

BLISS
EAGLES
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BOOK EIGHT

The Game Changer

SAMANTHA
LIND

THE GAME CHANGER

Indianapolis Eagles Series Book 8

SAMANTHA LIND

samanthalind.com

The Game Changer
Indianapolis Eagles Series Book 8
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PROOFREADING BY *PROOF BEFORE YOU PUBLISH*



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Chapter One

JOHNATHAN

I flip through a magazine that is in a rack on the wall of this small exam room. I've spent way too many hours inside the four walls of one of these rooms in the past year. I'm used to the bad news the doctors usually have to share with me each time I'm here, and I don't expect today to be any different.

"Mr. Camps, nice to see you again," my neurologist, Dr. David Price, states as he enters the room.

"What do you have for me today, doc?" I ask as he takes a seat on the rolling stool.

"Johnathan, I'm going to be straight with you, the scans show no improvement. It is still my professional opinion that you retire. Your brain has irreversible damage. Any further damage could cause permanent paralysis or even death."

I take in what he's just dumped in my lap. I knew coming in here today that he was most likely going to give me this news. I've known now for over a year that the lasting effects from multiple concussions over the years were taking their toll on my body and, most importantly, my brain.

"If I quit now, what kind of symptoms can I expect to have?" I ask. I've done the research. I've read the papers, so whatever he tells me won't be a huge shock.

"The sensitivity to light and sound may come and go for a while, as can the dizzy spells. We'll watch you closely to make sure you don't develop any new symptoms such as depression, memory loss, or slurring of your speech. If you stop now and don't suffer any further damage, I truly believe that you'll go

on to live a full life, just one not playing hockey for a living,” he tells me straight up.

“And if I push it and play for another season?”

“I can’t guarantee that you’ll live to see the end of it.”

Fuck.

“Okay,” I tell him as I blow out a huge breath.

“I know this wasn’t the news you wanted to hear, but I think it is in your best interest to retire. Do it now when you still have a life to live. The risks aren’t worth it, in my professional opinion.”

“Thanks, Doc,” I say as I toss the magazine back in the rack on the wall before opening the exam room door.

“Johnathan,” Dr. Price says my name from the doorway of the exam room I just left, “I’m sure it feels like the carpet has been pulled out from under your feet right now, but you’ll find a new normal.”

I turn back around and head out of the office. I step outside, the bright sun hitting my face, and I can feel the sensitivity to light hit me like a Mack truck. I quickly slide my sunglasses on and close my eyes as I swallow down the bile that burns the back of my throat. It never fails when I walk outside into the bright light; my body reminds me of the damage I’ve subjected it to over the last twenty-plus years of playing hockey. The nauseating feeling always hits me within seconds. I can sometimes ward it off if I’m quick enough on the reflexes getting my sunglasses on. I stagger the few steps until I can sink against the brick wall of the building where Dr. Price’s office is located. With my ass against the wall, I lean over and rest my hands on my knees, which allows my head to fall towards my chest. I focus on taking deep, controlled breaths as I do my best to breathe through the symptoms that plague me. I can only hope that the breathing works, and I don’t lose my lunch as has happened countless times. *This* is my new normal. What I’ve been dealing with for months—years, if I’m honest with myself.

“Johnathan, is that you?” I realize someone is talking to me, and I look up to find Jill, one of my teammates’ wife’s best friends, a few feet away as she closes the distance between the two of us. “I thought that was you, are you okay?” she asks, now standing in front of me, concern written all over her face. I stand, still leaning against the building, allowing my head to rest against the brick.

“Yeah, just feeling a little queasy,” I tell her. I probably look green as can be, so there’s no reason to lie to her about it.

“Anything I can do to help?” she offers.

“I should be fine, just need to make it to my truck and down some water,” I tell her, trying to brush off what I’m feeling and the seriousness of it.

“You don’t look great, how about I help you get to your truck,” she says, turning to look out in the parking lot for it.

“You don’t have to,” I tell her as another wave of nausea hits me. I suck in a breath, my mouth filling with saliva in that tell-tale sign that I’m not going to win the battle today.

“I know I don’t have to,” she starts to tell me, but the sound of blood rushing in my ears drowns out all outside noise. My eyes fly open as I look around for a trash can, or somewhere not right here in front of the main doors of this medical building for me to let loose the contents of my stomach. I take a few wobbly steps to the trash can, ripping the cover off just in time to empty the contents of my lunch into it. Once satisfied I’ve completely emptied my stomach, I stand back up, feeling surprisingly much better than I was just moments before.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” I hear Jill ask once more. “Here, have this,” she says, tapping my arm with a bottle of water. I don’t have to be told twice, so I take the bottle from her hands, quickly twisting the cap off and chugging it down in three gulps. I can feel the water hit my stomach, and I am thankful when the cool liquid doesn’t cause it to flop.

“Thanks,” I tell her once I’ve finished the water off and chucked the empty container into the trash. I replace the cover

I ripped off and step away from the container.

“Concussion issues?” she asks a moment later.

“Yeah,” I tell her—no reason to try and hide it. The hit I took a few months ago during the last game I played isn’t a secret. It was the talk of the NHL for a while after it happened. Everyone that follows the sport knows that I was placed on the long-term injured reserve list, and by the looks of it, I’ll never come off of that list. “Just left another appointment with my neurologist.”

“I take it that the appointment didn’t go well?”

“Nope. Told me that if I want to live longer than the end of the next season that I need to hang up the skates. Any further damage to my brain could be fatal.”

“Oh, Johnathan. I’m so sorry,” Jill gushes, her hand coming to land on my forearm as she rubs it up and down. The brush of her skin against mine has my dick perking up, even if it is the wrong fucking moment.

“Thanks. It’s still sinking in. He hasn’t benched me completely, but his professional opinion is I quit now while I still get to make that choice.”

“That makes sense. You’ve had a good career, right? Won the cup a few times?” she questions.

“That I have,” I confirm. I’m one of the few players to have been with the team through all five of the championship years. One ring for each finger on one hand. “Still doesn’t make hearing that I need to hang up my skates before I was mentally ready to any easier. I wanted to play for another few seasons.”

“I’m sure you’ll find something else to fill your days. And it’s better to be alive than six feet under.”

“You’ve got me there,” I tell her. My body has finally adjusted to the brightness of the day. My vision has returned to normal, and my stomach has calmed down. With the distraction of talking to Jill, I realize that my body never went through some of the other stages that it does when I have one of these episodes. I never got the jittery feeling or the tiredness

that almost always hits me right after. “Thanks for the water,” I tell her, “I think I’m going to head home. I’ve got some serious thinking to do and some phone calls to make.”

“Of course. Are you good enough to drive? I can take you home and then Uber it back here,” she offers.

“I’m good. Feeling almost one hundred percent back to normal. Thank you, though.”

“If you insist. Don’t be a stranger, call me if you need someone, even if it’s just to bitch about your situation.”

“Thanks, Jill, have a good rest of your day,” I tell her before stepping off the sidewalk and heading across the parking lot for my truck.

Chapter Two

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JILL
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I walk into my office, drop my bag, keys, and phone on my office chair before I turn to head into the little break room. I pop a pod into the Keurig and place a clean mug under it. Thank God for quick brew settings, as I need the caffeine boost this afternoon. I spent the morning running ragged between a late patient, a last-minute add on, and a baby that didn't want to cooperate with how I needed it to move so we could get the images and measurements that we needed for an ultrasound.

“How was lunch?” my receptionist, Cassie, asks as she joins me in the break room. She sits down at the little two-person table that is pushed against the wall and pulls out her to-go container. The aromas from her food start to fill the small room, and I swear my stomach growls even after stuffing myself not even thirty minutes ago with my lunch.

“Eh, not as good as that!” I tell her, looking over at the Chinese food she's just opened up.

“Ethan dropped it off to me on his way into work,” she says, taking a bite of her food. “Oh, before I forget, we got another add-on for this afternoon at two.”

“Thanks for the heads up. I'm going to go catch up on some paperwork before our next patient arrives,” I tell her as I grab my cup of coffee from the Keurig.

I settle in at my desk, waking up my computer as I sip on my hot coffee while I wait for it to load up completely. I've got reports to run, notes to document, and then send to the

ordering doctors' offices, followed by a stack of bills to approve to be paid, supplies to order, schedules to finalize. The laundry list of things on my plate is never-ending, but I wouldn't change it for the world. I love owning my own little practice, even if it does come with an endless supply of stress and more hours than I'd like to admit to having to work each week.

I look over the schedule quickly and realize that I've got about forty-five minutes until my next patient is scheduled. I verify all the bills my accountant sent me, and I give her the go-ahead to pay all of them. I start in on the notes and documentation required for the patients I saw this morning. There isn't usually much I have to change on the final report after the ultrasound is finished, and our machines automatically fill out the required data that is collected for both the ordering physician and any information that the insurance company might need.

Just as I'm finishing my now cold coffee, Cassie pokes her head into my office to let me know our first patient of the afternoon has arrived. I close out of my computer and grab the intake paperwork along with the doctors' orders. I look over everything on my way to the exam room. This is a pretty routine twenty-week pregnancy ultrasound where we check all sorts of the baby's measurements, and many parents find out what sex the baby is. These are some of the funniest appointments I get to do in my line of work.

"Good afternoon, I'm Jill," I greet the patient, and I'm assuming her husband, sitting next to her.

"Hi! I'm Hillary, and this is my husband, Zach," Hillary introduces the two of them. I take a seat on my stool, tapping a few buttons on the machine to wake it up.

"Nice to meet the two of you. If you're ready to get started, go ahead and lay back and lift your shirt for me. Did you want to find out the baby's gender today?" I always ask before I start with the scan so I can avoid spoiling the surprise if they don't want to know.

“Can you possibly put the information in an envelope for us? My sister is going to take the envelope to the baker, who’s going to use either pink or blue frosting in the middle of the cake so that we’re all surprised and find out at the same time.”

