such a fantasy with Stone is beyond me. I should've been paying attention to the signs the last few weeks. He was brought into my life to be my new friend now that Brooks died. It is a gift. I am grateful, and I need to learn to cherish it for what it is and stop hoping for more.

I push away from my door, tugging off my coat and hanging it on the coat rack. My intent is to head straight to my bedroom to put on pajamas and then I'll get some Odin cuddles. But I freeze mid-step, remembering now that Stone had a look on his face just before I shut the door.

Was it disappointment? Was he hoping for something different and didn't want to make the move since I'm the one who drew the line to start?

I shake my head. "Stop looking for things that aren't there, Harlow."

I take another step and stop again.

Yes, I think there was disappointment. Or maybe not disappointment, but a hopeful expectation that wasn't met? That's a nicer way of saying it.

There was definitely something in his expression that I can't quite put my finger on, but I can tell he was bothered by something.

I pivot toward my door and stare at it. I can stay here in my condo and go on with my life just as it is. Which will include going to bed and probably lying awake for a long time, wondering about what-ifs.

It's a safe move.

Or... I can pull up my britches and investigate exactly what might be between me and Stone.

But I'm the one who's going to have to take action.

A sudden burst of courage flushes through me, and I turn the knob. "I'll be back," I say to Odin.

I march down to Stone's condo and stop before his door.

Taking a deep breath, I try to quell the nerves and raise my hand to knock. I wait to see if doubt will creep in and send me scurrying, but I realize I'm sick of having conversations with myself about what Stone is feeling.

It's time I find out and put this to rest.

Knock, knock, knock.

My knuckles are swift and decisive in announcing my presence.

I hear footsteps and almost bolt but then have another surge of bravery and hold my ground.

And then the door is open and Stone is looking at me, head tilted in curiosity.

I should demand to know his intentions. Ask him to stop giving me mixed signals, even though those admittedly may all be in my head.

I want to insist he make things clear to me so I can stop wondering.

Instead, I remember all the obstacles I've overcome and how hard I've battled for sobriety, and that I am a strong, independent woman who can accomplish anything.

So I step over Stone's threshold, walk right into his body, and wrap my arms around his neck. I pull him down so his mouth is forced to mine, and I kiss him with all my might.

I can feel the jolt of surprise through his body, and I'm terrified he'll push me away. He certainly has every right to do so since I laid the initial boundary.

But to my immense relief, Stone utters a growl low in his chest that reverberates into mine, my body pressed tight to his. He kisses me back.

It's so different from that first kiss fueled by such negative emotion. I mean, that kiss was hot in all its glory, but this one... it's not only scorching, but it feels exquisitely intimate. Like I'm bared before Stone, and he can see everything about me.

His arms wrap around me, and he drags me inside, kicking the door shut. I'm walked into a wall as a hand slides behind my neck, fingers into my hair where he grips tight.

Almost as if he's afraid I'll push him away again.

But I won't.

His lips travel to my jaw, along my neck, and my fingers dig hard into his chest.

I'm spun around again, walked backward into the living room, and I'm somehow flat on my back on the couch with Stone stretched over me.

His leg wedged in between mine, his weight held up by his hand pressed into the cushion, he kisses me hard and deep and possessively. The kiss is so erotic, it lights something inside me I never knew I had.

Desperate to touch him, my hands snake under his sweater, roaming warm skin over hard muscles that jump under my fingers. Stone's hand works at the button on my pants, and when I feel him tugging at the zipper, my hips lurch upward—a silent demand for him to get my clothes off.

But he halts and pulls his mouth from mine, staring at me, eyes sizzling with hunger. “Condoms.”

“Yes,” I huff breathlessly. “That would be good.”

Stone's lips curl into a smile, but he shakes his head. “I mean, I don't have any.”

“Well, I don't have any,” I growl. “We need some now.”

“God, you're fucking cute,” he says, bending back down and crushing his mouth to mine.

But it's a swift kiss because he's up and off me, and I'm left with my head spinning.

“I'll run down to the pharmacy,” he says, nabbing his phone from the coffee table.

I scramble off the couch. “I'll go with you.”

“You don't have to,” he says. “Stay. Get naked.”

“No,” I insist, pulling my zipper up and buttoning my pants. I then smooth my hair and lift my chin. “We're cohorts together in sex. I'll make the illicit run with you.”

Stone laughs, shakes his head, and grabs my hand. “Then hurry up and let's go.”

I can't begin to process how his easy laugh touches me. Knowing how much this man has changed in just a few weeks, and all thanks to his brother's journals.

We practically run out of the condo, holding hands down the stairs, and as soon as we step out onto the sidewalk, we realize the rain has restarted.

Neither one of us has a coat nor do we have an umbrella.

“Shit, that’s cold,” Stone says as he pulls me back under the awning that covers the main entrance.

“So what?” I exclaim, eager to buy the condoms so we can get back and get naked. “Let’s run. It’s only a block down.”

“And half a block over,” he points out. “Go back upstairs... I’ll go get them.”

I release his hand, step out into the cold rain, and hold my arms aloft while grinning. “Cohorts in sex, remember.”

Stone stares at me a moment, as if he doesn’t understand. I like that I confound him.

I think he needs that in his life.

Then he steps out into the rain.

Grabbing my hand, we start a brisk walk, almost a trot, staying as close to the other buildings and their awnings as we can.

“At least my hard-on will be gone by the time we get there,” Stone grumbles.

“I’ll get it back,” I promise him solemnly. “Don’t worry.”

And we both laugh as we run through the rain.

CHAPTER 20

Harlow

CONDOMS IN HAND—EXTRA-LARGE box—we race back to the condo, up the stairs, and when we reach Stone’s door, he pushes me against it and kisses me like a starved man. I’m soaked to the bone, and just seconds ago, I was so cold my teeth were chattering.

But the instant his mouth is on mine and his body presses into me, an inferno rages.

Lust, heat, desire. A deep yearning to get as close to him as possible.

I manage to rip my mouth from his and gasp, “My place.”

“Too far away,” he grumbles and kisses me again.

While I’m eager to get naked and learn this man inside and out, his kiss is so consuming that I want to drown in the pleasure of it.

When his mouth hits my neck, I gasp with need. “Odin.”

Stone’s head jerks up, and he looks at me with a cocked eyebrow. “You call out your dog’s name when I kiss your neck?”

Laughing, I shake my head. “I mean... if we’re going to do this, and I assume this is going to be an all-night, sleepover thing...” I stop a moment, consider what exactly this is. “Is this a sleepover thing?”

Crowding into me, Stone puts a hand at the side of my neck and dips his head close. “Once I’m in your bed, not sure I’m ever going to leave.”

Shivers run up my spine, having nothing to do with our cold, soaked clothes and everything to do with the promise of

this being more than just physical attraction.

“Then we need to take it to my place because of Odin.”

“He needs a babysitter?” Stone asks, not peeved but genuinely curious.

“He needs me there.” That’s it. My dog needs me there. He shouldn’t be alone all night.

Stone accepts that without further question and once again, my hand is in his and he’s dragging me to my place. I fumble with my keys, open the door, and as soon as we’re in, he’s kissing me again.

He backs me into a wall, and there’s a slight bang of my body against it. Odin comes trotting around the corner to investigate. I twist my neck to free my lips and look down at my boy. “Go lie down. I need some privacy.”

My boy is curious, head tipped because he hears something in my voice he’s never heard before. Stone looks, and we watch Odin to see what he’ll do. He’s usually super responsive to a command, but he hesitates.

“Go lie down, buddy,” I say, gentling my tone and trying to sound as normal as possible. But it’s hard with Stone holding me so close.

Odin chuffs and turns, padding into the living room where he jumps onto the couch, spins twice, and curls himself into a doughnut. His look is a little suspicious, a little forlorn, but mostly accepting.

“Let’s go to the bedroom,” I suggest.

That’s all Stone needs to hear as he lifts me up, hands under my ass, and my legs wrap around him. He kisses me again, and I thread my fingers through his hair as he carries me through the living room and into the master suite.

He walks straight to my bed, but rather than lay me on it, he says, “Let’s get you out of those wet clothes.”

“Best idea I’ve ever heard.”

Stone tosses the box of condoms on the bedside table and then a lot of pulling and tugging ensues. We try to help each other out of our wet duds, but peeling off soaked denim isn't easy. Still, we manage.

When we're both naked, we end up standing there a moment, taking each other in. I'm not normally shy in my nudity, but my God... standing in front of Stone and his godlike body, all bulging muscles and, well, let's just say, a very mighty sword... I feel shy.

Especially as I watch his gaze rove over my body ever so slowly, his eyes filled with such heat and desire, I feel it straight between my legs. "I knew you'd be perfect under those clothes," he murmurs.

Stone steps into me, head dropping to stare at my breasts. He grazes his knuckles over my nipples, which are hard as rocks from the combination of cold rain and his hungry regard. "Now the question is... what do I do to you? What's going to make you squirm and scream the loudest?"

"Holy shit," I rasp, knowing that his words alone just made me wetter than I've ever been in my life. "Is that your normal brand of dirty bedroom talk?"

Stone smirks, bringing a hand to the back of my neck. His voice is gravelly. "There is nothing normal about what I feel for you."

I want to melt into a puddle, but I'm not given the chance. Stone kisses me and at the same time, a warm hand covers my breast and squeezes.

A moan escapes and then turns into a groan of pure need when that hand slides from my breast down to my stomach and right between my legs where he cups me.

Lifting his head, Stone stares into my eyes. "What am I going to find down here?"

I can't even speak. I've never been engaged in such intense feelings coupled with dialogue. My tongue is tied, and my heart feels like it's going to burst out of my chest, but when he

slides a finger into me, the power of speech returns. “Oh, fuck... Stone.”

My hips buck, tilt into his touch, begging for more. Instead, his finger slides out, wet and calloused, grazing over my sensitive clit. The pleasure is so blistering, I’m pretty confident he’s going to destroy me.

Some semblance of reciprocity filters into my addled brain, and I touch him in return. My fingers wrap around his hard length, and he’s apparently as sensitive as I am. His hips jerk and he curses, “Fuck... that feels good.”

Stone’s words have a mindless quality to them, as if he’s under a thrall, and it’s thrilling that just a simple touch from me affects him like this. It emboldens me, and I automatically sink to my knees. It dislodges his hand from between my legs—a loss I mourn, but know I’ll get back—and before he can comprehend what’s going on, I take him deep into my mouth.

A rumble of curses pours from Stone’s mouth, and I no more than get one long suck on his cock before he’s pulling me to my feet. He kisses me harshly, then looks at me with darkened eyes. “Can’t do that just now. I’m barely hanging on to my control as it is.”

“Really?” I ask breathlessly.

“You fucking stagger me, Harlow.”

His words almost make me cry, but I have no opportunity because his mouth is on me again. The kiss is almost violent in its frenzy, and then somehow, Stone has me on my back, in my bed, and he’s pulling my legs apart.

Heat and embarrassment course through me, and I try to push my legs together as he stares into my eyes.

“No doing that,” he chides, then with his hands at my ankles, he pulls me to the edge of the mattress. Stone drops to his knees, his intent clear. His hands move across me, baring me further to his gaze and then his mouth is on me.

I buck hard, call out his name, and beg him to stop. He chuckles, the vibrations causing my body to squirm and call out even louder. He wondered what it would take to get me to do those two things, and now he has his answer.

Stone shifts his head, rubs his bearded cheek on the inside of my thigh, and glances up at me. “You taste fucking amazing.”

I shudder and then buck again as the tip of his tongue circles my clit.

“I can’t,” I moan, my hands gripping the covers.

“You can. You will.” He sucks on my clit hard, and a moan comes out of me that sounds like I’m dying, but I’m not.

I’ve never felt more alive.

Stone ignores my cries, presses an arm across my stomach to hold me still, and proceeds to devour me. He uses his tongue, teeth, and fingers, and it’s almost embarrassing how fast I come.

I’m wrecked by him, as I knew I would be from the first kiss.

He stands up, beautifully naked, and stares down at me in triumph. I watch through sated eyes as he sheaths himself with a condom. He bends over the bed, slides an arm under my back, and hauls me up onto the middle of the mattress before covering me with his body. My legs part and he settles between them.

“You good?” he asks as his face hovers over mine.

I nod, offering a lazy smile.

He kisses me slowly, reaching in between our bodies to position himself. He enters me gently, his length filling me until our pelvises are pressed together.

Stone rests his forehead against mine, holds perfectly still for a very long moment until he grits out, “You feel a little too good, Harlow.”

“You don’t feel so bad yourself,” I murmur, and he chuckles, lifting his head to peer down at me. “I heard a rumor... if you move, it feels better.”

“Oh yeah?” His eyes glitter with amusement as he pulls out, but when he pushes back in, no one thinks this is funny.

Because it feels so damn good, I might die.

Stone lets out a breath and moves inside me. He lifts one of my legs, wraps it around his hip, and angles into me deeper. It’s intense.

Almost unbearable.

And yet I don’t ever want it to stop.

Another orgasm crashes through me, causing me to cry out. Stone seems to respond to the plaintive note and thrusts deep before burying his face in my neck. He growls low, his body shuddering with release. I wrap my legs around his back, my arms around his neck, and I hold tight until we both come down together.

Stone rolls us to our sides, gathers me in close. Resting his chin on my head, he muses, “I wonder what Brooks thinks of this.”

It implies Brooks is watching over us, the first time Stone has acknowledged a belief that his brother’s soul lives on.

“I think he’d approve,” I murmur.

“I hope so. You knew him better than I did in the end, but I think he’d have wanted this.”

“If not, he’s going to haunt us both,” I point out.

Stone’s body shakes with laughter, and I join in. He gives me a squeeze and kisses the top of my head. “I’ll be right back.”

While Stone is in the bathroom ditching the condom, I get under the covers and wait for him to come back. I replay what just happened, remembering how he felt, the tone of his words. The sensation as he came inside me.

It's never been like that with anyone else, and I hope I'm not looking for something that might not be there merely because of our shared connection to Brooks.

I banish that thought as Stone comes back into the room. Without a word, he slides under the covers and pulls me into his body. It's warm and he smells good.

I cuddle in close, and we don't talk. Within minutes, his breathing is deep and he's in dreamland.

It's not so easy for me. I keep replaying the whole evening, committing it to memory. I don't want to forget any of this.

Eventually, Odin comes into the room and looks at me pointedly. He needs to go potty, and I oblige without complaint. I slip out of Stone's embrace and dress quickly. Odin and I walk the block, and he pees against a tree planted along the sidewalk.

Within five minutes, I'm back inside, naked and sliding into my bed. Stone is dead asleep, but when I scoot into him, his arms come around me without so much as a hitch in his breathing.

I rest my head on his shoulder and close my eyes, a smile on my face when I finally drift off.

CHAPTER 21

Stone

SOMETHING SCRAPES ACROSS my face, not enough to hurt but enough to bring me out of a deep sleep. Before I even open my eyes, I know I'm in Harlow's bed and that last night was beyond amazing. Last thing I remember was pulling her into my arms and drifting off to sleep. I'd never felt so relaxed—body and soul—in my life.

Things I take in immediately is that Harlow's body is not pressed up against me. I'm on my back, incredibly hot, and something hits me again in the face.

I open my eyes, and all I see is dog paw. Black pads roughened by strolls on sidewalks, tufts of white, trimmed hair in between them, and perfectly cut claws. I know the paw is attached to Odin's leg, and before I can raise my head to see more, the leg strikes out and the paw catches me in the cheek.

I push the leg over and stare at the furry monstrosity. Odin is on his back in between me and Harlow, dead asleep. His head is down near our feet, front arms bent into his chest and back legs sprawled like he's in a porn magazine. One paw hovers near my face, the other near the back of Harlow's head. She's on her side, facing away, curled around a pillow instead of me.

Odin's head faces Harlow, mouth slightly open, and he's snoring.

And apparently dreaming, as his leg kicks out again. But because I'm still holding my hand up as a buffer, it doesn't strike me.

Jesus... the dog got in bed with us and wormed his way between me and Harlow.

That's not acceptable, especially when I prefer to wake up with her nakedness pressed against me, not a hundred and thirty pounds of fur that makes the bed feel like an oven.

I nudge his leg and whisper, "Odin... move."

A long snore emits from his mouth, but he doesn't flinch.

Wrapping my hand around his lower leg, I give a little shake. "Wake up."

Nothing.

I release my hold on him, not willing to do any more. While we made a delicate peace after the great salmon incident and he'll accept pets from me, he's still a bit intimidating. I remember the bared teeth when I first walked into Harlow's office, and I don't think he's fully forgiven me for that. I sure as shit don't want to piss him off by waking him up if he's enjoying his sleep.

With a sigh, I settle back onto my pillow and grab my phone from the bedside table.

Six fifty-five a.m.

I switch off the alarm, which is always set for seven, and consider my day.

I'd love to start it with Odin out of the bed and me inside Harlow. It's game day, and I'll spend most of it at the arena preparing not just physically but also getting in the right headspace. Before I fell asleep last night, I knew instinctively I wouldn't be slinking out of her bed, trying to make an escape. Not just because I wanted her again physically—although I do certainly want that—but because I wanted to see what she had to say, see if she's grumpy when she wakes up, learn whether she likes coffee or tea in the morning...

But yeah, I want her again. I want to start off my day sharing what we shared last night.

I've learned early-morning wake-up sex is apparently not how things work here. I'm suspecting that Odin has been her

bedmate since she brought him home, and I doubt that's going to change.

My lips curl into a smile. I should be irritated as fuck, but I think I love the fact she has a dog that sleeps in bed with her.

Even one that can potentially rip my throat out and who cockblocks me.

Odin kicks again, this time with the other leg, and he must connect with the back of Harlow's head because she mutters sleepily, "Cut it out, Odin."

Her voice alone rouses him from his snoring slumber. His head lifts and he stares bleary-eyed at his master. He decides to stretch, which causes one of those paws to come my way again. I push it gently to the side, and I'm not sure if he forgot I was in bed or what, but the minute I touch him, he's rolling over fast on top of Harlow and jumps right off the bed before whirling around to stare at me like I'm the boogeyman.

"What's up, Big Man?" I wave and grin at him, taking the opportunity to slide quickly over to Harlow. I spoon her from behind, the warmth of her naked body against me feeling way too good. Slipping an arm around her waist, I draw her into me and nuzzle her neck.

She wiggles her bottom against me. "Good morning."

"Morning," I reply, lifting my head and smirking down at Odin that I'm now the one cuddling with his mom.

For a moment, we engage in a staring contest, and I almost feel as if he's trying to make some calculations in that doggie head of his. I know he's not getting in between us again, as our bodies are glued together.

My smirk gets smirkier, and I feel like I've won a major battle.

Woof.

Odin's bark is deep and booming and has an urgent quality to it.

“Fine,” Harlow mumbles, and before I know what’s happening, she’s sliding away from me. My arms loosen and she slips from the bed. She reaches out a hand, scratches Odin behind the ears, and says, “Give me two minutes to get dressed.”

What the fuck?

I can’t even appreciate Harlow’s naked glory as she moves to her dresser to pull on a pair of sweatpants, followed by a sweatshirt. As she goes into her closet, coming back out with a pair of fuzzy boots, I glance at Odin.

I swear, the damn dog swings his big head my way and grins. His tongue lolls out the side as he attempts to appear goofy, but I can tell he’s gloating.

“What are you doing?” I ask dumbly as Harlow sits on the edge of the bed to pull on her boots.

She glances back at me, her red hair a mess of waves and tangles. “I have to take him out for a potty.”

I push up on one elbow. “A potty?”

“Well, yeah. I don’t want him to pee in my house, and he can’t use the toilet.”

“But it’s early... and freezing outside.” I know I’m stating the obvious, but I still feel compelled to point it out.

“That’s dog ownership for you. You live to serve their needs.”

I wouldn’t know. We never had pets growing up, and it wasn’t practical in college nor when I went into the pros. Not that I ever wanted one, but this is probably validation as to why I never needed one. Not sure I’d love being at the beck and call of a dog’s bladder.

“I’ll take him,” I blurt, pushing the covers off and getting out of bed.

“You don’t have to.”

“I’ll take him,” I repeat, nabbing my jeans and slipping them on. “You get back in bed—naked, of course—and I’ll join you when His Highness has had his royal constitutional.”

Harlow snorts but then looks uneasily between me and Odin. “I don’t know.”

“How hard can it be?” I’m slightly offended she thinks me incapable.

“He can be stubborn,” she says, holding her other boot in her hand as she’s still considering if I’m trustworthy.

“So can I,” I point out.

Harlow tips her head, green eyes lit with amusement. “I didn’t know that about you. Interesting.”

I glare at her sternly. “Get in bed. Get naked. I’ll be back soon.”

Another glance at Odin, who stares back at her, then to me. “Okay... if you think you can handle him.”

I can handle this dog. Surely, he’s got to pee badly. Quick and back, and then alone time with Harlow before I have to head to the arena.



THIRTY MINUTES AFTER leaving, Odin finally finds a spot in a small city park just a block from the condo. This was after he smelled every single rock in the place, considered four different trees, and seemingly won’t poop if I watch him. I finally figured out I had to look away when he started circling to conclude his business.

No one will convince me otherwise that the damn dog didn’t take his time just to impede upon my morning with Harlow. I could never prove such nefarious thoughts, though.

The fact I had to bag his shit and dispose of it did nothing to endear me to him either.

By the time we get back to the condo, Harlow has given up waiting naked for me in bed and is in the kitchen cooking

breakfast. While she's not naked, she's every bit as sexy in a pair of leggings and an off-the-shoulder T-shirt. Her wild red mane is bunched on top of her head, and truly... she's never looked lovelier.

As I unclip Odin's leash, I marvel at my inner voice. Pretty sure I've never used the word *lovelier* in describing a woman.

My vocabulary wasn't all that evolved when it came to the opposite sex. She was either hot or not. She was either cool or not. She was either a great lay or not.

But seriously... Harlow is a work of art, just in her comfy clothes and messy hair pulled away from her face. I find myself not all that irritated at Odin that I won't be enjoying Harlow in bed to start my day. Somehow, walking her stubborn, vindictive dog for half an hour just so she didn't have to go out in the nippy morning air fulfills me.

Not the same type of fulfillment, of course, but still pleasurable.

"I take it you two weren't out for a leisurely stroll and just lost track of time," Harlow says, eyes glittering with laughter.

"I think your dog intentionally stalled so I wouldn't get back into bed with you," I grumble, hanging the leash on the hook by the door. "You know he kicked me in the face this morning."

Harlow snickers as she scrambles the eggs. "Now, you know that's just not possible. Dogs don't think that way."

"Your dog does," I insist, rounding the island and moving behind her as she cooks. My arms slip around her waist, and I rest my cheek against the side of her head, looking down at the pan brimming with golden, fluffy eggs.

And it hits me... I've never stood with a woman like this before. I mean, sure, I've had women cook meals for me. I've even had a few semi-serious relationships that were monogamous, but never built on a prior friendship. But I've never held a woman in this affectionate, easy way because it's never felt natural.

With Harlow, it seems like I've been doing this for years. In fact, it would seem odd if I weren't taking the time to show her affection while she's taking the time to make me breakfast.

"What do you need help with?" I ask.

She leans her head back against my shoulder briefly, tipping it to look up at me. "You've done enough taking my duplicitous dog out for a half-hour potty. Get some coffee and I'll serve up the food."

I lean around her so my lips can touch hers. Just a brush, a good-morning kiss, and while I've got no orgasms on this morning's agenda, I realize this is just as good.

CHAPTER 22

Stone

THE TEAM LOUNGE in the Titans' arena is much different from what we had in Boston. And we didn't have a team lounge in Cleveland.

As with everything this organization does for its players, they spared no expense on the luxurious interior of the space where players go to relax before games. Thick carpeting, dark-paneled walls, and sconce lighting that provides a quiet, almost Zen-like atmosphere. There are no TVs, and everyone speaks in low tones.

I'm currently cocked back in a recliner with my headset on, listening to some Soundgarden. It's not exactly meditative music, but it gets me pumped up for the game, which will be starting in a few hours. My music is interrupted by an incoming text.

I lift my phone from my chest, assuming it's from Harlow since anyone else who would text me is in this arena right now. Instead, I grit my teeth and lose all my relaxed vibes when I see it's from my father.

I'd been enjoying several days of quiet from him, and it's been a relief. Prior to that, he was utterly manic in his demands for me to give him money, give him season tickets, give him respect because he's my father.

Every bit of it deepened the divide between us.

I grimace as I read his tirade.

This is getting ridiculous, Stone. Your continued denial of what is due your mother and me is bordering on criminal. I have been in talks with an attorney and if you are not willing to split more of Brooks's estate with me, I've been advised that we can press charges.

I actually laugh out loud at the desperate, untruthful, and fanciful words. First and foremost, my brother's estate has nothing to do with the criminal courts. I would no more be at risk of going to jail than I would be of winning the lottery.

The fact that he thinks he can scare me with that tactic, though, is disconcerting, and my laugh dies. My father is not a stupid man. He knows I would never fall for something so ludicrous. It tells me that he may be losing it altogether. He sounds desperate, and desperate people do tremendously dangerous things. I think my father has bought into the ultimate fantasy that no one in this world is more important than he is.