“Absolutely! How long will you have to wait to find out?” I ask as I squirt some warmed gel on her stomach.

“Tomorrow, and I’m going to go nuts in the meantime. I don’t know what I was thinking, keeping it a secret a day longer.”

“I’m sure you’ll do just great,” I reassure Hillary. “I’m going to start with some of the measurements that your OB needs. Your baby is nice and awake. He or she is actively sucking its thumb right now,” I tell Hillary and Zach as I point it out on the screen. Our rooms are set up with a large TV screen mounted to the wall so that the patient and their family members can watch what we’re looking at. I quickly take the measurements, printing out pictures of the baby as I go on explaining each step of the process.

I get to what I like to call the money shot and quickly realize that they’re having a boy. “All right, close your eyes for a few seconds. I’ve got to move, and it will be quite obvious what sex the baby is,” I warn the two of them and wait for a second as I watch them look away from the screen. I move the probe and get the shot I need, adding, “I’m a boy!” to the image. “All right, you can look again,” I tell them once I’ve moved on to measuring the baby’s kidneys.

“Thank you so much!” Hillary thanks me once we’ve finished, and she’s cleaned her belly off.

“Here are your pictures, video, and the all-important envelope with the gender,” I tell the two of them as I hand everything over. I put the images that give away the gender in a separate envelope and put it inside the DVD case.”

“Thanks, Jill,” Zach states as he snags the case from his wife’s hands. “I’ll hold on to that envelope until after tomorrow. Don’t want you cheating after we hand over the other envelope,” he tells his wife as he kisses her. I smile at

their excitement and easiness. I long for the day I have that kind of connection with someone.

“Have a great day.” I wave as they leave the exam room. I start my cleaning procedures, making sure the room is ready for the next patient who hopefully is waiting on me to come to get them from the waiting room.

Chapter Three

JOHNATHAN

I make it home from my appointment and run-in with Jill. The episode I experienced in the parking lot just pisses me off, especially after the appointment I had. I collapse on the couch in my condo. I've lived here since I came to Indy damn near ten years ago. I never needed anything fancy, but boy have I had a slew of different teammates come through as some of my roommates over the years. They've all moved on as they've settled down and found girlfriends, then turning them into wives. None have been puck bunnies and after them for the fame and fortune that they come with. Hell, one of them even married one of the biggest names in country music.

My phone starts buzzing on the cushion next to me. I flip it over and see my sister Cindi's face filling the screen.

"Hey, sis," I greet her as I answer the call. I hit the speakerphone button and drop my phone onto my chest as I kick back on the couch.

"How was the appointment?" she asks, not one to beat around the bush.

"It fucking sucked," I tell her, blowing out a huge breath. "Crap, is Mason within earshot?" I ask, knowing that my nephew likes to repeat almost everything he hears these days.

"You're good. He's out with Steph getting a present for one of his friends' birthday parties that's tomorrow. So, tell me about this appointment that fucking sucked."

"Basically, what they've told me for the last few appointments. I've beat up my body, my brain, specifically, for

way too long. The multiple concussions have done irreversible damage, and if I continue to play, a major hit to the head could be deadly. Dr. Price said that it's ultimately my decision, but his professional medical advice is that I don't return to play."

"I'm sorry, John. I know that isn't what you wanted to hear, but you also need to take care of your body and do what's right for you."

"I know. It doesn't make it any easier. I know I'm lucky to have played as long as I have, but this fucking sucks. I thought I could play for a couple more seasons before I'd have to retire."

"Have you called your agent or one of the guys on the team to talk about things yet?"

"No, not since my appointment today. Only a few people knew I was going in today."

"I think you should find someone to talk to."

"I'm not suicidal, Cin," I scoff at her.

"I didn't say you were, but it still wouldn't hurt for you to talk to someone. Be that a counselor, your coach, a friend, or a mentor. You've had a shit few months, and even shittier news dropped in your lap today. With decisions coming up, it would be easy for you to slip into a depressive state, and I don't want that for you. Hockey has been your identity since you were five. That's thirty years, John. That's a lot of time, and for it to be pulled out from underneath your feet, no one would blame you for having a hard time with it."

"I'll think about it," I tell her, just to appease her for the time being.

"I know what you're doing," she calls me out.

"Okay, okay. I promise I'll talk to someone, although I thought that was what I was doing with you right now."

"It is, but I think that it would be good for you to have someone local, as well. You know I'm here for you day and night, whenever you need me. And if you need me to jump on

a flight today to come to be with you for a few days, all you've got to do is say the word, and I'd be there."

"I know," I state. "So, how are Steph and Mason?" I ask, changing the subject to my sister-in-law and nephew.

"They're doing just fine. Mason has mastered riding his bike this week. He's feeling like a big deal out there in the driveway," she tells me, the joy evident in her voice.

"Awesome, you'll have to send me a video."

"Of course!" she exclaims. "I can't believe I didn't think to send you one already."

"It's okay. I know he keeps the two of you busy."

"That he does. And speaking of keeping us busy, I went in for the egg transfer yesterday, we should find out next week if it worked."

"Congratulations. How are you feeling?" I ask, knowing that when she was pregnant with Mason, she had a pretty smooth pregnancy.

"So far, so good. A little crampy, but that's to be expected."

"How many eggs did you and Steph decide to transfer this time?" I know they were debating what to do this go around.

"We went ahead and did two this time, that was all we had left that were viable and able to be transferred."

"I hope everything works out for you. I'm ready for another nephew or niece."

"We're cautiously optimistic about adding to our family. Now I just need you to settle down and give me a niece or nephew or two."

"I don't think that's going to happen anytime soon, so don't be holding your breath on that one."

"Oh, come on, if you retire, you'll have lots of extra time on your hands to get out and date."

"Too soon, Cin, too soon."

“Sorry, that was a little bitchy of me to say,” she says with a laugh. “Must be early pregnancy hormones already kicking in.” She tries to joke to lighten up her words. They kind of cut deep, but she isn’t wrong. With retirement looming over my head, maybe it is time to settle down with someone and start a family of my own. “I should probably get going. Steph and Mason should be back anytime now, and then we’re headed out to dinner with some friends.”

“Sounds good, give them my love, and have Mason FaceTime me sometime this weekend. I miss his chubby little face.”

“Will do, love you.”

“Love you, too.” I hit the end button on my phone, leaving it on my chest. I lay out on the couch, crossing my ankles and resting them on one end with my head on the pillow at the other end. I close my eyes and nod off for a short afternoon nap that turns into a much longer one than I thought I’d take. I jolt awake when my phone starts buzzing on my chest. I look at the screen and see a text message from Jill.

Jill: How are you doing? Make it home okay earlier?

John: I’m much better, I just woke up from a little afternoon nap. Thanks again for your help today.

Jill: Anytime. I’m sorry again for the news that you received today.

John: It was a tough pill to swallow, that’s for sure. But I’m sure it will all sink in after a few weeks. My sister wants me to find someone to talk to about everything.

Jill: That’s probably smart. What you’re going through is life-changing. If you retire, will you move back home?

Jill’s question hits me. I hadn’t even thought about what I’d do after retiring or where I’d live. I’ve called Indianapolis home for so long that I guess I just always assumed I’d live here. Although, the thought of moving back to St. Louis and being around my family all the time doesn’t sound half bad. I

usually go home for a few weeks every summer, but with all my concussion issues this postseason, I stayed here for treatment and to just lay low until things hopefully get better.

John: No clue to be honest with you. Retirement wasn't on my radar, so I hadn't really started to think about it. I love it here and have called Indy home for so long now that I'm not sure if I'd leave. The majority of my good friends are here, my current job is here. I don't know, maybe I can get an office job with the Eagles or put my college degree to good use and help them with stats.

Jill: I'm sure that you'll find something amazing.

John: Can I ask you a random and spontaneous question?

Jill: Sure

John: Do you have dinner plans tonight?

Jill: Nope. Just some leftovers in my fridge that I don't really want to eat. Why?

John: Go to dinner with me?

Jill: Why, John, are you asking me out on a date?
{winky face}

John: I guess I am.

Jill: I'd love to.

John: Give me twenty-five minutes, and I'll pick you up, does that work for you?

Jill: Sure! Do you need my address?

John: Nope, I still have it from that event we were at together with Julia and Beckett.

Jill: Then I guess I'll see you in about a half-hour.

I stand, thankful to not be seeing spots after standing up a little fast. I also didn't have a dizzy spell I sometimes get after lying down. Going from horizontal to vertical is sometimes just as bad as the bright sun is.

I hit up the bathroom, running a comb through my hair before I brush my teeth quickly. I can only imagine how rank my breath was since I never brushed after losing my stomach content in that trash can earlier. I stop in my bedroom and pull out a clean shirt, changing quickly, and then head out to my truck.

It doesn't take me long to make it across town to Jill's condo building. I park and walk up to the secure door, pressing the buzzer for her unit.

"Hello?" Her voice is loud, coming out of the speaker.

"Hey, it's me," I tell her, feeling a little awkward now that I'm here. I don't usually spring dates on women so last minute, but I enjoy Jill's company, so I draw in a deep breath to calm my suddenly racing nerves as I step onto the elevator, hitting the button for her fourth-floor unit.

"I realized after I buzzed you up that I could have just come down, I was ready," Jill greets me at her door.

"It's not a problem," I tell her, holding out a hand for her to walk in front of me. I wait while she turns to lock her door, then follow her back to the elevator. "So, how was your afternoon?" I ask once we've both settled into my truck a few minutes later.

"Pretty standard day. Had a full afternoon of patients, followed by paperwork."

"How long have you had your business?" I ask as I change lanes, driving us across town.

"Almost two years. It was a leap of faith to open, one that without my parents' help would have never happened. But one I'm so glad that I took. I hit the ground running and have not looked back since. Thankfully, it was well accepted by the medical community, as there was a need for a standalone ultrasound clinic. I've made lots of connections with so many doctors' offices in that amount of time."

"You also work in some of their offices, sometimes, right?"

“Yep. I had a few offices come to me that already owned their machines but had a hard time finding reliable techs to run them. So, they contract with my company to provide the tech. I have a staff of ten that all work within different offices. Some work out of one office full-time, and some rotate depending on the needs of the offices. We then, of course, have our own office. I’m usually at that location, along with one other technician.”

“Sounds like a great system. I’m glad that it all worked out for you so well,” I tell Jill as I pull into the parking lot of a little Mexican restaurant. I got turned on to this place when I first came to the Eagles organization. It has become somewhat of a staple for many of the guys and their families.

“I love this place!” Jill says as we park.

“Oh good, because I just realized I never asked if this would be okay with you. Sorry about that.”

“No need to apologize. I’m pretty easy going and would have been happy with pretty much anywhere you could have picked.”

“Good to know for next time.” I wink at her as I get out of the truck. She’s out of it before I can get around to open her door for her, which irrationally irks me for some odd reason. I’ll have to ponder that later. I follow Jill up to the doors, reaching around her to open it so she can walk through. I’m a damn gentleman, thank you very much.

“Thanks,” she murmurs as she brushes against me as she passes through the doorway. My dick perks up at our contact, and it takes a lot of willpower not to pull her against me so she can feel just what she’s stirred to life. This reaction around Jill isn’t new, she’s a beautiful woman, and I’d have to be a dead man not to find her attractive. But our relationship has always been in the friend zone, but something tells me that this little date could change that.

The hostess leads us to a table right away, another perk of this place, they hardly ever have a wait. I walk just behind Jill, getting the perfect view of her ass, and it is looking mighty fine tonight in her tight jeans and curve-hugging top. Between

her brushing up against me a moment ago, and this view, my body is humming with pent up frustration suddenly.

“So, you said your sister wants you to talk with someone about what’s going on?” Jill asks once we’ve placed our order.

I blow out a breath, then snag a chip and drag it through the bowl of salsa between the two of us before I muster up the will to answer her. “Yeah. She doesn’t want me to let it fester inside. She’s worried that I’ll get depressed or some shit over having to retire.”

“I can see why she’d worry about that. Hockey’s been your life for how long, a few decades?”

“Yeah,” I snag another chip, scooping up lots of salsa on it. “I started playing when I was five. It’s been my life for thirty years. I don’t really know what I’ll do if I don’t have hockey anymore.”

“I’m sure when you were younger—not that I’m saying you’re old, by the way—” She smirks, looking at me over the rim of her margarita glass. I watch as her tongue peeks out and licks a line of the salt off the rim before her lips wrap around the straw, and my fucking dick twitches again. “Back to what I was saying. I’m sure when you were younger, you had a contingency plan in place in case you didn’t make the pros or didn’t play for very long. What did that look like? What did you study in college?”

“I was like almost every other jock. I studied communications and broadcasting. Such a fucking cliché.” I laugh and shake my head at my younger self.

“So, I take it that it doesn’t really interest you now?” she asks, grabbing a chip of her own and scooping up some of the queso we also have between us.

“Not really. I’ve never been comfortable in front of a camera. It’s why I don’t like interviews.”

“What does interest you? Besides hockey?” she asks, raising a brow at me in a challenge.

“Are you secretly a mind reader?” I ask on a chuckle. “I like how you call me on my bull before I even have a chance

to say anything.”

“Nope, but it was an easy guess that you’d say hockey. I mean, it is what you breathe, eat, and sleep twenty-four seven and have for the last thirty years.”

“You’ve got me there,” I tell her as the server approaches with our plates.

“Careful, the plates are hot. Can I get either of you anything else for now?” the waitress asks after setting the plates in front of us.

“Everything looks good to me,” I answer, looking at Jill for her to also respond.

“I’m good, as well, thanks,” she says as she picks up her fork and dives in. One thing that I like about Jill is she’s not afraid to eat around me. We’ve been around each other a handful of times because her best friend is married to one of my best friends and teammate, and it seems like most of those events revolve around food. So many women I’ve dated over the years will order the smallest thing on the menu or a small salad and then sit there picking at it. I want a real woman. Not one that thinks she needs to be a twig.

A silence falls between us as the two of us enjoy our food for the first few bites. “Have you thought about going back to school to learn something else? Maybe find a new career path?”

“I hadn’t thought of that, but it’s always an idea.”

“What are you passionate about?”

I shoot her a look that says it all. “Well, since hockey is out of the question, I love to be outdoors. Hiking or biking. I love to fish and be out on the water, as well.”

“Okay, so that’s a start. Maybe you could do something with those interests. Or start a charity of some sort for a cause that is important to you. I know you donated money to help support the women’s shelter awhile back, do you have any other causes that you’d be interested in supporting?”

“I did donate to them and planned on making it a yearly contribution. I’ve kicked around the idea of a foundation but never had the time to dedicate to it.”

“I think you might have a little bit more time on your hands in the near future.”

“You got me there.”

“Does coaching interest you at all?” she questions between bites.

“Eh, it’s never been my strong suit. Probably goes hand in hand with that aversion to being in front of the camera. I’ve helped out with kids’ summer camps throughout the years, and those are always fun, but it’s usually filled with little kids who don’t really know what they’re doing, so anything we taught them was new and fun. It wasn’t about the nitty-gritty of the game, more the basics, starting with how to stand on a pair of skates,” I tell her as a laugh escapes my lips. I remember back to one of the first camps I ever helped with as a young rookie. “I remember this one little girl at a camp. She arrived decked out in head to toe bright pink gear. She thought she was hot stuff, but her blades hit the ice, and she was flat on her back the next second. It took two of us an entire hour of convincing her to leave the bench and try again. By the end of the week, she was doing pretty good, but man, those first few days, were pretty sketchy.”

“Sounds like a fun memory,” Jill states as she pushes her plate away. “Damn, that was amazing, and now I’m so stuffed.”

“I’ve never had a bad meal at this place,” I tell her as I push my own plate away.

Chapter Four

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JILL
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“So, I have a question for you,” I ask once our plates have been cleared from the table.

“What’s that?”

“I’ve got an event to go to next weekend. Would you be interested in being my date for it?” I watch his face for any adverse feelings to my proposition.

“What kind of event are we talking about? Family wedding? A work event? Charity event?”

“Sorry,” I giggle at his questioning. “I wouldn’t spring a family wedding on you like that. It’s a fundraiser for a community youth activity center,” I tell him.

“I’m sure I can clear my schedule and accompany you.” He grins at me. “How formal is this event?”

“Nothing black tie like. Just summer business casual,” I tell him. “I just planned on wearing a summer dress, if that helps at all.” I don’t miss the flash in his eyes as they quickly drop down my body and come back up to meet my eyes. Most of my body is hidden by the table, so it was swift and almost something I could have missed if I wasn’t watching his eyes so closely. I can feel something developing between the two of us, even in this short dinner. What that is, I have no idea, no clue if it is something that will go anywhere past a mutual attraction, but it’s something I’m definitely willing to explore.

“Sounds good. I’m sure I can pull together a polo and some slacks by then.” He winks just as the server drops the bill

off at the table. He drops his credit card in the tray before she can even leave the table's edge.

"I'll be right back with this," the server states before scurrying off to run his card.

"Thank you for dinner. I had a great time tonight," I tell him while we wait for his card back.

"I'm the one that should be thanking you. I needed to get out of the house tonight, or else I'd have gone stir crazy."

"I'm sure you could have gone out with one or more of the guys," I remind him.

"Most of them aren't here since it's summertime. Only a handful hang around here during the off-season, and those that do still leave for longer chunks of time during the summer."

"I can see how they'd want to do that. Go back home or on vacation."

"Yep, with Julia and Beckett gone in Sweden, and Austin busy with the baby and Reese, my options are slim."

"Didn't you play your early years with some of the guys that have retired and then stuck around with the team? Like, isn't one of your coaches a former player?"

"Yep, Scott played and is now one of the assistant coaches. I also played with Brian and Murph, who is now one of our commentators. They were some of my original teammates and some of the guys that are closest to my own age. I'm the old guy on the team...or I was," he says, tripping up on his words.

"And do they stick around here in the summer?"

"Scott and his wife Becca usually head home to Alaska for a portion of the summer. I know he has to be back earlier than players do since he's a coach. They also have school-aged kids, so they have to come back for them to start school. Brian and his wife Kinley, I think, split their summers between his family in Minnesota and hers in Alaska. Richard and his wife visit his family in Canada, but also spend a lot of time here since she's a local."

“Sounds busy, and I can see how it would be hard to find someone to get together with.”

“I guess you’re stuck with me,” he states and flashes me a panty-melting smirk. I kinda like this flirty easy-going side he’s showing me tonight. Especially with the heaviness of everything he’s got going on, I’m glad that he’s able to make light of the situation.

“I don’t want to be the party pooper of the night, but I need to get home so I can get off to bed. I have another full day tomorrow, and my alarm goes off way too early.”

“Of course. Sorry, I lost track of time,” he apologizes as he slides out of the booth.

“Not your fault at all. I was just as engrossed in our conversation as you were.”

He escorts me out to his truck, his hand resting on the curve of my lower back as we walk next to one another. I don’t know if he even realizes that he’s doing it, but I’m not going to stop him. When we reach his truck, he hits the unlock button on the key fob then opens my door for me—that chivalry shining through once again. “Thank you,” I tell him as he offers a hand to me while I step up and get settled into my seat. Once I’m in, he closes my door, rounding the front and practically jumping into his seat after opening the driver’s door.

“What are your plans for tomorrow?” I ask once he pulls out on the street.