Part of me wonders if I need to have a conversation with my mother about my father's mental health. Maybe this isn't about my dad being a narcissistic asshole, but perhaps he has some underlying mental issues.

My text chimes again, and I can see he's switching tactics.

I wouldn't expect you to understand. Your brother was a champion, and you are nothing but a loser who mooches off his brother's success. And now you're trying to take all the credit and not give me and your mother our due for raising and sacrificing everything we had for you and your brother. It borders on ungrateful.

Mental issues?

Nah... my dad is just an asshole. These are the same tactics he used on us growing up. Always bullying, always intimidating to get his way.

I start to close out of my texts, deciding to ignore him like I have been the last few weeks. When I don't engage with his bad behavior, he eventually gives up. Granted, he'll become progressively more bullish, and I expect a few more nasty texts, but eventually he'll go quiet when I don't respond.

But now I'm wondering if I can put an end to this. Maybe my mistake has been in not addressing the issue and assuming that my dad would get the hint and exit my life for good. If he decided to show one hint of care and concern for me as his

son, I might be open to communication, but as of right now, my father adds no value to my life.

It's probably time I said that to him.

I do so in a way that's not overly complicated and cuts to the heart of the matter.

I am not sure how you got so off track from being a true father, but I'm done trying to figure it out. So let me make this clear. You are not getting a dime from me now or in the future. You can do whatever you feel is necessary in the court system, if you feel the law has been unfair to you. If you choose to go that route, simply have your attorney contact mine. But from this moment forward, you have no business contacting me further. After I send this text, I am blocking you from reaching me via phone in the future. I'm sorry it's come to this.

And that's it.

I hit Send and let out a deep breath of relief. My fingers keep moving on the screen, though, and I block his number.

I send a quick screenshot of this most recent text exchange to Harlow. After last night and our amazing morning enjoying breakfast and coffee and mundane chitchat—which turned out to be one of the best mornings I've had in a very long time—I know Harlow will understand my emotions regarding this step toward cutting out my dad.

We've talked about it before. She knows everything there is to know about Brooks's relationship with our parents, my relationship with my parents, and lastly, how my relationship with my brother suffered because of my dad's inability to be a good, loving parent.

Sadly, not just my dad. My mom is no better. She never stepped up and interceded on her children's behalf. She's as much to blame for our dysfunction as he is.

Harlow responds almost immediately. *Want to talk?*

I glance around the room, and there are too many people in here sitting close by.

I text her back. *Yes. But I'm not in a place where I can. We can talk about this after the game.*

Her reply is quick, and she's clearly worried. *Are you okay?*

I think about it a moment and take stock of my feelings. I pretty much just cut my parents out of my life. And yet last night, when Harlow came to my condo and kissed me, ushering in a new phase for me, I gained something so significantly more beautiful and fulfilling than anything my father has ever given me, I can't feel sad about what I've just done.

I'm more than okay, I text back. Can't wait to see you after.

She makes me feel like the king of the world with her reply. *Can't wait to see you.*

I have more to say. Like, I'm crazy about her, and while I hate that my brother died in a plane crash and I'd give my own life to have him back, I can't be sad that it led me to her.

But now isn't the time.

I can barely say those things to myself because that's bordering on big commitment, and I've learned that even those who proclaim to love you aren't always loyal.

Still... Harlow makes me want to move past that fear of betrayal and abandonment, and I'm going to listen to my gut.



COACH KELLER STANDS in the middle of the locker room. He has a pregame speech that he likes to give before we head out onto the ice. It's getting to be the same thing over and over again, just couched in different clichés.

He has no clue that nobody's really listening to him. While the man is a genius with the technical aspects of the game, he has not been the great uniter and motivator he should be. That has actually come from two others—Baden and Gage.

While Baden works mainly with the goalies, he's managed to reach out and make personal connections with almost every player on the team. He's easygoing and always willing to listen if you have a problem. Not that I've gone to him with

my problems, but I've heard he's taken some guys under his wing and is mentoring them in their transition from the minors up to the pros.

The other guy who has become the definite glue holding the team together and lighting that proverbial fire under our butts out on the ice has been Gage. As a veteran player, he's nearly unflappable during practices and games. Everyone looks to him when there's uncertainty, and Coach Keller is feeling it. He's desperately trying to cling to a self-made illusion as our great hero who's going to lead the Titans back to victory. In order to do that, he has to take our talent pool and add in a healthy dose of confidence plus realism that will keep us motivated to give our all.

His words and speeches aren't doing it.

Gage has reached out to almost all the players much the same way Baden has. Except whereas Baden gives more general advice and security on how to transition into the big boys' league, Gage provides more of a family unity among the players. In the workout room, he's always going around and checking on everyone. At practice, he's the most vocal supporter when someone has an awesome play and is there to console when someone fucks up. This is often done right under Keller's nose, and I've seen his expression when it happens.

He doesn't appreciate it.

As such, Gage takes flak from Coach, but he lets it roll right off his shoulders. That's his maturity coming into play.

He told me while working out the other day that he doesn't give a shit if Keller doesn't like his role within the team. He's doing what's best for all of us.

And Gage doesn't even begrudge that he's not captain. That title still belongs to Coen, even though he's done nothing to deserve it or keep it, but Gage doesn't care about those physical trappings.

He's genuinely a good guy who wants to see everybody succeed.

We're getting down to the wire before the playoffs start. Exactly three and a half weeks from today. Ten games left in the regular season.

Before the plane went down, the Titans were at the top of their conference with a hefty eight-point lead. They were on a trajectory to keep that number one spot and were heavy favorites to end up in the championship series.

In the five weeks the Titans have been back on the ice, we've played a total of seventeen games, winning six and losing eleven.

There's nobody on this team who feels like this is a failure or disappointment to the city. We've been getting stronger and stronger in our play, despite the hiccups with Keller and Coen. Our most recent games were much closer in score and level of competitive play. While those eleven losses caused us to slide in the rankings, our hefty lead, plus the fact that some other teams in the running have had tough losses, means we're still in the hunt for a playoff spot.

The point system is complicated, and a team's standing can change on a dime depending not only on how you play but on how other teams perform.

Bottom line... if we continue to play well, we have a good shot of staying in the top eight and making the playoffs. Granted, we may be right in that eighth slot, and we might be sliding into it by the hair of our chins, but we have a chance.

It is that goal that seems to be fueling everybody.

Certainly not Keller's speeches that ramble on and cause our minds to drift.

At least my mind isn't drifting too much toward Harlow. She definitely creeps in now and then, but I'm focused on doing my job out there tonight.

After Coen was suspended for two games, he came back and actually seemed to be playing a little stronger. His disposition hasn't gotten any sunnier, and he still distances himself from the rest of the team, but at least he's starting to play a little more skillfully.

This has been a bit of a moral dilemma for me. Our second line center, Boone Rivers, got moved up those two games when Coen was out. And while he doesn't have anywhere near the talent that Coen does if you compare them side by side, he actually ended up excelling by coming up and playing with Gage and me. He did incredibly well those two games and nabbed an assist. Again, not as strong as Coen, but he definitely fits in with us better.

But Coen is back, he's part of this first line, and we are going to make it work. We don't have to be friends. He doesn't even have to pretend to like any of us. He can be an asshole, for all I care, as long as he goes out and does his job on the ice.

"We control our own destiny, men." Keller looks around at us, and I blink to focus on him so he doesn't know I was lost in thoughts elsewhere. When he's confident he has our full and undivided attention, he finishes dramatically. "We must remember... not all heroes wear capes, but we are heroes all the same."

I school my features into a hard mask and force myself to not roll my eyes. Christ, he's so corny, but he did say something that resounds with me on a personal level.

I control my own destiny.

I've cut my father out of my life. I'm turning my back on his toxicity.

And at the same time, I've invited Harlow deeper in. Not to replace the hole left by Brooks or by my absent, manipulative parents, but to fill something that's been expanding within me.

A growth of sorts, whereby I'm opening myself up in ways I'd never imagined. I've let Harlow in, and now I can only hope I don't get hurt by it.

CHAPTER 23

Harlow

I PATIENTLY WAIT at the table for Stone to arrive. This is not the first time I've hung out with him after a game. As he had done in the past, a reservation for a high-top table was made at Mario's, and I enjoy a frosty glass of strawberry lemonade while I wait for him to finish his business at the arena.

The Titans won tonight, and it was one of the best games I've ever seen in my life. Part of that has to do with the fact that they came back from a 2-to-0 deficit in the third period, to win 4-2 over the Quebec Royals.

That's right, four goals scored in the third period alone.

Two of which were Stone's.

I'm sure this is one of the best games I've ever seen because Stone played like he was on fire. And while I'm quite sure I'm his number one fan, it is vastly different now that we've become intimate. I cannot get all poetic about how amazing last night was with him, how touched I was this morning when he took Odin out and was patient with my boy. Or how much it meant that he settled in for breakfast and good conversation with a gracious laugh that Odin spoiled his bedroom plans.

Hell, I was disappointed, too, but the time we spent talking was just as good.

Many women might even go so far as to say that what I had with Stone last night was transcendental.

Life-changing.

I can't say that, though.

My life is still the same, amazing in all its glorious ways. But it has been so greatly enhanced by getting to know Stone, and now taking this relationship to a new level, what has changed is my future. I know in my gut that he is going to be responsible for a lot of goodness yet to come.

And so maybe that's why it was the best game I've ever seen—because of a man I am probably falling in love with who was instrumental in helping his team win. And every Titans win is a healing balm to the cuts this city has endured since the plane crash.

Mario's starts to fill up with people from the arena trickling over. I see a couple of lawyers who I know fairly well, and they hang out at the table with me for a bit. They ask me to join them at their table, but I let them know I'm waiting for a friend. I would've invited them to stay, but frankly I am looking forward to alone time with Stone.

The waitress is overly solicitous as I'm sure she's been told this table belongs to Stone Dumelin. I no more get finished with my strawberry lemonade than she has a refill for me.

She returns a few moments later and says, "There's a guy at the bar who wants to buy you a drink. I told him you weren't drinking, but he insists I come over and offer one to you, anyway."

I follow her gaze to a very handsome man sitting by himself with a beer in front of him. He's watching me like a hawk, and when our eyes meet, he raises his beer in a silent toast, his eyes hopeful for an invitation.

I give my attention back to the waitress. "Politely decline. I'm definitely not drinking, and I'm waiting here for my boyfriend."

The waitress leans in closer, conspiratorially. "So, you're dating Stone Dumelin?"

Hadn't meant to reveal that to anyone, so I play coy. "Just tell the man thank you, but no thanks."

Slightly disappointed I didn't give her what she wanted, she still winks at me. "You got it."

I sip my strawberry lemonade, which I now realize must look ridiculous sitting in the bar area of Mario's full of rowdy Titans fans most of whom are drinking booze. And those who aren't, aren't drinking strawberry lemonade from the kids' menu.

I shrug to myself. Who cares what people think?

Someone touches me on the shoulder, and I swivel in my chair to see the man from the bar who wanted to buy me a drink. Without invitation, he puts his beer on the table and leans an elbow on it to face me. "I can't believe you're not going to let me buy you a drink."

Taking the guy in up close, I note that he isn't merely handsome but devastatingly gorgeous. I hadn't really paid much attention to it when he was sitting over at the bar, but now that he's in my face, I can't help but notice that his looks are movie-star quality.

I glance around and notice that several women are watching him talk to me.

I bring my attention back to him, offering a polite smile. "I'm with someone, so it wouldn't be appropriate."

The man smirks and looks around, back to me, and quips, "I don't see anybody with you."

No matter how good-looking, his cocky attitude has now annoyed me. I don't like people who can't take no for an answer. Stone's father immediately comes to mind. Someone with so much ego that they can't believe someone would have a differing opinion.

The man sticks his hand out for me to shake. "I'm Trevor."

I look from his hand to him, prepared to decline his introduction a little more sternly. I don't get a chance, though, because Stone appears on my other side and moves in close to

me. He kisses my cheek and then puts his elbow on the table to look past me to the man who still has his hand outstretched.

Stone nods down at it. “Pretty sure she’s not interested in meeting you.”

The guy’s mouth falls open as recognition dawns. “Holy shit. You’re Stone Dumelin.”

“That would be me.” Tipping his head to me, Stone adds, “And this would be my girlfriend you’re hitting on.”

The man flushes with embarrassment, and I almost feel bad for him. Stone apparently does feel bad for him because he takes the man’s hand, still stuck out in introduction, and shakes it. “Nice to meet you, Trevor. Did you catch the game?”

The guy gushes. “I did, and you were fucking amazing tonight. You are the best acquisition this team could’ve gotten.”