“I’m not one hundred percent sure. I need to start having some tough conversations with my agent and then the team management. Because I was injured during a game and have been on the long-term injured reserve list, it isn’t necessarily a straightforward retirement process. My contract still has a season left on it. The organization is still liable for that contract, and it still counts towards a portion of the salary cap. It’s mostly a bunch of legal crap, but I think what it will come down to is I won’t officially submit retirement paperwork until the end of next season when my contract runs out. When it ends, I become an unrestricted free agent, which means I can

talk to any team and sign anywhere I want to, but obviously, I'd just retire at that point."

"It all sounds complicated," I tell him.

"It is. I've been in the league a long-ass time, and I still don't know everything there is to know with the inner workings when it comes to contracts and such. I trust my agent to get me the best deal he can, and he's yet to fail me. They pay me to play, I pay him to make sure I've got the best contract he can get me."

"Did you set out to play most of your career with one team? That can't be quite common, is it?" I ask.

"I didn't, but I lucked out. I think every team ends up with a handful of players that all play well together. It also helps when some of them can negotiate in no-trade clauses into their contracts. That secures their place on the team. You can't usually get that kind of a contract unless you're a proven player. I considered it with my last contract but didn't make it a deal-breaker. In the end, I got a little more money per season and an additional year tacked on."

"So, had you stuck to that no-trade stipulation, your contract would have ended just a few weeks ago?" I ask, fascinated by all this information.

"Possibly, but teams will usually start negotiating with players whose contracts are nearing expiration months early if they want to lock them into another contract. So, say my current one ended this past season, they would have started talking to my agent in probably January. The earlier they can lock a player in, the less likely it is that they'd be talking to other organizations, well, that is if they're unrestricted free agents. If they aren't, then they have to wait until after July first when all contracts expire, and they can start talking to one another."

"Wow. Sounds intricate."

"It can be, that's for sure," he agrees with me as he pulls into my building's parking lot.

“Thank you again for tonight. I had a great time,” I tell him as he parks and shuts his truck off.

“Let me walk you up, make sure you get in safe,” he offers as he slides out of his side. I open my door only to find him already standing next to it. He holds out a hand for me to grab while I step down from the tall truck.

He falls in step next to me just like we did when leaving the restaurant. His hand rests on my lower back, sending tingles up and down my spine. He keeps his hand in place until we’re standing outside my door, and I miss the feeling of it once he pulls it away.

“Thanks for being my sounding board, it felt good to have someone to talk with tonight about everything,” he says as he reaches out and tucks a few stray hairs behind my ear. His fingertips trail down my neck before he wraps them around it and pulls me into his personal space. His movements are calculated and slow, but also thorough. I can sense the second of hesitation in his actions before he pushes them away. His lips are a hair’s breadth away from my own. “Tell me to stop if you don’t want me to kiss you,” he practically growls, giving me a few heartbeats worth of time to push him away before his lips are on mine. The pillowy softness of his lips almost surprise me as he takes command of the kiss. I open for him almost immediately, stepping into his embrace as I bring my own hands up, raking my fingers through his hair. His tongue duels with mine, and he shifts slightly, tilting my head just so to give him better access to deepen the kiss and make it even hotter than it already is.

All sense of time evaporates. I have no idea if we’ve been lip-locked for ten seconds or ten hours by the time we break apart, both sucking in air like we’ve been without for longer than acceptable. Johnathan rests his forehead against mine as we both work on catching our breath. I can taste the hint of hops from the one beer he drank with dinner. He stands up taller, his forehead breaking the connection we’d just had, but then his lips are pressed against the same exact skin, and I melt all over again. What is it about forehead kisses from a guy you’ve been crushing on to melt you into a puddle of

hormones? “I should go. Call me tomorrow?” he asks as he attempts to take a step back. Our limbs are still a little tangled, and I find myself not wanting to let him go.

“Yeah,” I finally agree, knowing that inviting him in isn’t the right thing to do tonight. “I’ll call you when I’m off work. I should be home around six or so,” I tell him as I start to ramble.

“I look forward to it. Maybe we can get dinner again together; only this time, you can come to my place, and I’ll cook for you,” he says, his lips brushing against my forehead once again.

“You cook?” I ask, rearing back to look him dead in the eyes.

“I do. I just don’t usually bust out all the fancy cooking skills when it’s just me I’m cooking for, but I’ve got a trick or two up my sleeve.”

“All right, it’s a date. I’m excited to see what you can whip up.”

“I’ll gladly show you tomorrow night. Any allergies I should be aware of?” he asks.

“Nope. I’m good with almost anything. I will tell you that I won’t touch mushrooms or liver, so please don’t tell me your specialty includes either of those things.”

“You’re in luck, not a mushroom or liver on site. I don’t care for either of those, so you won’t find me cooking them.”

“Good to know,” I tell him as he pulls me against his chest again, this time his arms are wrapped around my midsection. I mimic his stance and wrap my arms around his torso. He towers over me when we’re standing like this, the top of my head hits him right at his collar bone. I can feel the ridges of his muscles through the thin fabric of his shirt, and if I’m not mistaken, I can also feel his hard shaft pushing against my belly. Feeling what I do to him has my own arousal pulsing between my thighs. What I wouldn’t give to jump him tonight. It’s been awhile—who am I kidding, it’s been more than a year

since I was last with someone, my BOB has been keeping me *a lot* of company the past year.

“I should go, you need to get off to bed, and if I walk through your door, I don’t think either of us would be getting any sleep anytime soon.”

“Right,” I agree with him, even if him coming in and the two of us *not* getting any sleep anytime soon does sound like a much better idea than him leaving right now. “I’ll see you tomorrow. Let me know if anything pops up and it doesn’t work for you once your day is going.”

“Don’t worry, sweetheart, I’ll make sure I’m ready and waiting for you,” he tells me before his lips land on my lips in a chaste kiss. He steps back, lightly squeezes my sides before dropping his hands. “Good night. Sweet dreams.”

I stand there and watch him walk down the hall of my condo building. He turns around once on the elevator. I watch as the door closes, waving just before it slides closed and whisks him down to the ground floor. The sound of someone’s door opening down the hall snaps me from my daze, I slip my key in the lock, turning it quickly before pushing into my entryway. I have no idea how everything transpired the way that it did tonight, but I can’t say that I’d change it in any way.

I practically float from room to room as I make my way around. I drop my purse and shoes in the entryway after locking up. I stop in the bathroom then go change into some sleep shorts and a tank top. I do want to get to bed early tonight. I’m exhausted and wasn’t lying to Johnathan when I told him I have a full schedule tomorrow. Once I’m changed, I make my way out to the kitchen.

I grab a glass of ice water, stop and refresh the water in my cat, Walter’s, water dish and top off the automatic feeder I have for him. I mosey into the living room, where I find him curled up on the couch, and I sit down next to him, the movement of the cushion waking him up. He looks around to see who or what interrupted his peaceful slumber. Once he spots me, he stretches, then comes over and starts to head-butt my hand until I give him some loving and scratch his head. He

starts purring almost immediately, and I snuggle him closer. Walter is getting up there in age. I rescued him when I first bought my condo about three years ago. He makes himself comfortable on my lap while I flip through the channels looking for something interesting to watch for a little bit. I stop on some reruns of *The Big Bang Theory* while I wait for the evening news to start.

My eyes are heavy before the news is even half over, but I've heard enough. I set Walter down before I get up and make my way to my bedroom. He follows me, jumping up on the bed and finding his favorite sleeping spot in the entire condo—right smack dab in the middle of my pillow.

“I hope you know how lucky you are,” I tell my cat as I push him over to the other pillow on my bed. This is a nightly occurrence. If I get up in the middle of the night to pee, he'll steal it then, as well. Pretty much anytime I get out of bed, he likes to take claim on my pillow.

I snuggle into the bed, thoughts of that hot as hell kiss running through my mind. My thoughts wander to Johnathan and what he's doing right now. Is he thinking about the kiss? Is he wishing I was warming his bed as much as I wish he was warming mine?

I reach over, grabbing my phone, and ponder if I should send him a text. I don't want to come across as needy or clingy, so I put my phone down, knowing that I'll talk to him tomorrow.

Chapter Five

JOHNATHAN

I lay in bed, the sun already shining through the cracks in the blinds. I'm still exhausted as if I didn't sleep at all after I tossed and turned most of the night. Between the pent-up sexual tension that was crackling between Jill and me last night, and that hot as hell kiss that ended our night before I walked away and then not taking care of things after I got home last night. Add in the stress from my appointment yesterday, it's no wonder I slept like shit. I need to get my ass moving today and get some phone calls out of the way.

I give myself five more minutes to relax in bed before I force myself to get up and moving for the day. I head into the bathroom to start my day with a shower. I reach in and turn the water on, taking a leak while the shower warms up. I slide in under the hot water and allow the pressure to work its way into my muscles. I can feel the stress melting away as the water beats against my back. My cock hasn't gotten the memo that it's not time to be out, and thoughts of that kiss from last night flood back into my mind. All I can think of is the feel of Jill's lips against my own. The slide of her tongue tangling with mine as I devoured her.

Had we stepped over the threshold of her place, I can only imagine how quickly we'd have shed our clothes. I knew I had to slow things down. She deserves better than a quick fuck against a wall or door, especially for our first time together. My cock is hard, pulsing with need. I slide a hand down my abs, gripping it at the base before sliding my hand up the shaft, circling my palm around the tip. I imagine what it would be like to have Jill's hand wrapped around it instead of my own,

or her mouth. *Fuck*. Just the image of that has me ready to blow my load all over the shower wall. I stroke my shaft a dozen or so times, thinking of Jill the entire time. Of all the filthy things I'd like to do to her, preferably while naked the whole time. I can't hold back any longer, finally crashing over the edge as my release spurts on the wall. I lean into the one hand, resting on the wall, holding myself up. With my lack of sleep, I wore myself out.

It takes me a minute or so to recover from my orgasm, but once I do, I go through the motions of my regular shower routine. I get out, toweling off and dressing all in the span of maybe five minutes. I head for the kitchen, pulling out a pan to make myself some breakfast. I whip up some sausage, eggs, and toast. Nothing fancy, but it's simple and gets the job done. I need to take an inventory and make sure I have everything on hand for dinner tonight and make a run to the store before Jill is off work and here this evening.