Trevor continues gushing while I enjoy the warmth left behind by Stone calling me his girlfriend. There are accolades for Stone, and for Gage as well, laments that Coen isn’t playing up to par, and absolute thrills to the fans that we might make the playoffs.

But Stone doesn’t let him go on too long. “Hey... you want a picture or an autograph or something? I’d like to have some time with my girl.”

The man, of course, has forgotten me altogether. His evening has become far better getting to meet Stone than I ever could’ve made it by accepting his offer of a drink. I watch in amusement as Trevor whips out his phone, comes around the table, and takes a selfie with Stone. This, unfortunately, springs the door wide open, and other fans start approaching. Stone graciously takes picture after picture.

The waitress comes up and asks me if I know what Stone wants to drink.

“Just a water,” I reply. “With lemon.”

It will do me no good to ask Stone if he wants a beer, which I know is his go-to alcoholic beverage just through conversations we've had. Over the last few weeks we've been hanging out, he's laid down the law that he's not drinking around me, even though I've assured him it's okay. I think it's sweet that he wants to be supportive of me and my alcoholism, but I also don't expect people to give up their responsible use of alcohol.

Ten minutes later, Stone finally extricates himself and plops down on the stool next to me. The water is in place, and he grabs it for a sip before setting it down.

Gaze coming to me, he grins broadly. "Hi."

"Hi." I beam back before doing a little gushing of my own. "Words cannot describe how amazing you were tonight. I'm really proud of you."

Stone's gaze softens, and his hand goes behind my neck, almost pulling me off my stool so he can kiss me. It's soft, and sweet, and it makes everyone in this place melt away until it's just us two.

"That's new," Gage says as he comes up to the table.

Stone pulls back slowly and reaches out to take my hand, holding it on top of the table—a public display that the nature of our relationship has changed.

Gage has hung out with us a few times after games. But he has only ever known me as Stone's friend. He also knows me as Brooks's closest friend.

Now he sees that we're different.

He gives Stone, then me, a pointed look. "I was going to join you, but it looks like I might be a third wheel."

"Of course you're not a third wheel," I exclaim, and I nod toward an empty stool.

"You're totally a third wheel," Stone grumbles, but he's teasing. Gage knows it and takes the stool, resting his forearms on the table.

He lasers his eyes onto Stone. “I don’t know what brand of Wheaties you fucking ate this morning, but that was some of the best hockey I’ve seen in my career.”

Stone squeezes my hand as he replies, “I got a really good night’s sleep, I guess.”

Mid drink, I almost choke on my lemonade. We did indeed sleep well last night, both worn out from amazing orgasms. But I also think about Odin waking him up early by kicking him in the face. Half an hour in the cold, trying to get my dog to do his business.

It was not his normal routine.

If anything, Stone should’ve been discombobulated today. My presence in his life on an intimate level would shake up the most solid of men.

But he takes it all in stride, and that is a big difference from the man I met several weeks ago.

“Is Baden coming?” I ask. He had joined us once before, and I really like the guy.

Gage shakes his head. “He wanted to hang at home with Sophie. He’s officially whipped.”

I knew the backstory about Baden from the news, but Stone filled me in a little more on his new romance with the woman he saved from attackers, which in turn caused the severe injuries that resulted in career-ending paraplegia. It led him to a new position here as the Titans’ goalie coach and reunited him with the woman he saved.

Something beautiful coming out of something so horribly ugly.

I wonder if that’s what this is with me and Stone. Did that plane crash lead him to me?

Did I lose my best friend and he lose his brother, merely so we could find each other?

A family approaches, this time for Gage. A mom, dad, and two little girls, both of whom are wearing Heyward jerseys, ask for pictures. When Gage steps away from the table to mug with the little fans, I turn back to Stone.

“Okay... listen—” I start to say.

Stone puts a finger to my lips and shakes his head. “In my opinion, when somebody starts a sentence with *okay, listen*, it’s usually bad news. Let’s not go there.”

I bat his hand away and smirk. “It’s not bad news. I’m merely extending an invitation to dinner at my parents’ house on Friday night. They asked if you wanted to join us.”

Stone scowls, not in an irritated or angry way, but confounded. “Did you tell your parents that we had sex?”

I can feel my eyebrows drawing inward, nearly touching each other, so deep is my confusion. “No. Why would I do that?”

“Why would they invite me to dinner?” he throws back, a small insight into his befuddlement. “You and I didn’t sorta become official until last night. I think having sex solidifies that we’re having a relationship. Well, I’ve had sex in the past with women and that did not mean I was in a relationship. Normally—”

Now I’m the one who puts my fingertip to his mouth to stop his adorable but unnecessary rambling. “My parents know we’re friends. They knew Brooks well, and he came to dinner at their house many times. They’re being polite by extending the invitation, which came during the game. Now, as far as dating... I do think that having sex clarifies we’re something more than friends. I think the fact you’re showing PDA in a very public place might also be a hint. However, I want to say, please don’t ever talk about your prior habits with regard to your sexual conquests. I don’t need to know that stuff.”

Stone laughs, taking my hand in his and brushing his lips across my knuckles.

“Sorry I jumped to conclusions. And that’s sweet your parents invited me to dinner.”

“And?” I prompt.

Stone shrugs. “I suppose I should accept. We are having sex, after all, and it would be totally rude to decline at this point.”

I smack him with a playful backhand and then lean in for a kiss. I don’t make it, though, because there’s a commotion across the bar with men shouting and glass breaking.

Stone and I both look that way, and my jaw drops when I see Coen Highsmith grappling with another bar patron. The guy’s got his arm around Coen’s neck, and Coen is trying to break free.

He succeeds, his right arm coming out, and gives the guy two hard punches to the ribs.

Bouncers jump in as well as two of the Titans players who must’ve come in with Coen. The men are broken apart, and the guy who just took two shots to the ribs holds a hand to his side, grimacing in pain.

Coen, on the other hand, is still pissed and trying to jerk away from the people holding him back. His eyes are pinned on the man he just punched, shouting obscenities and trying to reach him for another round.

“Jesus Christ,” Stone mutters as he stands from the table.

I start to get up as well, but he shakes his head. “Stay here. Just going to see what happened.”

Gage also has taken notice of the melee and walks over with Stone. I watch from the table as things calm down and Gage gets in Coen’s face. He has some harsh words that get Coen’s attention off the other man, and then Gage pulls him away from the crowd where he steps in closer to talk to him. Stone has words with the man Coen hit, putting a hand on his shoulder in commiseration.

Whatever Gage says, it seems to penetrate Coen's thick head. He walks over to the guy and seems to apologize. The guy begrudgingly accepts with a curt nod, and then Gage leads Coen out the door.

When Stone returns to our table, I ask him what happened.

"Apparently, that guy stepped in Coen's way and accidentally bumped his shoulder. Coen went ballistic and called him a nasty name. Shoving ensued, and you saw the rest."

"He's got an awful short temper." I know Coen hasn't been doing well, based on what Stone has told me. Anybody who watches sporting news knows he got arrested for drunk and disorderly and assault. And here he is, jumping right back into the fray.

"And he doesn't even have alcohol to blame for this outburst." Stone sounds absolutely disgusted but equal parts worried about his teammate.

"He needs a major intervention."

"I agree." Stone glances toward the door and then back to me. "But who would do it? None of us are close to him. All his friends died on that plane. Every single member of this team could sit him down and tell him we're worried, but it wouldn't mean shit because he doesn't know us and we don't know him."

That makes me sad for Coen. "He must feel like an island."

"A rageful island," Stone clarifies. "He has to figure some way to work that shit out. I know management won't put up with it, and he's going to find himself booted from the team."

"You figured a way to work past that stuff," I murmur.

Stone smiles, takes my hand again. "Yeah... I did. Part of that was you, and part of that was my brother's journals. I don't know if Coen has a support system. I've tried to get him

to open up a few times, but he's not interested in connecting with anyone."

We feel the heaviness of the moment... that Coen might be a lost cause.

"Want to get out of here?" Stone asks.

I study him, noting the worry lines around his eyes. "Yeah... let's go to my place. I'm sure there will be sex involved."

Stone laughs, the distress melting from his expression. "I'll make all your dreams come true tonight."

"God, please don't be kidding."

Standing from his chair, Stone helps me up. He loops an arm around my neck and pulls me in. His mouth touches mine for a small kiss, then he nuzzles his cheek next to mine.

His lips graze my ear before he whispers, "I think I'm going to make you beg."

A shiver runs up my spine at the dark promise within those words, and I doubt he's going to have to work too hard to get me to beg.

CHAPTER 24

Stone

I LET HARLOW drive us to her parents' since she knows Pittsburgh like the back of her hand, and I get lost if I venture more than a few blocks from the condo or the arena. When we pull up in front of what I can only describe as a mansion, I'm finally starting to understand not only Harlow's family wealth but the history behind it. She comes from a long line of prestigious lawyers, and if the grandiosity of her family home is any indication, they are not only prestigious but incredibly productive when it comes to making money.

As we step out of the vehicle, I look over the hood at her. "I'm feeling severely underdressed."

Harlow waves at me and then to herself. We're both in jeans. "You're dressed just as well as I am. Trust me when I tell you my parents don't care about this stuff."

She walks around the front of her car and holds out her hand. "But please don't get freaked out that they will both be dressed nicely."

"Oh, great," I grumble. "Missing my first real opportunity to impress your mom and dad."

Harlow laughs and wraps both of her arms around the crook of my elbow as we walk up the sidewalk. "They're going to like you just the way you are."

She leads me up the steps to a set of large double doors with heavy brass knockers. She ignores those, along with the doorbell, and enters into a spacious, marbled foyer with a double-grand staircase before us and marbled floor beneath. Before I can take in my surroundings, I hear the scrabbling of claws as two large Bernese Mountain Dogs race toward us.

I'd been expecting this. While we didn't bring Odin tonight, I'm well aware that the Alston family has had Bernese Mountain Dogs going back a few generations.

Harlow squats to hug the dogs and let them kiss her. She glances up at me and says, "This is Loki and Freya."

As if understanding the introduction, both dogs come to me with tails wagging. A far cry from how I first met Odin, who continues to warm up to me, I'm happy to say, but his tail doesn't wag like these two when I'm near.

Maybe that will happen over time. I know I'm going to have to win him over at some point.

"Oh, there you are, Harlow."

My gaze moves to a woman in her late forties. I know this isn't Harlow's mother, not only because of the age but because this woman is a brunette, and I've seen pictures of Harlow's parents in her condo. She inherited her fiery-red hair from her mom.

This woman is wearing a pair of black pants and a red silk blouse.

"Hi, Carina," Harlow says with a smile as she straightens. "This is Stone Dumelin."

Carina moves forward, holding out her hand. "Welcome, Mr. Dumelin. Can I get you anything to drink?"

"I'm good right now," I reply.

She tips her head toward a hallway that goes past the right side of the curved staircase. "Your parents are in the sitting room waiting for you."

"Thank you," Harlow says and takes my hand to lead me away.

"Who was that?" I ask in a low voice.

"I'm sorry," Harlow murmurs, glancing back over her shoulder as Carina heads off in the opposite direction. "That's my parents' housekeeper."

“That totally blows my stereotype of wealthy people making their help wear uniforms.”

Harlow laughs. “I told you my parents don’t care about physical trappings such as clothing and uniforms. They judge people on their own merit. Besides... Carina is so valuable to them, she could show up wearing a clown costume and they would be fine with it.”

Harlow leads me into the sitting room that looks like nothing more than a formal living room, decked out with antique furniture, heavy silk rugs, polished dark flooring, and what looks like expensive art on the wall. The huge fireplace is currently unlit, a recognition of the spring weather barreling into Pittsburgh.

I get my first glimpse of Mr. and Mrs. Alston. They’re sitting on a couch placed perpendicular to the fireplace. There’s a matching couch across from them with a coffee table in between.

Harlow’s dad has his arm draped over the back cushion, his fingertips playing affectionately with his wife’s shoulder as they talk. He looks very distinguished with silver at his temples, and while he’s not wearing a suit, he has on a dress shirt and tailored pants with what look to be very expensive dress shoes. Mrs. Alston is wearing a dress and high heels—and wow, Harlow is the spitting image of her mother.

They both turn their heads our way and stand from the couch when we enter.

Harlow lets my hand go and moves to her parents.

“Hi, honey,” her dad says as he hugs her. Harlow moves to her mother and receives the same greeting, although her mother also kisses her cheek.

Harlow then moves back to my side and takes my hand in hers.

“Mom... Dad... this is Stone Dumelin. My boyfriend.”