With breakfast out of the way, I grab my cell and shoot off a text to one of my prior teammates, Richard Murphy. He retired a few years ago, but more importantly, his wife, Madison, used to be an agent. I know I need to talk to my own agent, but I want to get both of their perspectives on what I should do moving forward, and if there's anything that I should be looking for with ending my career mid-contract.

John: Hey, man, are you free today? Can I stop by and talk to you and Madison about something?

I toss my phone on the counter and start cleaning up my mess from breakfast. Richard isn't the quickest at replying to texts sometimes these days, not with two babies at home now.

I finish up the dishes, then start rummaging through the fridge and cabinets trying to decide what I should make tonight. I settled on Chicken Cordon Bleu. I set the chicken out to defrost and make sure I have everything else to make the dish. I make a quick list, knowing that I need to pick up some wine and a dessert of some kind to round out the meal.

Just as I'm finishing up my list, my phone vibrates on the counter with a reply from Murph.

Murph: We're just hanging out here at the house, so stop over whenever. The babies should be going down for a nap in the next half hour or so.

John: Sounds good, need anything? I can head that way now.

Murph: Can't think of anything, but thanks for the offer.

I grab my list for the store, my cell, and keys from the counter and head for my truck. It only takes me maybe ten minutes to make it over to Richard and Madison's house. I park in the driveway and make my way up to the door. Remembering that he said the babies might be down for a nap, I rap my knuckles on the door rather than risk ringing the doorbell. I hear Max bark and hope that it didn't wake anyone up.

"Sorry," I say in lieu of a greeting when Richard opens the door a moment later, the dog on his heels. "Hope I didn't wake anyone," I tell him just as I hear a cry from the living room.

"Nope, Madison just got Sophia changed and ready for a nap, and now she's nursing Courtney. Come on in and make yourself at home. I've got to go wrap Sophia up and get her put down in her crib."

"Hey, JC," Madison greets as I take a seat on one of the couches. She's on a recliner facing me, propped up with a baby and some weird shaped pillow thing. "How are things?" she asks as I watch Richard wrap his other daughter up almost like a burrito in a weird blanket wrap contraption with Velcro on it.

"Eh, things are going. I was hoping to pick your brain on some things, if you don't mind."

"Of course, what can I help with?" she asks.

"It can wait until you're done, I don't mind," I tell her, knowing that she'll probably need to attend to the baby in her arms soon.

"You sure? She's almost done, and then I can get her down for a nap, as well."

“Of course, take your time. Kids are more important than my issues at the present.”

“Can I get you something to drink?” Richard asks as he reappears from down the hall.

“Water is fine,” I tell him before he disappears into their kitchen.

“Do you need anything, babe?” he calls out to Madison.

“Can you bring me something to eat please, some cheese and crackers are fine,” she calls back to him. “Nursing two babies has me starving all the time,” she tells me.

“I can only imagine,” I tell her, not really having any experience in that arena. I was around my sister so little when my nephew was a baby due to my schedule and living in different cities.

“Here ya go,” Richard captures my attention a moment later as he hands over a bottle of water to me before handing his wife a plate with the food she requested. He takes a seat on the armrest of the couch, just a few feet from his wife and daughter’s side. “Need me to burp her?” he asks as Madison adjusts the baby in her arms.

“Sure,” she tells him, as Richard picks the baby up, cradling her to his chest as he starts to pat on her back. It only takes a few seconds before she lets out a burp that could almost rival one of the guys on the team.

“Damn,” I chuckle. “What are you feeding that kid?”

“Only the best.” Madison beams.

“These girls have got some wicked gas power. I’ve been amazed at some of the noises and smells that they can produce,” Richard tells me as he starts to wrap up this baby the same way he did the other. I’ve already forgotten what one was which. I’m sure they can tell them apart, but I’m lost when it comes to that.

“Okay, I’m ready for you to dish,” Madison says as Richard heads down the hall with the already sleeping baby in his arms.

“I had another appointment with my neurologist, and it didn’t go well. He wants me to retire,” I tell her, and go on to give her and Richard, once he returns to the living room, all the details from my appointment. I also tell them about the episodes I’ve been having, including the one when I left the office yesterday and how Jill helped me.

“I know it isn’t what you want, but I have to agree with the doctor,” Richard tells me. “I had some minor injuries a few years before I retired that had me really considering retiring then, so I know somewhat what you’re going through with the should-I-shouldn’t-I debate. Obviously, mine wasn’t as serious, and I was able to go on and play for another few seasons, but with your brain at stake, I think you need to listen to the doc.”

“I know, and I’m starting to come to terms with it. I wanted to get any info or insight from you,” I say, motioning to Madison, “as an agent before I call mine back up and tell him what I want to do and to start talks with management over ending my contract.”

“I’m sure that he’ll do everything he can to benefit you. You’ve got what, one year left on your contract?” she asks.

“Yep,” I confirm.

“They may choose to just pay you out upfront, but they might also decide to pay you out over the course of the remaining months. No matter what way they go about it, it’s still a hit to the cap.”

“I figured as much, and I guess I don’t really care what way they choose to go. I guess if they pay it all out this year, that might create a tax nightmare for me.”

“It definitely will create a tax liability, so it would be a good idea to talk to your financial advisor and get their take on things when you’re in negotiations with the team. Your agent should also be looking at those kinds of things, as well,” she tells me.

“Thanks, I know I need to just make the call, but it pains me to think that everything I worked so damn hard for over the

last thirty-plus years is just done and gone.”

“It’s a tough pill to swallow, that’s for sure, and even more of one since it isn’t on your own terms. But look at all the positives—you’ve had a great career, won the cup multiple times, won multiple awards, played on the Olympic team, and won Gold. Not too many people can claim even half of those things.” Madison reiterates my accomplishments.

“I know, and I’m not trying to diminish what I’ve accomplished, just sucks ass to end on such a bad note. Almost casts a shadow over everything, in a way.”

“Only if you let it. But think of what you can turn around and do with your platform to help keep future players from dealing with the exact same outcome you are dealing with. You could use your position to educate young players on why safety measures and protocols have come so far in the sport and how they still need to get better as we progress on. I really think that you can turn this around and use it for the betterment of the sport,” Richard tells me.

“I hadn’t thought of that angle,” I tell him honestly. “It isn’t like people don’t know that I was taken out with a concussion in the playoffs, so it would be an easy transition.” I mull over his suggestion, knowing that it is definitely something that would be an important cause to me, and that brings back Jill’s idea of finding a significant cause for me to focus my time and energy on. I’ll have to remember to bring it up to her tonight over dinner.

We continue our visit while the babies take their naps, waking up about ninety minutes later. Observing my friends as they take care of their girls, I realize just how well they’ve adjusted to being parents to twin girls. Having a few months under their belts now, things appear to come pretty naturally to them as I observe both of them take care of the girls. I’ve never really wanted for a family of my own, always focusing on playing and being as game-ready as I could be, but now that I know hockey will no longer be my life, I can see the appeal to having someone to come home to every night and maybe a kid or two of my own.

“You’re getting this dad thing down,” I tell Richard as he expertly changes one of the girls right in front of me.

“Yep, amazing how quickly things changed around here.” He chuckles. “They might be little, but they sure do rule our lives these days, but I wouldn’t change it for anything,” he tells me, holding up the baby before blowing a raspberry against her cheek, causing her to giggle and blow some spit bubbles. I realize just how much the girls have already changed in the few short months since they were born.

“How old are they now?” I ask.

“Just turned four months old this week,” he tells me. “Some days, it feels like they’ve been here for a year, and some days it feels like just yesterday we were bringing them home from the hospital,” he says, blowing another raspberry on her cheek. “We’ve had many sleepless nights and zombie-filled days, but it’s been worth every single one.”

“Ok, I gotta ask, but how in the hell do you tell them apart?” My question must be one they get a lot, but it still causes Richard to laugh.

“Easy, they actually don’t look all that alike. They’re fraternal, not identical twins, so that’s helpful, but this, here, is Sophia. She’s got lighter blond hair and has her mother’s nose, while Courtney over there has slightly darker hair like her momma, and was blessed with my nose,” he tells me.

“I’ll have to try and remember that,” I tell him.

“You want to hold Sophia?” he asks, holding her out to me. I nervously take her from his arms, a little surprised at how strong her body is. I can’t really recall the last time I held a baby this small. I’m occasionally around some of my teammates’ kids, but I don’t usually ever hold them, and my nephew is a tad bit bigger than these little ones.

“You need one of your own,” Madison says as she walks by, Courtney in her arms.

“That would require a wife or girlfriend first,” I deadpan.

“Well, yes, that would make things a little easier,” she laughs. “So get on with that part,” she encourages.

“Maybe,” I grunt, and the baby in my arms lets out a shriek that damn near pierces my eardrum. “Fuc...fudge,” I catch myself from cussing. “You are one loud little girl,” I say to Sophia.

“What about Jill? From what you were saying earlier, it sounds like things could potentially become a thing,” Madison questions.

“Maybe. It is new, might not be anything, or it might be something. I’d say we’re feeling each other out right now.”

“Feeling each other out,” her eyebrows raise in question. “Is that what we’re calling it these days? I mean, I know I don’t really have much of a leg to stand on when it comes to how relationships start, just promise me that you won’t lead her on or feel things out too long. You’ll waste precious years,” she says, and I can tell there’s a little warning from her and Richard’s own story. They skirted around their true feelings for so damn long. Everyone else, me included, could see it before they both did and finally acted on those feelings.

“I’m not one for dragging things out or dating just to date. It isn’t my personality,” I tell her. “Probably one of the reasons I’ve never really had a long-term relationship.”

“Well, maybe now’s the time to change that,” she suggests.

“I’ll take it under advisement,” I say to appease her. “Thanks, guys, for your advice today. I’ll let you know how everything shakes out with the team and contracts and such, but I need to get out of here. I’ve got to stop at the store yet today and get ready for my dinner date this evening.”

“Anytime. Don’t be a stranger. Our door is always open for you,” Richard tells me as he walks me out.

My stomach starts to growl as I drive toward the store. I realize I never had lunch, seeing as I was at Richard and Madison’s for a few hours. I grab a quick sandwich at the store before grabbing the items from my list and then making my way home.

Once home, I pick up the few things lying around. I tend to keep a pretty tidy house, never one for much clutter, but still, I

want my place to look nice for Jill tonight. I head into my bedroom and decide to strip my bed and put on fresh sheets. Not that I expect us to make it in here, but I realize I don't remember the last time I changed them, so I toss them into the washer and put a clean set on the bed. Once my bed is remade, I pull out the vacuum, hitting up my bedroom, the hall, and the living room.

Once my house is immaculate, because, apparently, I really want to impress Jill tonight with a sparkling clean house, I set out the items I need for tonight, verifying that I have everything and didn't miss picking anything up. I put one of the wines I picked up in the fridge to chill and the other on the counter, pulling out the opener, so I have it handy for when Jill arrives.

I kick back on the couch, turning on the TV while I wait for Jill to call or text me to let me know she's off work and on her way over. Since she wasn't one hundred percent certain on what time she'd get out of work, I figured I'd wait until she let me know she was done to start actually cooking.

Jill: Just leaving work! Do you need me to pick up anything on my way?

John: Nope, all good here. I'll go ahead and start the food.

Jill: Sounds good, I'm starving, didn't really get much of a lunch today as we had an urgent add on.

John: Well, you're in luck because I have a full meal, including dessert here for you tonight.

Jill: Dang, a girl could get used to that. {winky face}

John: Anytime. {winky face}

I head for the kitchen, setting my phone down on the cradle I have for it on the counter. I assemble the chicken, placing it in the hot skillet to sear it before adding the chicken stock for it to simmer in for the remainder of the time. Once that's set up, I start the rice just about the time my buzzer rings. I answer the call, buzzing Jill up to my unit. I quickly wash my hands off, then head for the door. Opening it, I stand

just outside the door in the hall and wait as Jill comes off the elevator and down the hall. She's dressed in a pair of shorts and a tank top, yet looks gorgeous, like she could walk down a runway if she wanted.

"Hi." She smiles up at me as she stops just inches in front of me.

"Hello yourself," I say, pulling her against me. After our hot as hell kiss last night, all I want to do is taste her lips once again, so I drop my lips to hers and do just that. I pull her with me inside my condo, kicking the door shut with my foot, all the while my lips are still fused to hers. I feel as her fingers dig into my skin, first on my biceps and then as her hands makes their way up my arms and neck and then into my hair. I cup her face, angling her just right to deepen the kiss even more. I could devour her like this all night and be a happy man. Our impromptu make-out session is interrupted when the timer in my kitchen starts going off, signaling that it's time to finish the sauce up for the chicken.

"Guess that's my signal to stop kissing you for now."

"For now," she agrees as I step back and head for the kitchen. She follows closely behind, leaning against the counter as she watches me remove the chicken from the pan and add the heavy cream and cornstarch to thicken the sauce up. She presses her fingers against her kiss swollen lips, making me wish mine were still fused with them.

"Can I get you something to drink? I picked up a couple bottles of wine, a white and red, I didn't know what you prefer."

"I'm good with a Chardonnay," Jill says as I stir the sauce. I step away from the stove long enough to grab two glasses from the cabinet and the bottle of wine from the fridge. I stir the sauce quick, then pop the cork and pour us both a glass.

"Is there anything I can help with?" Jill asks as I hand over her glass of wine.

I watch as she takes a sip. I watch the way her throat moves as she swallows it down, and fuck do I want to put my

lips on that skin. My dick twitches in my shorts at the thought of stripping her out of her clothes right here, right now.

“John, I think it’s going to boil over,” Jill says, pointing at the pan behind me.

“Fuck!” I curse, turning quickly and removing the pan from the burner before I make a mess of our dinner. I transfer everything to serving dishes and carry it, with Jill’s help, to my small table. Once everything is on the table, I pull Jill’s chair out for her, then my own once she’s seated. We each quickly fill our plates.

“This is amazing. Do you cook like this every night?” Jill asks as she cuts into her food.

“No, while I enjoy cooking, I hate doing it for just myself. I usually just cook up a few days’ worth of meals one day a week and then just reheat things throughout the week. Makes it so I don’t have to do a bunch of dishes each night, and so I don’t have to eat the same meal over and over, finishing up leftovers. I’ll grill up chicken and then use it a bunch of different ways, or steaks and cut them up for different things. When I used to have teammates living with me, I’d cook more often since they’d be here to eat.”

“How many of the guys have you lived with over the years?” she asks.

“A lot.” I chuckle, thinking back, probably five or six of them—some longer than others. “I swear, some of them only put the address down as a legal address but hardly ever lived here because they were always staying over with a girlfriend. We were always pretty protective of this place, not really having women over since it’s sometimes hard to determine what ones are just after us because of our job and who’s in it for the person under that public persona.”

“Is that hard to deal with?”

“In my early years, it was every young twenty-something single guy’s dream to have all these women throwing themselves at us every way we turned, but it also got old really quick. It only took me a season or so to pick the puck bunnies

out from across the room. I won't lie and tell you I never took what some were offering, but I quickly learned to be more selective in those I kept company with."

"I can't imagine throwing myself at a guy just because of his job," Jill muses.

"Most of them are out there doing it to either have 'bragging' rights amongst their friends, or some do it for the wrong reasons, and that is to try and trap a guy with a kid, thinking that it will be a big payout. I've known a handful of guys that that's happened to and now they've got kids in cities they only make it to a handful of nights a year and baby mamas with more drama than a sorority house. It's sad because it's the kid that suffers the most."

"That is really shitty. Those poor kids."

"Yep."

"You aren't one of those guys, are you? With a kid in another city?" she asks, stopping to take a sip of her wine.

"Nope. No kids for me so far," I tell her, taking a drink of my own glass.

"Do you want kids?" she asks.

"I'm not against having them, I've just never found someone I'd want to settle down with and start a family with. Hockey has always been my priority. Now with that coming to an end, I can see it possibly happening. Although, it will probably have to happen in the next couple of years or else, I'll be the old dad."

"I think biological clocks only pertain to women," she teases me.

"In fertility, maybe, but I don't want to be a new dad at fifty. As it is already, I'll be closer to forty, most likely."

"Forty is the new thirty," Jill retorts.

"Maybe. But I also have to worry about what lasting effects my TBI will have on me. I wouldn't want to subject my future wife and kids to a life filled with having to take care of me because things go badly."

“But in reality, that isn’t something that you’ll ever know if it’s going to happen. So, if that’s your logic, you’d never be ready to start a family. You could have a stroke today and be one hundred percent dependent on someone else for the rest of your life, or you could live to be one hundred and still live on your own the entire time. None of us knows what life will bring us, so you can’t live your life in fear of the unknown.”

“I guess you’re right,” I tell her as I push my plate away. I’m very intrigued by the way she makes me think about things. Having someone as intelligent and determined as Jill in my life is something I could definitely get used to.

“This meal was amazing,” Jill tells me as she does the same. “I could have eaten that sauce on just about anything. You’ll have to share your recipe with me.”

“Maybe.” I wink at her. “It might cost you.”

“Is that so?” She bats her eyelashes at me before finishing off her wine. “What’s it going to cost me?”

“I could think of a thing or two.” I flirt with her and realize that it has been a long-ass time since I’ve flirted with someone, and damn does it feel good.

“I’m sure you could,” she drawls.

“Would you like a refill on your wine?” I ask as I stand, taking the plates with me to the kitchen.

“I guess I can have one more glass, any more than that, and I won’t be able to drive home.”

“You can always stay here,” I call out and then realize just how that sounded. “Not that I expect you to do that,” I add, hoping that I’m not making a complete ass of myself.

Chapter Six

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JILL
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“You can always stay here,” John calls out as he walks into the kitchen. “Not that I expect you to do that,” he adds as an afterthought. I didn’t come here expecting to stay over, but I can’t say that the idea didn’t cross my mind on my drive over. It might have been why I packed an overnight bag that is down in my car, just in case.

I grab a few of the serving dishes and follow John into the kitchen.

“Sorry, that came out wrong,” he says once I enter the kitchen.

“It’s fine, I’m not offended at all. You’ll have to learn that it takes a lot to offend me,” I tell him as I set the dishes on the counter, then turn around and go back for the wine glasses. “I’ll take that refill of wine,” I tell him, holding out my glass. He pops the cork and refills my glass and then his own. “Would you like help with the dishes?” I offer.

“I can get them later,” he says, placing them in the sink.

“Or we could get them done, and then you won’t have a messy kitchen to deal with later,” I push. “You cooked for me, the least I can do is help you clean up afterward.”

“If you insist.” He gives in pretty quickly. I bump him out of the way with my hip, taking control of the sink and rinsing everything off and handing him the dishes to load into the dishwasher.

“So, did you talk to your agent or whoever you needed to talk to about the decisions you have to make?” I ask as we

finish up the dishes.

“Actually, no,” he chuckles. “I set out to call him today, but I ended up going over to one of my former teammates’ houses; his wife used to be an agent, and I wanted to get both of their take on things. I ended up hanging out with Richard and Madison and their two new babies for a few hours. After that, I ran to the store before coming home to cook for you. I’ll give him a call in the morning.”

“Do you know what you’re going to do? Or do you have to talk to him first?”

“As much as it pains me to do so, I’m going to follow the advice of my doctor and negotiate my retirement. It isn’t worth the risk to keep playing.”

“I think that’s a smart decision. I’d hate to see you get hurt worse.”