Neither one of the Alstons raise an eyebrow or blink in surprise at that announcement. This is only because Harlow had given them a heads-up that our relationship had changed from friends to something more. Harlow assured me her parents were greatly pleased by this, but I wonder how they can be because they don't know me at all.

Maybe they think I'm just like Brooks, and that's good enough for them, because Harlow told me they adored my brother.

I move forward, shake both of their hands. "It's nice to meet you. Thank you for inviting me to dinner."

"We love to have guests," Harlow's mom says, her hands encompassing both of mine. "And please let me offer our condolences over your brother's passing. We adored him and he's sorely missed."

"Thank you." I wasn't ready for that and I have to swallow hard the emotion that brings up. "I'm glad you got to know him."

Both of her parents smile sympathetically, but move on from the heavy moment when her father asks, "I'm sure Carina has already offered, but would you like a drink?"

"I'm good, Mr. Alston. Thank you."

Harlow's mom waves a hand. "Please... it's Robert and Celia. Not Mr. and Mrs. Alston. And I have to ask, are you refusing a drink in deference to Harlow?"

I'm not prepared for that question, but the answer is easy enough. "I am."

Harlow's parents shoot each other a look, and I can tell my response impresses them. Which has no effect on me. I don't do it to impress them. I do it for Harlow.

"Well, dinner won't be ready for at least half an hour. Let's sit down and chat." Harlow's mom motions to the furniture, and we take a seat on one of the couches while her parents

reclaim their original places. Loki and Freya had followed us in, and both lie down before the fireplace to our right.

It looks like a fucking Norman Rockwell painting.

“My apologies in advance,” Robert says as he levels me with an apologetic smile, “but I am quite the Titans fan, and I will probably have a million questions. I want insider information on how things are going with the team.”

I laugh, also having been prepared for this. Harlow warned me that her dad always pestered Brooks for the same. “Lay it on me, Robert. I shall divulge anything I can.”

We talk about hockey, politics, and oddly enough, the city of Cleveland where I played with the Badgers. Harlow’s father apparently had a case there that lasted three weeks, and he got to know the city quite well.

In less than the half hour predicted, Carina announces that dinner is ready, and we all move into the formal dining room, which holds a massive table that seats twenty-four. I’ve never seen anything like it in my life, and I can’t even imagine having a dinner party with that many people. But I suppose when you have that level of money and sophistication, you probably hire out every bit of the work that needs to be done to entertain formally. I mean... who even has twenty-four place settings in their cupboards?

We congregate at one end of the table. Robert takes the head, Celia to his right. Harlow and I are to his left, and we dine on several courses, including an appetizer, soup, salad, and the main course of lamb. The food is impeccable, and I wonder if they eat like this every night. While I’ve made tremendous money in my hockey career, playing with the Eagles and now the Titans—but not with the Badgers, because the pay there sucked in comparison—I’ve never experienced this level of wealth.

Yet Harlow’s parents aren’t overly formal. They’re quite down-to-earth and charming, much like Harlow.

As dinner progresses, we talk about a variety of subjects. At one point, Celia mentions Harlow's brother Brian, who is due to come in for a visit in a few weeks.

"It's his birthday," Celia explains to me. "We'll throw a big party when he gets here. Of course, you'll have to come, Stone. It will be a very good time."

"And just how long will my dear brother be staying?" Harlow asks dryly.

I'm well aware that Harlow has a bit of frustration that her brother won't grow up and decide what he wants to do with his life, preferring to jet around the world on his trust fund.

But I also know she loves him very much and doesn't truly begrudge that he's having fun. She certainly has the right to do that with her trust fund if she wanted, rather than use it to fund her law practice for lower-income people.

Harlow's parents also don't seem to have a problem with Brian being a professional playboy. But not in the sense that they don't care about his future or that they've written him off. On the contrary, they actually have some level of confidence that he'll have true success one day when he's ready to become that man.

As we make our way through the meal, I am increasingly aware of the differences between Harlow's parents and mine. Each set of parents has two children. Their offspring have had varying levels of success. But if you compare Brooks and me to Harlow and Brian, the differences are stark and make me aware of how unlucky Brooks and I were.

Harlow did not want to follow in her family's traditional footsteps of working for her family's law firm. This would be akin to me telling my father I didn't want to play hockey.

Harlow's parents supported her decision. My father would have berated and then disowned me.

Harlow's brother, Brian, is unambitious and without drive or direction—the complete opposite of his parents and sister.

Yet they are giving him the space to find his own way and have confidence in him that he will one day succeed.

My brother was an alcoholic, gay man who was too afraid to be himself. If my dad had ever known those things about Brooks, he not only would've disowned him, I'm quite convinced he probably would've tried to beat the gay out of my brother.

I can't help it, but I have a surge of intense jealousy that Harlow has parents who are supportive and loving, no matter if their children are flawed.

Her family is utterly perfect. Everything any kid could hope for.

But even though I admire them and I envy Harlow, part of me doesn't respect her parents. It's a shitty, judgmental way to be, but I wonder why they don't bring her brother in hand and insist he do something productive with his life. And there is a small part of me that wonders why her father didn't do more to keep Harlow with his law firm. It's an incredible family legacy that she turned her back on. I know she's immensely happy doing what she wants, and I want her to be fulfilled, but wasn't there some common ground that could've been explored? Couldn't her father have worked harder to make it so she could stay in that law firm without the pressures she was experiencing?

Maybe he's not so perfect after all, and I realize I'm actually giving credence to my father's hard and unyielding ways by finding fault with the Alstons.

I don't know why these ugly feelings are rearing up inside me. I think it has to do with the fact that I'm a bit overwhelmed with how a happy, normal, functioning family operates. The mere fact that I have slight echoes of my father in my thinking terrifies me. Perhaps I'm more like him than I want to admit. Otherwise, why would I be looking for fault in the way the Alstons raised their kids?

I manage to be involved and engaged in discussion throughout the rest of the meal. Over dessert, I push some of those ugly thoughts aside as we talk about the cabin Brooks left me. It's in Potter County, where Robert often goes to hunt and fish. "You'll absolutely love it there. If you like peace, solitude, and the occasional bear, I'd highly recommend it as a wonderful getaway."

"We're hoping to go in a few weeks so he can take a look at it," Harlow says. She reaches over and puts her hand on mine. I look at her, and she says, "Right? Didn't you want to go take a look?"

"Yeah. Of course I do," I say automatically, but I feel odd and disconnected from her. The more differences I see in our parents, the more I wonder if we're suited for each other.

Harlow gives me a funny look, then turns back to ask her father a question about a legal case on which she wants his opinion.

I tune out and unfortunately start to question if I can live up to the expectations that Harlow or her family might have of me. I certainly failed all of my father's. If they knew some of the thoughts I just had about their parenting abilities, they'd probably do everything in their power to insist Harlow not have anything to do with me.

And I can't quite seem to shake those feelings, even after we say our goodbyes and head back across the river to Allegheny West.

When we make it back to our building, I follow Harlow as we pass the door to my unit. I've been staying at her place every night when I'm in town, mainly because of Odin. She pulls out her keys and unlocks the door. When we enter, Odin comes up for a greeting.

After the appropriate amount of scratches, Harlow takes off her coat and hangs it on the rack.

"You were so quiet on the way home," she says lightly as she puts her purse and keys on a small table. "Feeling okay?"

I stand there, not sure how to answer that question. I don't feel okay. Somehow that simple dinner with her parents has made me doubt things.

When I don't answer, she tips her head. "You going to take off your coat and stay awhile?"

I should take off the fucking coat and put all these crappy thoughts out of my head. I should take Harlow in my arms and kiss her, knowing that her taste alone will drive the darkness out.

Instead, I take a slight step back and put my hands in the pockets of my coat.

"Actually, I think I'm going to go out and get a drink, if you don't mind?"

It was perhaps the dumbest thing I could've said. I can see it in her expression... wariness and suspicion.

Not suspicion that I'm off to meet someone else, but she is now skeptical of whether I want to be with her. She has every right to be, because up until this moment, I have a hard time keeping my hands off her anytime we're together. Whether it's to strip her naked or to just hug her, I have become utterly enchanted with giving and receiving affection from Harlow.

The mere fact I want to go somewhere else is a red flag. That I told her I want to get a drink is a slap in the face.

And I think I meant for her to get both of those things.

Something hardens in Harlow's eyes, and she crosses her arms over her chest. "What's wrong with you?"

I'm immediately defensive. "Nothing's wrong with me. Can't I have a bit of time to myself?"

It's classic deflection. Turning my problems back on to her. Making her the bad guy.

Harlow's too smart for that. She's never going to put up with that shit. "Try again, Stone. Something's up your butt,

and I want to know what it is. You're not the type to just go cold on me like this. The truth."

The defensiveness melts away, and I have no fight left. But it doesn't mean I'm not still spooked as shit by the prospect of committing to Harlow. The expectations on me are now incredibly high, and I don't know if I can reach them.

I also know I have to be honest with her, so I boil down my issues. "I don't know if I'm good for you."

Harlow's expression softens, and she makes a step for me. I hold up my hands to stop her and shake my head. "Let me get this out. I need to get this out, so you know where I'm coming from."

Harlow's expression pinches with worry, but she steps back. "Okay. You can tell me anything, you know."

I nod, deciding to take a page from my brother's book. "I know I can. Just as I know you will understand when I tell you that I feel like my world is constantly shifting underneath me, and I can't get my balance. And while you are one of the best things that has ever happened to me, you're also the one who's knocking me the most *off* balance."

"I see," she murmurs.

I shake my head. "I don't think you really do. You know the surface stuff. You know what my family is like and the problems I've had. You see a guy who isn't quite like my brother, but that I've got potential."

"You've got more than potential, Stone. You're an amazing man."

I shake my head hard, because she's not getting it. I look at her with a tortured expression. "You don't get it... I think I am more like my father than I am the man you need me to be. When we were just at dinner, I was getting angry about your brother. I was wondering why he couldn't get his head out of his ass and be a better person. I was angry at your parents for not doing more to make him grow up. I was even angry at your dad for not doing something to help you stay with his

firm. All this is completely ridiculous, but I realize that I am so trained by my father to try to control everything, I don't know if I've got the ability to be understanding of what other people are going through."

"That's not true. You were understanding of Brooks and even understanding of what I go through with alcohol."

"Sympathy, Harlow. But I don't know if I can *understand* it. In the long run, I always want to be able to support you, no matter what. But Christ, I'm pissed at your parents for their parenting, which is completely fucked up because they raised an amazing daughter. What type of person does that make me?"

Harlow motions toward her living room. "Maybe if we sit down—"

"No. I don't want to talk about this. I'm confident I'll eventually ruin what we have. I didn't have a good role model. Things are new and fresh with us, so things are easy. I don't know how to be truly supportive when the going gets rough. I don't think I can do this relationship because I'm pretty sure that failure and disaster are coming, and it's going to be completely my fault because I don't know how to do this."

Harlow comes toward me, and I hold my ground. She steps right into me and puts her hands on my cheeks, forcing me to look at her. "You're having a moment, Stone. It's bound to happen. The past hasn't been kind to you, but you have to push past it. I know you can."

I wrap my hands around her wrists and pull them away from me, holding them in place. "You have a faith in me that isn't deserved, Harlow. You don't even really know me."

Disappointment fills her eyes. She pulls her hands free and steps backward. "If I told you right now that I was craving a drink, and I absolutely needed to have one, and that I was going to do it no matter what you told me... would you think the worst of me?"

"I don't know."

I can tell by the look on her face that's exactly what she expected. I know she was hoping that I would say without a doubt that I will always support her, but I don't trust enough in my values to give her that. My father didn't give me reliable values by which to live. He made me look out only for myself.

Her voice is so soft, I can barely hear it. "I am far from perfection. As wonderful as my life is, it can get ugly and messy at times. I can handle it on my own. I don't need you. But if you are standing by my side, I need to know you've got my back. Forget everything else that you were just talking about, everything that is plaguing you right now. If you can't emphatically state that you would have my back no matter what... no matter how ugly things got... then I need you to walk away from me."

Those words shock me. Because when I walked into her condo a few minutes ago, I had intended to walk away from her. All that ugly doubt and judgment felt like an oily sludge within my veins, and I was determined to walk away.

Instead, she's telling me to go. She's making the decision because she is assured of what she wants and needs, whereas I'm not sure about anything.

I stare at her a long moment, memorizing the way she looks right now. Crushed and disappointed. I'm used to people feeling that way about me, so I'm not sure why it hurts so much. But I deserve it.

I nod, accepting the way things are.

I turn for the door and when my hand hits the knob, she says, "This has nothing to do with you and me, but don't ever forget... even when you are having a moment of weakness, you can never forget that you still have strength."

I don't dare turn around to look at her. It would only make me feel more ashamed. I walk out and close the door behind me.

And I know I've just lost the most incredible thing I've ever had in my life.

CHAPTER 25

Harlow

I FINISH READING the psychological evaluation that my client, Tonya Hillman, underwent two weeks ago. She's right now my most important case, and she happens to be my favorite client. Tonya went through a few years of incredible darkness, which included a heroin addiction. In that time, she lost custody of her three-year-old son Charlie, who was put in foster care. Tonya fell so hard and fast out of normalcy, she spent over a year homeless, sleeping on the streets or on friends' couches and doing horrible things for her drug fix.

But she's a different person today. She went voluntarily into rehab, finally acknowledging the pain of losing her son was worth the fight to overcome her addiction.

Unfortunately, by the time she completed rehab, got a steady job, and was able to save some money to hire me, the courts were already deep into the process of finalizing adoption papers for her son with his foster family.

Tonya hired me to stop that process and get him back.

That case is moving slowly through the courts. The psychological evaluation had to be made. Tonya has to meet certain milestones. She has to prove her sobriety is here to stay, and she won't be getting full custody back until she's able to show a long pattern of sober behavior.

But for now, we need to stop the adoption.

There will be a huge hearing in a few weeks during which I'll present all the necessary case law to support Tonya's case. Pennsylvania fortunately favors birth parents, so we have a leg up. I was even able to get the court to grant visitation rights, and for the last three months, Tonya has been able to see Charlie twice a week for two hours at a time, supervised, of

course. I decided to come into the office today to go over my research and work on my memorandum of law that I'll be submitting to the court. It's not due until the hearing date, but I needed something to take my mind off Stone. There's nothing better than concentrating on my most important case.

It's disturbingly quiet in the office, but that's a Saturday for you. The phones aren't ringing, and I don't hear Bonita's laughter out in the reception area. I even left Odin home because I just wanted to be alone. I wanted to dive into Tonya's case, let myself get sucked down into the fulfillment of making the justice system work for the ordinary person, and forget about how badly Stone hurt me.

I was blindsided last night by his revelation that he couldn't be the man for me. I don't understand how I could've misjudged him so badly. Was I perhaps focused too much on what I loved about Brooks in him?

None of what he told me as he stood in my foyer made sense. How could he take everything we've been building through weeks of friendship, and most recently deep intimacy, and throw it all away because he got a little spooked? Because he doesn't understand how my parents aren't more upset that Brian isn't doing something with his life? Or that my dad didn't strong-arm me into staying with the firm?

It's all bullshit. I know damn well the real Stone Dumelin doesn't care about things like Brian being a playboy, and I sure as hell know that he knows how much I love my career just as it is. I'm hoping when he thinks about it, he'll understand it was bullshit too. It was a moment of fear, and I can be okay with that.

I have a much deeper knowledge and understanding of weakness than I'd like.

Christ, the minute he walked out that door, I wanted to drink. My mouth literally filled with saliva at the thought of slamming a few shots of vodka. I hate that he did that to me. I loathe it even more that I let him become a weak moment.

Even when you are having a moment of weakness, you can never forget that you still have strength.

I told him that last night before he walked out. I had to keep repeating that mantra to myself so I wouldn't go to the liquor store and drown my sorrows. I haven't wanted to drink like that since Brooks died, and last night it felt a bit like Stone was permanently lost to me too.

What I did do instead was oogle the closest AA meeting, get my coat, and walk right back out the door. There wasn't one at the local church hall, but I found one about twenty minutes away. And it did its job because by the time I left, I felt more in control.

I didn't have the greatest sleep last night, although cuddling Odin certainly helped. But when I woke this morning, I knew I had to do something to take my mind off things. Thus, I am here getting lost in Tonya's case. I'm happy to report that my desperate need to drown my sorrows in alcohol is gone, the AA meeting having strengthened my resolve.

This morning all I needed to do was look in the mirror and remind myself that my determination to stay sober is greater than any pain someone could inflict upon me.

It's working, for now.

Am I still devastated over what happened last night?

I am.

Do I think things are hopeless?

I don't.

In the bright light of day, I remember one very important thing.

Stone is a strong man. He's overcome so much, and I refuse to believe that he's going to let this moment of doubt ruin things between us. My game plan is to lie low and hope he comes to his senses.

And if he doesn't... I'll deal with the pain and disappointment later.

For now, I have Tonya Hillman's case to keep me busy.

I dive deep into legal research online, thanks to a company called LexisNexis who has digitized all the research books an attorney could ever want or need. I was never the strongest researcher, and half the time I would hand it off to a law clerk, but that was back when I worked in a big fancy firm and had law clerks to do my research.

Now I have to do it myself, and it's not my favorite part of the job.

My phone rings and I consider ignoring it, but I recognize the ringtone as my neighbor Natalie. She's my unit two neighbor, and her wife Liz is pregnant and very close to her due date, so I wonder right away if that's why she's calling.

"What's up, Natalie? Is it time?" I ask as soon as the line connects.

Natalie sighs with heavy frustration. "Not time. We got sidetracked by some Braxton Hicks contractions last night, but so far, the little nugget doesn't want to come out."

"Then may I suggest you two go for a very long walk today? I know it's cold this morning, but you can bundle up."

The temperatures dropped to freezing last night in a weird cold front that came through western Pennsylvania. It's supposed to warm up this afternoon, though, into the sixties.

"We'll definitely do that, but that's not why I'm calling. I wanted to let you know that I just came in from the grocery store, and there was a man and woman waiting outside of our building. They said they were Stone's parents here to visit him, and he wasn't answering the intercom. I let them in, and they're waiting outside his door. He doesn't seem to be home."

I don't think to question Natalie to see if she's positive it's his parents. There's no way a random couple would come to this building that's not even in Stone's or Brooks's names

since the property is owned by a dummy corporation to protect their identities. I have no doubt that it's Stone's parents.

I don't berate her for letting them in. I know she did it just to get them out of the cold.

"I went and knocked on Stone's door, but he's not answering, so I'm assuming he's out somewhere."

"He might have gone to the arena already," I muse since he has a game tonight. "It's earlier than he normally goes, but that would be my guess. I'll text him and let him know, and I'll head over and talk to them."

I thank Natalie for calling me, and when I hang up, I tap my phone against my chin for a moment.

I have no clue why his parents are here. The text that Stone sent his dad a few days ago was an absolute cutoff in their relationship. Stone even blocked his father's number so he couldn't call.

Maybe they're here to make amends with Stone. Maybe Stone severing the relationship finally made his dad wake up. Maybe they're worried about him.

I'm an optimist by nature and refuse to believe that they're here to cause trouble, although I'm not foolish enough to deny that possibility. Regardless, I'm going over there to see what they want and will offer them hospitality at my place until Stone can tell me what to do.

I shoot a quick text to Stone.

Your mom and dad are at the condo. Natalie let them in and they're waiting outside your door. I'm at the office working, but I'm going over there and will let them into my place until you can tell me what to tell them.

I send the text and wait a few moments to see if Stone responds. When he doesn't, I assume that he either has his phone off or is unable to look at it. Despite the way we left things last night, I know he would not purposely ignore me about his parents.

I save my work, log off my computer, and grab my purse, keys, and coat. When I exit my office building, I turn my collar up against the brisk wind.

It takes only about five minutes to walk from my office to the condo, and when I make it to the top of the stairs, I lay eyes on Stone's father. His back is to me and he's talking with animated hands to a woman I assume is Stone's mom.

As I proceed down the hall, my movement catches Mrs. Dumelin's eye, and her husband pivots to face me.

It only takes a second for him to recognize me, and his eyes flare wide before narrowing in anger.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demands.

Before I can respond, he goes on the attack. "Don't bother answering that. I've got it all figured out. You were fucking Stone and somehow both of you got Brooks to agree to leave his entire estate to his brother. I don't know how you talked Brooks into it, but I'm not going to stand for these criminal actions."

I had thought that Mr. Dumelin's last text to Stone sounded a little bananas, but hearing that type of craziness straight from his mouth is shocking. I actually halt, unsure what to do now. There's no doubt he is unwilling to have a reasonable, calm conversation.

I figure my best bet is to spin on my heel and head out of there. His parents can sit in the hallway until hell freezes over for all I care. It's not an option to go to my unit because Mr. Dumelin stands in between me and my door, but besides that... I don't think I want him knowing I live here. As of this moment, he thinks I'm here to see Stone.

"That's it, isn't it?" he snarls, striding down the hall with his fists balled in anger.

"Mason," Stone's mother implores, "please... let's not—"

Mason Dumelin whirls and stomps back toward his wife, who shrinks in fear. "Don't you fucking start on me, Nancy."

She apologizes with downcast eyes. “Of course. You’re right. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

I frown at the scene playing out in front of me, taking in his aggressive stance, the way he went after her but stopped the minute she apologized.

Is he abusing her? Stone never said that his dad was physical with his mother, but I know he hit Stone and Brooks when they were growing up.

It makes me sick to my stomach but also fills me with a loathing for this man that I didn’t think was possible.

“Leave her alone,” I say with a steady voice, knowing his attention will come back on me and this could get ugly.

Mr. Dumelin whips around, his face mottled with fury that I would dare question him. He comes back after me, long strides down the hallway that eat up the distance between us. “And what the fuck do you know, bitch?”

I hold out my hands and try to speak in a calm, soothing manner. “Mr. Dumelin, I know you’re upset. Perhaps we can sit down and talk about this over coffee.”

He doesn’t stop but continues to barrel toward me. I consider attempting to skirt past him, perhaps get to my own door and open it to let Odin out. But there’s no way I’ll make it if he attacks me.

Stone’s dad moves too close and grabs the lapels of my coat. He spins me around and pushes me into the wall. It’s not hard enough to hurt, but he’s strong enough that I cannot move.

His eyes look wild with insanity. “You cost me a lot of money, you fucking whore, and I’m going to—”

He doesn’t finish the sentence because he’s simply gone. Torn away from me by a massive person who barrels into him like a linebacker taking down a quarterback.

Mr. Dumelin flies to the ground, and it takes me a moment to realize it’s Stone standing there over his dad. He’s sweaty

but dressed in jeans, so I know he didn't go out for a run.

Mason pushes himself up into a sitting position, and rather than ordering him to stay down, Stone actually helps his dad up.

But not by the hand, and not in a nice way.

He grabs his father by fistfuls of his coat, whirls him around just like was done to me moments ago, and shoves him into the wall so hard, it had to hurt.

Stone snarls at his father, "If you ever put your fucking hands on Harlow again, I will end you."

I'm stunned. He just threatened to kill his own father, although I know rationally, it's his anger talking.

"Stone," his mother exclaims as she rushes forward. She puts her hand on Stone's shoulder. "That's your father. You talk with respect."

Mason swivels his head sharply to look at his wife. "I don't need you defending me, woman."

Nancy shrinks back and lowers her gaze to the floor. Stone hasn't taken his eyes off his father, though. He speaks in a low growl that sends a cold shiver up my spine. "I want you to leave and never come back. You are not welcome here or anywhere around me. If you come back, I will call the police."

Stone doesn't wait to see if his father nods in agreement. I'm sure he figures his father won't agree to anything. He starts to loosen his hold, but Mason tries to assert his masculinity and control by shoving Stone's hands off him. "You don't tell me what to do."

I don't know if Mason is just so self-centered and egotistical that he would never think Stone would do this, but the next thing I know, Stone is ushering his father along the hallway, one hand on the back of his coat and the other on his arm. Mason is no match for his son's strength, and although he struggles, Stone has no problem dragging him down the stairs. I rush that way and bend over the railing to watch him open

the exterior door, shove his dad out onto the sidewalk, and shut it again where it auto locks.

Mason bangs on the door, but Stone calmly turns away and trots back up the staircase. He doesn't spare me a glance but moves straight to his mother who is wringing her hands with worry.

He doesn't touch his mother, but he speaks gently to her. "Mom... you do not have to go with him. You can come into my place right now and stay as long as you want. You do not have to stay with him ever again. All you have to do is say the word, and I will take care of you."

My eyes sting with tears at such a generous offer. His mother has never been there for him, and he did not witness what I saw his father nearly do to her. I guess Stone suspects that she may not be as complicit in his father's delusions of grandeur but maybe is just too fearful to be anything other than what she is.

It's incredibly sad and pathetic when she shakes her head and mumbles, "I'm sorry, but he needs me."

She scurries past Stone, then me, and heads down the staircase. Stone follows her but as he passes me, he says, "Don't go anywhere."

He has yet to look me in the eye.

I assume Stone is going downstairs to make sure his dad doesn't muscle his way back in. And I'm certainly glad he showed up to take care of the situation. But I don't answer to his beck and call, and I remember that he's the one who broke things off. I'm most certainly not going to wait around.