“Yeah, me too. I also started mulling something over this afternoon after our conversation last night and then something that Madison and Richard said to me today. The idea you suggested about starting a foundation or charity, but last night I couldn’t think of any one thing I’d want to focus on supporting. Then Madison suggested I use my platform to bring awareness to TBI injuries and what can be done going forward to help protect players from them. Maybe it’s working with helmet manufacturers to better the technology that goes into the helmets to protect the head from the impacts they take on a regular basis, or with the medical teams on sitting guys out for longer periods to really make sure that the player isn’t suffering even minor symptoms that they might otherwise try and push aside just to get back out on the ice and keep playing. I know that holding players out longer will be a fight with the players, but if it can save just one guy from a long-lasting injury, I’d fight for it. I wouldn’t wish any of my symptoms on my worst enemy, and mine aren’t even as severe as they get.”

“I think that is an amazing way to use your notoriety. Not only can you bring the professional aspect, but the personal one, as well. Having dealt with your own Traumatic Brain Injury, I think guys will respond better to you than, say, some

researcher that walks in just wanting to show them the data on why they should wear a better helmet or sit out for an evaluation after hitting the boards at a high speed all while being crushed by a two hundred-plus pound defender.”

“That’s a good point. I know I was that way when younger. I looked up more to the older, veteran players rather than someone who just wanted to come and talk up their product to us.”

“You might even work some endorsement deals out of a platform like that.”

“Possibly. But first, I’ve got to get through the initial contract issues before I can even think about starting a foundation, but at least it gives me something to work toward.”

“Important things like that don’t come to be overnight. Even if it takes you a few years to fully launch something, it will still be something you can be proud of.”

“Thanks for your help in here. Let’s go relax now,” he says, grabbing my hand with his and leading me out to the living room. His condo is very much the quintessential bachelor pad. Large leather couches, a huge TV mounted on the wall, video game console on the entertainment center, along with a handful of games and controllers next to it. He’s also got a collection of hockey sticks in the corner, and a large frame on the wall with a jersey on display.

“Is that yours?” I ask, pointing to the jersey and feeling a little bit like an idiot, since it is obvious that it’s his since it has his last name across the back of it.

“Yep, that was my team USA jersey from when I made the Olympic team a few years back.”

“Wait, you went to the Olympics?” I ask him, turning my body on the couch to face him better. I tuck my feet up under me, so they’re out of the way.

“I did. I’ve got the gold medal in my bedroom to prove it.”

“No way! That’s badass! I can’t believe I can say I know a gold medalist.”

“It was an amazing experience. One I’ll never forget.”

“I can only imagine.”

“Have you done anything unique or random, backpacked through Europe, or partied hard over spring break in Cabo?”

“Nope. Pretty typical upbringing; graduated high school, then straight into college. Once I graduated college, I worked a couple jobs as my introduction into the adult world before I opened my own business.”

“Nothing wrong with that, not that I’d say kicking ass at being a small business owner, and a successful one at that, is anything to downplay. I think you’re pretty incredible for going after something you wanted and making it work.”

“I wouldn’t be where I am without the support of my parents. They helped me get off the ground. My mom, actually, was my first employee,” I tell him, using finger quotes around employee. “She came in and would answer phones and help me with paperwork but would never let me pay her for her time. She always insisted that she wanted to be there, helping me get things off the ground.”

“That’s what parents are for.”

“Are you close with yours?” I ask John.

“My mom, yes. She’s one hell of a woman. My dad, no. He hasn’t been in the picture since I was little, and that’s for the best,” he tells me, and I can tell I’ve hit a nerve.

“You’re also close with your sister, right?”

“Yep, one of my very best friends. I’d do anything for Cindi.”

“Where does she live?”

“She’s back in St. Louis, she’s married to my sister-in-law, Stephanie, and they have my nephew, Mason, who’s three, and she just told me yesterday that they did another egg transfer, so hopefully in the next week or so they’ll know if it worked and will be adding another kid or two to the mix.”

“That’s awesome! I’ve done many ultrasounds for fertility patients. They can sometimes be some of the hardest appointments to do, but then also some of the most rewarding ones.”

“I bet. They used donor sperm and harvested eggs from Stephanie when they wanted to have Mason. They froze the extras, and I guess they transferred the last two that were viable.”

“Did Stephanie not want to carry the pregnancies, or was that their way of both feeling like they were involved in the process?” I ask.

“I think it was a little bit of both. Stephanie is an attorney in a big law firm, so she works some crazy-ass hours. Cindi was a paralegal, and that’s how they first met. I guess they figured that it would be easiest for Cindi to be the one to be off, and now she stays home with Mason.”

“That’s awesome. Do you get to see them often?”

“A few times a year in person. We talk on the phone and FaceTime a lot. Mason is one of the coolest kids, even if I am a little biased since he’s my nephew,” he tells me, a goofy smile on his lips as he talks about his family.

“Maybe you’ll get to see them more now.”

“Maybe.” He shrugs. “I’ll figure all that out in due time.”

“So, I have another question for you,” I state. John reaches a hand out, pushing a stray lock of my hair behind my ear. His fingers trail down my neck, causing the skin to pebble with goosebumps.

“Ask away.” His words come out a little gruff. We’ve both been inching closer and closer to one another since sitting down on the couch.

“So that charity event, I asked if you’d go with me...” I start my question.

“Yeah, what about it?” he questions. I pull my bottom lip in between my teeth, and I observe as his eyes drop to watch as I do so.

“When I called to give them my plus-one information today, they asked if you’d be willing to be one of the celebrity bachelors up for auction at the event,” I rush out in one breath.

“A bachelor auction?” he questions.

“Yeah, I can always tell them no—” I rush to tell him.

“I’ll do it.” He surprises me. “But only under one condition,” he states, his hand cupping my cheek again. His thumb rubs along my bottom lip before he leans over and steals a kiss.

“What’s your one condition?” I ask a moment later, once he’s released my lips.

“That you’re the highest bidder at the end of my time on stage.”

“Oh!” I say in shock. “Um, I’m not sure I’ll be able to afford what some of the bachelors go for,” I tell him honestly.

“Don’t worry about the cost. I’ll give them my card. I’ll do it, but I only want to go home with you,” he reiterates.

“So let me get this straight, not only will you be my date to the event, but you’ll donate yourself to be up for auction and then pay for the winning bid, all so I can ‘win’ you?”

“Sounds about right,” he replies before kissing me once again. I push against his chest to get him to stop his incredible assault on my mouth so that I can get some stupid answers. “Something wrong?” he asks, a cocky smirk on his lips.

“You just surprise me, is all. How no other woman has locked you down before now is a mystery.”

“Maybe I was never ready to be locked down,” he tells me as he tugs me onto his lap. I straddle him, which may or may not have been a good idea. His hard cock is pressed firmly against my swollen and pulsing clit. As he pulls my chest against his own, my hips rock in the most sensual motion against his erection. “Fuck,” he murmurs before kissing me hard once again.

Time might as well have stopped at that moment. Our surroundings melt away as we both take the time to explore

one another. We're a tangle of limbs and dueling tongues as we both have moments of dominance. He grabs my hips, helping me as I slide back and forth over his hardness underneath me. The pressure against my clit has my body on fire. "You like that?" he whispers against my lips, and all I can manage is a whimper of my approval. We both trail our hands along one another's bodies while we learn the intimate details that one learns about a potential lover—the way our touches are rewarded by moans or whimpers of pleasure.

We break apart, our foreheads coming together as we both suck in much-needed air to replenish our lungs with. "You should take me to bed," I boldly state. I'm not usually so forward—thank you, two glasses of wine tonight—but I don't feel any remorse for asking for what I know we both want.

"You don't have to tell me twice." John stands up in one fluid motion. His arms cradle me, as he holds me up and carries me down the hall. His room, one that is very simple, much like the rest of his house. A large, king-size bed in the center against the wall. A dresser is along the opposite wall. Nothing hangs from the walls, so things feel a little impersonal in here, but also very manly.

He places me in the center of the bed, standing between my open legs. I grab his T-shirt in my fist and pull him closer to me. "Ready to strip for me?" I ask him, just before I nip at his bottom lip.

His hands go straight for the button of his shorts, flicking it and dropping them to the floor practically before I can blink. His shirt comes off next in one fluid motion. Why is a guy taking a shirt off one-handed so sexy? I could watch that exact movement on repeat a hundred times and be just as turned on by it every time.

"You've got some catching up to do," he tells me, running his fingertips up my legs.

"I'm enjoying the show," I tease him as I reach for the hem of my own top. I pull it up and over my head, leaving me in my lacy bra. I unbutton my own shorts, then push him out of the way so that I can stand and take them off. Once I'm

standing in front of him in nothing more than my bra and thong and him in his boxer briefs, we stare one another down for a few seconds. Who will break first?

I reach out and run my fingertips down the ridges of his abs, loving the feeling of the muscles twitching under my touch. When I reach the elastic of his boxer briefs, I skim my fingers along the edge of the material, then over it to run my hand over his erection.

“Fuck, Jill.” He practically growls my name as I cup his dick. I run my thumb over the head of his cock, the fabric of his boxer briefs doing nothing to hide just how turned on he is. I drop to my knees, tugging the fabric over his hips and down his muscular legs. Damn, he’s got some powerful legs. All those years spent in skates and on the ice have been *very* good to his physique.

I look up at him, watching his expression as I stroke his cock in my hand. My eyes don’t leave his as I move back and ghost my lips over his shaft, licking around the head of his cock like it’s my own personal sucker, and I’m attempting to find the center. John’s fingers sink into my hair as he gathers my short locks into one of his fists. As he holds it out of my face, I enclose my lips around his cock, sucking him fully into my mouth until the head hits the back of my throat. I pull back until my lips are once again around just the crown of his cock, sucking hard as I hollow out my cheeks. My fist easily slides along his shaft as I work him over, doing my best to bring him to the edge of ecstasy before pulling back, only to build him right back up.