I head to my condo, unlock the door, and once inside, shut it behind me.

I lean back against it and sigh, my heart heavy that Stone once again had to see how much his parents don't care about him. I hate that for him, and I hope it's something he'll be able to reconcile one day.

Odin is sleeping on the couch and makes a slow exit off of it, stretching luxuriously with a big yawn. He starts to walk my way but halts when my door is pushed open. Given that I'm still leaning against it, I am pushed out of the way, and Stone comes inside without an invitation.

"What are you doing?" I say as I whirl on him.

Odin growls, taking a cue from my exasperated tone.

Stone's eyes move from me to Odin, and he points at my dog. "Don't you even start in on me. I'm here to apologize to your mom, so give me a fucking break."

His tone is harsh and any normal dog who doesn't understand words but operates off vibes would've continued growling.

To my shock, however, Odin merely sits his butt down and watches us both carefully.

"I'm sorry, Harlow," Stone says, and it jolts me that he's speaking to me directly. I turn my head to him.

Stone's palms move to my cheeks. "I'm sorry for all the stupid shit I said to you last night. I meant all of it, but I don't want any of it to mean anything at all. Does that make sense?"

I frown and shake my head. "It makes no sense whatsoever."

"What I'm trying to say is that all those feelings I had were real and legitimate, and they were clearly brought on by the fact that I have a fucked-up, dysfunctional family causing me doubt. But I was wrong in letting them eat at me in a way that caused me to give up on us. It's not who I am. I'm not the guy who gives up anymore."

That's exactly what I needed him to say. It would've been all wrong had he apologized and said he didn't mean it, because that would've been a lie. I know his doubts and fears are real. I know that while Stone has come a long way in the last several weeks, he still has pain and demons. Hell, I still have pain and demons.

The fact that he's admitting them, but doesn't want to be a slave to them, is exactly what I needed to hear.

I throw my arms around his neck and plaster my mouth to his. I know there is probably so much more to say, but honestly... it's irrelevant at this moment.

And let's not forget, he just threatened to kill his father if he ever touched me again. While I don't wish any parent and child to have that type of divide, that fierce protectiveness tells me everything I need to know about this man.

Stone pulls his mouth away from mine and looks down at me. "I don't know what I did to deserve you. I'm having a hard time reconciling that I have a career again. It's harder still to believe that you're real. Even harder is the realization I can love someone so much or even have the guts to admit that to you, because deep down... there's still that small part of me that doesn't want to trust any of this. But I have to try, Harlow. You're too important to me to not try."

"I don't know what to say," I murmur. My ears are ringing, and I feel light-headed because I'm pretty sure he just told me he loves me.

"You don't have to say a thing. You only have to listen right now. I love you. I love the woman who stopped her dog from attacking me when I stormed into her office, the woman who battled addiction, the woman I came to know through my brother's journals. The woman who I've now shared meals with, dreams with, passion with. If my behavior has set us back, all I'm asking is you give me another chance."

My ears still ring slightly, and the dizziness is in check only because Stone is holding me. It's with no hesitation that I say, "I love you, Stone. And I'll give you a million chances to always make things right with me."

"I don't know why you're so generous."

"Because I know mistakes happen. I know weakness is an ongoing battle. I wanted to drink so much when you left my condo last night—"

Stone jerks me to him and wraps his arms around me tight, pressing his lips to the top of my temple. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to do that—”

I push him away and tip my head back so he can see my face. “Don’t you apologize for my weakness. I need to own it. It’s only when I own it that I can defeat it. You’re going to piss me off at some point in the future, Stone. You’re going to hurt my feelings again too. I’m probably going to do the same to you. It’s what people do to each other because we’re human. But if I know you love me, I can overcome anything. And what I hope you learn is that you have my love, my loyalty, and my absolute devotion. So you can overcome any weaknesses that decide to rear their ugly heads.”

Finally, Stone smiles. The tension, angst, and worry seem to melt away. “I think we might be a fucking match made in heaven.”

“I absolutely believe something bigger was at play in bringing us together.”

“Brooks,” he says simply.

I don’t know if Brooks is our guardian angel, or if some cosmic power put us on the same path.

I only know I’m never going to question it.

I’ll only ever be grateful.

I lift onto my toes and press my mouth against Stone’s. It’s the first kiss of our new life together, and I know there will be a million more to come.

CHAPTER 26

Stone

I STOP AT the door to Harlow's condo and fish my keys from my pocket. It's one key heavier now that I added hers four days ago when we made up.

Or rather, when I prostrated and begged forgiveness for being so stupid.

It was the shortest breakup in the history of breakups, although Harlow said we weren't truly broken up. She calls it "my need to get my shit figured out."

Which I quickly did. That night in bed, I tossed and turned, replaying things over and over, focusing on what got me upset at her parents' house, and all I could conclude was that her loving, accepting family was too antithetical to what I knew, and therefore, I couldn't trust it.

I didn't tell myself I was being stupid, because I actually think, given my history and how horribly dysfunctional my parents are, I have the right to get spooked.

But most importantly, what I figured out is that even if I do get spooked, I won't run away from the best fucking thing to ever happen to me—and I mean, better than being a professional hockey player and better than winning the Cup.

Harlow Alston is truly the only thing I need to make my life whole.

So, yeah... figured out all that during my long, lonely, sleepless night. I was exhausted the next morning, but I knew I needed to fix things right away. My life and future happiness depended on immediate prostration and groveling.

Unfortunately, Harlow didn't answer her door when I knocked. Odin was inside barking, and when that didn't spur

her to open the door and I didn't hear her telling him to be quiet, I knew she wasn't home.

I decided to go for a walk, hoping the crisp morning air would clear my head. I explored the neighborhood on foot, found some more prime spots for Odin to go potty should I ever get the privilege of walking him again. I had a game that evening and was hoping to see Harlow before I had to leave for the arena. I'd resolved that if she wasn't at her place by the time I made it back, I'd call and beg her for a meeting, hopefully before the game. I knew if I didn't fix things before then, my head would not be in it, and I'd play like shit.

She contacted me before I got back, and it was not what I wanted to hear. She'd texted that my dad was in our building, so she was going over there.

Fear sliced through me, because I had no clue what my father was capable of. He'd seemingly lost touch with reality, so my leisurely morning walk turned into an all-out sprint to our place. Reaching the top of the staircase and watching my father advance on Harlow, I knew at that moment I had the capacity to kill if it meant protecting her.

Luckily, it didn't come to that, as it would've been hard to have a relationship with me in prison, but you know the rest.

I love her, and I've made sure she knows it.

She loves me, and she gave me a key to her condo. While I didn't give her one to mine—I have to have one made first—I suspect I'll probably be selling mine and moving into hers. I know that might be rushing things, but I'm envisioning the future I want, and I'm going to get it.

That future will not include a relationship with my father. I've made it clear to him he's not welcome in my life. My mom is a bit of a tougher pill to swallow. I think she needs to leave him, but I don't think she will. Still, we'll keep trying, and I'll make it clear she only has to call and Harlow and I will help her.

I've been gone for two days—an away game against the Cold Fury—and I'm almost too giddy with excitement to see Harlow. We've talked and texted when our schedules allowed, but being away from her has been kind of miserable. I hope that'll get better as I really have no choice but to travel with my job. But for now... I'm just ready to look at her.

Kiss her.

Hold her.

Get her in bed and do lots of dirty things to her.

I slip inside the condo. This is her place, not mine, but it feels like I'm coming home even if she has moose heads and gymnastic dragons in tutus on the walls. I've never had that feeling before.

When I step inside, I immediately see Odin on the couch. We're definitely making progress. He doesn't growl but instead lifts his head to look at me, and miracle of miracles, his tail thumps against the leather cushion, as if he's happy I'm home.

Glancing to the right, I see Harlow standing at the stove with her back to me, hair on top of her head. She's in my red flannel shirt I left here the night before my road trip.

It touches me in the deepest of places that she wants that connection when I'm gone.

Her neck twists, and she smiles at me over her shoulder. "You're home."

"I'm home," I reply, setting my duffel on the floor and closing the door. I immediately start for her, the only thing between us the damn kitchen island.

"Wait!" she exclaims, holding out a hand as she faces me. She glances back, clicks off the flame under whatever she's cooking—which smells delicious, by the way, but I'm not interested in food. When she turns back, her fingers go to the top button on my flannel shirt. "I have something to show you."

“If it’s under that flannel,” I reply, my eyes pinned on her hands, “don’t bother with the strip tease. I can’t handle it.”

Harlow laughs and works at the buttons, quickly as asked. My pulse hammers, and when she pulls open the shirt, I’m disappointed to see another shirt underneath. It appears to be the exact white T-shirt I’d worn under it, and I think it’s sweet and sexy she wanted to wear that too.

Shrugging out of the flannel, she tosses it aside. That’s good enough for me. I start once again toward her.

“Wait,” she commands, rolling her eyes. “So impatient.”

“I haven’t seen you in two days,” I grumble. “I’m more than impatient.”

“Oh, you’ll thank me later for making you wait,” she says mysteriously.

Then turning once again toward the stove, she grabs something from the counter. It’s a large, glass pitcher filled with ice water. “This is for you.”

“Not thirsty,” I say with a pointed look at it.

“You will be,” she promises, and then I’m stunned when she tips her head back, holds the pitcher above her chest, and slowly pours the ice water over herself. Ice hits the hollow of her throat, water pours down her chest, and the white T-shirt becomes translucent, molding to the outline of her breasts. The freezing water causes her nipples to pucker and pop against the thin cotton.

My dick swells to rock-hard proportions, and I remember... the gay bar wet T-shirt contest Brooks wrote about. I’d teased her about it once, told her I wanted to hear more about that story.

And now, here she is, showing me.

“God, if I’m dreaming... nobody better fucking wake me up.” There’s no stopping me now. I stride through the kitchen, around the counter, and come toe-to-toe with her. Once around the counter, I can see she’s wearing nothing else other than the

wet T-shirt. It's contoured to her front, and she might as well not be wearing it because I can see every inch of her body through the soaked fabric.

What a fucking homecoming.

But she's not finished as her hands work fast at my belt, button, and zipper, and before I can process her intention, she's on her knees with my length in her mouth.

"Jesus, Harlow," I bark, my hands going to the side of her head. She sucks and licks and I'm so crazed with lust, I'm about to embarrass myself.

I'll probably hate myself later, but I gently push her off and lift her up from kneeling so I can kiss her. I pull her into me, the wet material soaking my shirt, but I don't care. Her tongue in my mouth is exactly what I need. My hands move to her ass and press her pelvis tight against my aching cock.

"I missed you," I mumble against her mouth.

"Missed you more."

Just as I'm about to pick Harlow up and carry her into the bedroom, something cold and wet brushes against me, and then Odin is pushing his way in between us with that big block head of his.

This dog is ridiculous, but I'm strangely not irritated with him. In fact, I find myself laughing as Harlow and I break apart.

"Odin," Harlow says in a chastising tone, but I hold up my hand.

"I got this."

Harlow cocks an eyebrow and smirks at me.

Feeling stupid with my dick hanging out, I tuck it back in before squatting down before Odin. I put my hands to the sides of his head, much the way I do with Harlow when I want to hold her captive for a kiss.

I have no intention of kissing Odin, but I do look him straight in the eye, hoping he won't eat my face if he doesn't like what I have to say.

"Listen, buddy," I say, rubbing his fur. "I love your mom. And I need alone time with her. You get far more time with her than I do, so how about giving me this one?"

Odin stares at me, as if requiring more.

"I promise to take you on an extra-long walk later, and I'll sneak you some food when your mom isn't watching."

Apparently, the dog understands English, because his tongue lolls out, and before I can move, he slurps the front of my face from chin, across my lips, over my nose, and right to my forehead.

Fucking gross.

But I act like I like it and ruffle his fur. "Good boy."

To my astonishment, Odin turns and trots back into the living room, hops on the couch, and curls into his doughnut sleeping shape.

"Impressive," Harlow says.

I stand, wiping my sleeve across my face. "Well, that killed the mood."

"Speak for yourself," she murmurs, pulling the wet shirt over her head and dropping it to the floor.

Yup. Mood definitely back in play.

Harlow heads to the bedroom, and I follow along behind. I glance back once at Odin and find him watching me as I walk away.

His lips peel back slightly, showing his upper teeth and long canines. I can't decide if it's a threat, a reminder he's got his eye on me, or if he's smiling because he likes me.

Either way, I'm going to bed with Harlow right now, and he's not, and that's all that really matters.

Veteran player Gage Heyward retired from the league following a very successful career. Now the Titans need him, but does he have what it takes to get back on the ice and pull this team together? READ chapter one of GAGE below, and [CLICK HERE](#) to preorder now.

Chapter 1

Gage

I'M GETTING TO know the city of Pittsburgh well, particularly the North Side, which is comprised of several contiguous neighborhoods where many of the Titan players live. I promised our goalie coach, Baden, that I'd help him move his friend, Jenna, into an apartment this afternoon and my navigation system tells me it's less than a mile from the arena. I finished up a workout with Stone, then spent a little bit of time reviewing game film on my own before heading out.

Coming out of retirement, and as the oldest Titan on the team at age thirty-five, I always have to go a bit above and beyond to maintain my position on the first line. That means not only stellar play on the ice and keeping my body in optimal shape, but also getting to know my opponents. I'd been out of the league for almost a year, having retired from the Seattle Storm, where I'd spent the last seven years of my career, at the end of last season.

I thought I was done with hockey but apparently hockey wasn't done with me.

When Callum Derringer called me with an offer to join the Titans after the plane crash, I reached deep inside myself to determine whether I still had what it takes to be competitive.

I knew it wouldn't be a problem physically. I'm still in great shape—some would say the best of my life—but it remained to be seen whether I had the heart for it. I decided to retire last year because, frankly, I wasn't getting the same thrill from competition that once drove me.

But the prospect of skating with a team that was being built from nothing appealed to me. Not only the challenge but the opportunity to be a part of history within this league. To

help shape and form what would hopefully be a new dynasty spoke to my conscience more than anything. The ability to mentor young players moving from the minors to the pros who would be out of their element. Helping a city that is reeling from the loss of its beloved hockey team.

Simply put... I wanted to do some good with my life, and this seemed like the way to do it. The money offered—while very nice—wasn't important. Between my previous salary and endorsement deals, which had been wisely invested, I'd never have to worry about finances for the rest of my life.

In the end, it was an easy yes for me and I don't regret a thing.

I turn right onto North Avenue from Allegheny and see a large moving truck parked before the loft apartments where I'm supposed to meet Baden and Sophie.

When I approach, I see Sophie standing near the rear of the truck, the roll up door lifted and the back filled with furniture and boxes. This section of North Avenue is a two-way street with parallel parking on both sides and all the spots are taken. I stop and roll my window down and Sophie grins as she sees me.

"You standing guard?" I ask her as I nod toward the truck.

"Protecting the truck from a parking ticket," she replies with a grin as she moves my way and bends down to see me. "There's a fire hydrant on the other side so I'm prepared to roll out if a cop comes. Baden's upstairs putting the bed rails together. There's parking in the back alley."

"Got it," I reply with a thumb's up.

After I park and lock my car, I round the block and Sophie points me toward the door. "Second floor. Unit 2."

Trotting up the stairs, grimacing at the compact u-shape of the stairwell which is going to be a bitch moving up that couch I saw in the back, I find unit 2's door slightly ajar. I push it open, noting a small living with good lighting and a balcony where I can just make out the very tips of the buildings

downtown. The flooring is new—light gray stain—and the kitchen is white-on-white, making the small area appear bright and open. There is no hallway to speak of, just another room with a closed door and from inside, I can hear the whir of a power drill.

On a small step stool is a woman with long blond hair hanging down to her mid-back stacking plates in a cabinet from an open box on the counter. She's wearing a pair of black workout leggings, a long sleeve shirt and running shoes.

Still standing at the threshold, I wrap my knuckles on the door to get the woman's attention. "Hello."

She turns to glance at me over her left shoulder and I smile at her. "I sure hope you're Jenna or this is a very awkward situation where I walked into the wrong apartment."

She smiles back, a small stack of salad plates in her hand. "I am indeed Jenna. You must be Gage. Come on in."

"Guilty as charged," I reply as I step inside and return the door to the same position I found it.

Jenna turns back to the cabinet as I move toward the kitchen for a handshake. She places the plates on the shelf, backs off the step stool and turns to face me.

With the sun behind me and facing her, I'm startled by her eyes. A brown so light that in the brightness they're almost honey gold. In the span of second, I also can't help but notice that she has scarring on the right side of her face near her jaw. It doesn't take up much real estate, but it's mottled and bumpy, and hard not to notice. It disappears down into the front of what I see now is a turtleneck shirt that is fitted to her body.

My eyes drift back up to hers to take in more of that amazing color but I find that she's not looking directly at me anymore, her gaze averted off to the side. I also notice that she's moved one hand across her belly, the other hovering near the color of the turtleneck that she fidgets with, attempting to pull it up higher over her scarring.

Fuck.

Did I make her self-conscious when I noticed the welted skin? It's not something I did intentionally but I'm sure it doesn't make it less bothersome to her. Despite the fact that her shirt is well fit to an admittedly amazingly beautiful body, I'm guessing it was chosen to help cover her scars.

The positioning of her arms and hands is defensive and her averted gaze is indicative that I've caused her to retreat.

I'm not one to hide from an awkward situation though, and I force conversation so she'll have to look at me. "How was your trip here from Arizona? You came with your sister, right?"

She drags her eyes back to mine and puts a lackluster smile in place. Nodding toward the door I'd seen off the living area, she says, "Yes. Emory is in the bedroom with Baden trying to put the bed frame together if you want to go in."

I decide to stay and converse. "And your trip out?" I ask, a reminder she didn't answer my first question. "That's a hell of a drive."

"We broke it up into a three-day trip," she replies quietly, letting her hands drop away and turning for the step stool. She climbs back on, reaches back into the box and pulls out another stack of plates without elaborating further.

It's dismissive and I don't want to make her uncomfortable. "I'll just go see what Baden wants me to do. We'll get you set up in no time."

"Thank you," she murmurs, placing more plates in the cabinet with her back to me. "I really appreciate it."

My tone is easy as I turn from her. "Not a problem at all."

And it's not. I'm glad to help her out because she's Baden's friend and any friend of Baden is a friend of mine.

In the bedroom, I find Baden using the drill to drive a screw between the metal frame and the headboard. He lifts his head up and grins. "You made it."

“I made it,” I agree, and turn to the woman who must be Jenna’s sister. I stick out a hand to the raven haired beauty with blue eyes—the exact opposite of her sister’s coloring of golden hair, skin and eyes. “You must be Emory. Nice to meet you.”

Emory stands up from where she was squatting beside Baden and we shake. “So great to meet you too. We really appreciate your help.”

We don’t bother with any further small talk. Baden and I get to work unloading the truck, using our considerable strength to work our way through the contents. There wasn’t a lot of furniture. Just a bedroom set with a bed, dresser and two night stands. The rest were boxes of clothes and kitchen ware—much of it newly bought in Arizona and loaded onto the truck to save her shopping here. Baden explained the bed was from Emory’s house and Jenna bought living room furniture online that will be delivered in a few weeks. Until then, the only other thing to sit on was a plush bean bag that we plopped in a corner of the living room. It was spartan living for sure, but I’m sure she’ll have it set up into a nice home in no time at all.

Baden and I head down to get the last round of boxes from the truck while the Holland sisters work to unpack the mountains of ones we already unloaded.

Before he can jump up into the truck, I stop him with a hand on his shoulder. “Need to ask you something.”

Baden turns to face me. “What’s up?”

“I’m pretty sure I offended Jenna when I got here,” I say, bothered by the fact that I’ve been here almost two hours and she won’t meet my eyes or engage with me at all. I explain to him what happened when I arrive. “I swear, man... I didn’t give any outward reaction to the scars. My eyes just sort of flicked there and then right back again, but she totally withdrew after that.”

“Yeah... I noticed she was acting shy around you.”

“She won’t even meet my eyes,” I grumble with frustration. “You know I’d never intentionally do something to hurt—”

Baden stops me with a soft punch to my shoulder. “Don’t even go there, dude. Jenna’s an amazing woman and I adore her, but I also know the type of man you are. I know you’d never do anything to make someone feel bad about themselves.”

“I need to fix it,” I reply, determined to set things straight.

“You didn’t break anything,” Baden points out and I appreciate his efforts to make me feel better. “She’s had a lot of trauma in her life and it’s made her sensitive.”

I’ve been called a sensitive guy before, a moniker I don’t mind, and the squeeze of heart muscles proves it. “I have a feeling you’re talking about more than her scarring.”

“She was in a bad fire. She’s got a lot more scars than what little you saw—emotional and physical. She’s had a hard time putting herself out there because a lot of people abandoned her during her recovery. So it’s more than just what you can see on the outside.”

I hold my hand up, indicating he should stop. I don’t want him telling me confidences that aren’t his to tell. I also don’t need to hear more to know without a doubt I need to let her know I didn’t intend any harm when I looked at her scars.

“Arrange for me to have a few minutes alone with her,” I say as I help him pull the last two boxes off the truck.

He nods, picks the stack up by himself. “Stay here. I’ll send her down.”

I lean back against the side of the truck, hands tucked into my pockets and within no more than thirty seconds, Jenna is coming out the door with the truck keys in her hands. She doesn’t meet my eyes as I push off the truck but holds the keys out. “Baden said you needed the keys so you could move the truck away from the hydrant.”

I take them from her, not willing to let her know this was a set up by Baden so I could get some time alone.

Jenna starts to turn away, but I call out, "Wait."

She stops, turns only part way and to the left to look back at me. It's habitual I can tell, but clearly intended to keep the unmarred portion of her face between me and the damaged part.

I don't know this woman at all, and I don't know if I'll ever see her again after today, but I know I'm not going to take the easy way out. I'm not going to let her either.

I step up onto the sidewalk, move around her so she's forced to face me. I'm pleased to see she doesn't hesitate to tip her head back to meet my eyes and I think that's her own courage shining through.

"I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable when I first walked in," I say.

She flushes but holds my gaze. "I don't know what you mean."

"You do," I admonish kindly. "You've been withdrawn since we met and I can pinpoint the exact moment. It's when my eyes caught the scars on your jaw." Pointedly, I let my eyes travel there to look at them again and she lifts her hand to her turtleneck to pull it up.

Without thought, I catch her hand, and hold it in mine.

Pulling it down, I say, "Don't hide."

She blinks at me in surprise but I can feel her hand relax and I let it fall away from my grip. "Sorry. Habit I guess."

"I can understand that," I reply with a smile. "But honest to God, Jenna, that's not what first caught my attention. It was your eyes and the way the light was hitting them that shocked me more than your scars."

She tips her head at me, eyebrows drawn slightly inward with some skepticism.

“But if I made you feel uncomfortable about the scars, it was unintentional. I’d like to tell you they’re hardly noticeable, but that would be a lie.” Jenna flinches, but I’m not done. “What I will tell you as truth, is that while they are noticeable, they are not what holds my attention. It’s your eyes.”

Like a wide-eyed owl, she blinks at me as if she’s never been paid a compliment. And I could absolutely go on with more because she’s a stunning woman. Her face is gorgeous with high cheekbones, full lips, and golden hair that stretches for miles.

But it’s mostly those eyes that are hard to look away from.

Finally, her expression softens and she shakes her head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have let it bother me.”

“You have nothing to apologize for,” I assure her.

“Actually, I do,” she says with a deep sigh. “I’m working hard to put myself out there and give humanity a chance to be real with me. I should have given you the benefit of the doubt. I can see you’re a nice guy.”

“I’m a totally nice guy,” I affirm. “And now you can say you made your first friend in Pittsburgh.”

Jenna sticks her hand out and smiles. “It’s very nice to meet you, Gage.”

I take her hand, soft and delicate. “Nice to meet you too, Jenna. And if you ever catch me staring at you, just be assured it’s totally your eyes that have my attention.”

I had not meant for that to come out as a flirtation, but damn if it doesn’t sound that way to my own ears. Clearly to Jenna’s as well as she blushes, but she manages to turn it into a joke. “Maybe I’ll wear mirrored aviators around you. Wouldn’t want you bumping into walls or anything.”

I tip my head back and laugh. Squeezing her hand before I release it, I jingle the keys before her. “I am going to go move

the truck and then I'll be up to help with the rest of the unpacking.”

“You don't have to,” she says as I brush past her to round the truck. “I'm sure you have better things to do.”

“Nothing better to do than helping out a pretty friend,” I assure her and I can't help but like the fact that I make her blush again.

GAGE (Pittsburgh Titans, Book #3) releases July 26, 2022!

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About the Author



New York Times, USA Today, and Wall Street Journal Bestselling author Sawyer Bennett uses real life experience to create relatable stories that appeal to a wide array of readers. From contemporary romance, fantasy romance, and both women's and general fiction, Sawyer writes something for just about everyone.

A former trial lawyer from North Carolina, when she is not bringing fiction to life, Sawyer is a chauffeur, stylist, chef, maid, and personal assistant to her very adorable daughter, as well as full-time servant to her wonderfully naughty dogs.

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