“I’m not going to last much longer,” he groans out, tapping my cheek to get my attention.

“That’s the point,” I tell him after sliding his cock out of my mouth. I increase my strokes with my fist, watching as he starts to let loose. His cum hits my torso, marking me as it pulses from his cock. He turns his body, falling back on the bed and taking me with him. I’m careful not to land with the front of my body against the comforter, so I don’t make it messy.

“Here, use this,” he tells me, handing me the T-shirt he took off a little bit ago. It must have landed on the bed when he took it off.

I wipe his cum off my skin and curl up next to him as he recovers from his orgasm.

“That was fucking amazing,” he tells me as he nuzzles my neck. The combination between his facial scruff and his breath against my skin has me squirming and ready to fall apart in a matter of seconds. “Now it’s my turn to make you come alive,” he says against my skin as he ghosts his lips over it. His lips randomly land, leaving wet kisses as he moves over me. Starting at my collar bone, he makes his way across my chest, between my breasts as a hand slips behind me to flick the clasp of my bra open and then off my body. I vaguely hear it hit the floor just as he sucks one nipple between his lips. My back arches off the bed as he expertly rolls my nipples, one between his teeth and the other between his fingertips. The dual stimulation has my center pulsing, and he hasn’t even touched me down south.

“You like that?” He chuckles against my skin as I arch into his touch, seeking out more each time he even slightly moves. My body is on fire, and he’s the only extinguisher that will put my fire out.

“Yes, but I need you to move a little further south,” I tell him, encouraging him to move things along. I’m desperate here for some friction where I want it most.

“I’ll get there, just hold your horses,” he tells me. “I’ll make this good for you, don’t worry,” he says, just before he sucks the other nipple into his mouth. The amount of pent-up sexual frustration now is going to make my release all that more powerful and sweet.

He moves on from my breasts, down my torso as he alternates between leaving love bites and open kisses along my heated skin. When he reaches the elastic of my thong, he doesn’t hesitate, just pulls it to the side, exposing me to him. Thank god I had the foresight to trim things up this morning in the shower.

“God damn, you’re sweet,” he tells me as he runs his tongue up my center. “You taste just as good as you smell.” I about come unglued as his tongue travels up my slit again before latching on to my clit. He flicks it with the tip of his tongue before sucking it hard into his mouth, then back to circling with his tongue. The direct attention on my clit has my body, once again, ready to come completely undone. My orgasm hits me hard and fast. I clamp my legs around John’s neck, holding him against me as I come hard.

I vaguely register John’s moving body as I enjoy the endorphin release that is flooding my bloodstream right about now. I hear what sounds like a condom packet being torn open then feel the tug against my skin of my thong being pulled from my body.

“Are you still good with this?” he asks, aligning both of our bodies up, his lips hovering just above my own.

“Of course, I am.” I pull his lips to mine just as he pushes inside of me for the first time. “Fuck!” I cry out as his cock fills me. It’s been a little while since I’ve been with someone, and the last guy definitely wasn’t this well-endowed.

“Shit, am I hurting you?” he questions, attempting to pull out.

“I just need to adjust for a second,” I tell him, holding him still as my body adjusts to the size of his cock.

He must feel my body start to relax as he slowly moves, starting with small rolls of his hips. He slowly builds his thrusts until we have the entire bed rocking with us as he pounds into me hard and fast. His thumb finds my clit, and the onslaught of his cock hitting me just right with each thrust, coupled with the pressure from his thumb, and he has me cresting over the edge with my second orgasm. I come hard, probably the hardest I’ve ever come in my life. If this is what sex is like with John all the time, then I’m in for some fantastic orgasms in my future, hopefully.

“Yes, baby. Come all over my cock,” I hear him grit out as he continues to thrust through my orgasm. I feel as he starts to lose his own grip. One last thrust and he’s buried so deep

inside me as his orgasm barrels out of him. He collapses onto me, pinning me to the bed as he comes hard. He shakes as he attempts to suck in air—our sweat-slicked bodies aligned as if we were created to perfectly fit together.

“You good?” he sweetly asks a moment later when he rolls off me. I immediately miss the fullness of his cock inside of me.

“Never been better,” I whisper back to him, causing him to chuckle. He shakes the bed as he erupts into a full-on belly laugh.

“You know how to stroke a man’s ego,” he finally gets out.

“I know how to stroke something,” I tease right back, loving this easy banter we’ve found between the two of us. I reach out and find his cock still semi-hard. I have no clue when he removed the condom, but it’s gone. I lazily stroke him as we lay here, still sweaty and languid.

“You’ve got to give me at least twenty to rebound. I’m not a spring chicken anymore,” he tells me, grabbing my hand to stop my strokes. “You’re going to kill me if you rush things.”

“You’re not that old.” I laugh and poke him in the chest as I sit up and then straddle him. His cocks slips through my folds, hitting my clit and strumming my body right back to being ready to go again. John runs his big calloused hands up my legs and torso, stopping to cup my breasts in them. I lean forward, boxing him in on the bed.

“You’re so beautiful,” he says against my skin just before he sucks a nipple into his mouth—my back arches, pushing my chest into him as he lavishes my breasts. I pull him off my breast and capture his lips with my own. We make out like we are teenagers, exploring every inch of each other’s bodies in the process.

Chapter Seven

JOHNATHAN

“Do you want to stay the night?” I roll over and ask Jill as I pull her back against my side. I just made her come again while buried deep inside her. I don’t think I can move until morning after the last few hours we’ve had in this bed.

“I didn’t have any plans of leaving now, unless you’re kicking me out.” I can hear the question in her statement.

“Definitely not kicking you out,” I assure her, dropping a kiss to the crown of her head.

She snuggles in a little tighter and I spoon around her, holding her as close as I can possibly get her before sleep finally claims the both of us.

I wake up, a shriek of some foreign alarm going off somewhere in my condo.

“What the fuck is that?” I groggily ask as Jill stirs next to me.

“Crap, what time is it?” she asks, jumping out of bed. I look at my nightstand and the clock reads seven-forty-five. “I’m going to be late for work,” she says, running out of the room, still naked from last night, in search of her phone.

“Hello,” I hear her say a little frantically. “I’ll be there as soon as I can, I overslept.”

I slide out of bed, stretching my well-used muscles. I snag a clean pair of boxers from my dresser along with a pair of basketball shorts. I have both on when she comes back in the

room, frantically looking around for her clothes from last night.

“I can’t believe I didn’t set an alarm last night,” she says under her breath as she almost falls over trying to pull on her thong.

“Slow down, rushing and hurting yourself isn’t going to get you to the office any faster. Go take a shower and I’ll make you some coffee and a quick breakfast that you can take with you. It will make you feel better.”

“I don’t know,” she starts to say, worrying that bottom lip between her teeth. I close the distance between us, cupping her cheek and pulling that lip from her grasp.

“Trust me, you’ll feel better once you’re clean and refreshed. I’m sure I’ve got a spare toothbrush around, as well, and I’ve even got some girly shampoo around for when my sister visits.”

“Okay. And actually, would you be willing to run down to my car? I packed an overnight bag, just never got the chance to go grab it, so I have clean clothes and my things with me.”

“Sure can,” I tell her, dropping a chaste kiss on her lips. I can already see the stress leaving her body. She turns and heads for my bathroom and I pull on a T-shirt and slip on some sandals to run out to her car. I grab her keys from the counter where she set them down last night. I easily find her car and the bag sitting on her front passenger seat.

Once back up in my condo, I drop the bag on my bed then head to the bathroom, knocking twice on the door before I just barge in. I might have been inside Jill multiple times last night, but that doesn’t mean I have the right to just walk in on her.

“Come in,” I hear her call out. I open the door and a billow of steam hits me in the face.

“Are you going to burn your skin off in there?” I tease her.

“Nope, but I do have to say, you have an amazing shower.”

“It is pretty sweet,” I agree with her. “Do you need anything from your bag in here?” I remember to ask, seeing as

that is why I came in here while she's wet and naked in my shower without me. I know I have to stay out, seeing as she's already late and I told her I'd make her something to take with her to eat on the way to work.

"Just inside my bag is a toiletries bag, can you set that on the counter for me please?"

"Sure, and any requests for food?"

"Nope," she answers over the sounds of water rushing off her body and hitting the tile floor.

I do as she asked and set the bag on the bathroom counter before I make my way out to the kitchen. I pull out a small skillet and make some eggs that I can fold up to place on a breakfast sandwich. I heat up a few slices of ham, adding both, along with some cheese to a bagel to round everything out.

Just as I'm finishing assembling the bagel sandwich, the coffee pot stops brewing, so I pull out a to-go mug, filling it most of the way up. Realizing I don't exactly know how she takes her coffee, I leave room in case she needs it for creamer.

I head into the bedroom, stopping at the door frame as I watch Jill pull on her scrubs. They aren't the normal boxy, one size fits most, like you see nurses and doctors in hospitals wearing, but these ones are a little more form fitting and have her company's logo embroidered above the left breast. She's beautiful in anything I've seen her wear, and that includes her scrubs. She's got on minimal makeup and her dark hair is pulled back up and out of her face.

"I've got a bagel sandwich ready, as well as a mug of coffee. I didn't know if you'd want cream, so there's room for that if you need it."

"You're a lifesaver. Thank you. And you were right, I feel human again now that I've showered," she says, closing the distance between us. She pushes up on her toes when she reaches me, dropping a quick peck on my lips. I snake an arm around her waist, pulling her against me for a little deeper kiss.

"I've got to go," she says, pushing against my chest and reminding me that we can't make this a lazy morning.

“Right, have a good day. Call me later?” I ask her as she grabs the creamer I left out and adds some to the mug before placing the lid on it. She grabs her purse, keys, coffee and bagel as she heads for the door.

“Of course! You have a good day, too, and I want to hear how your call goes with your agent.”

With Jill off to work, I head in and take my own shower before making breakfast for myself. With those things out of the way, I get to work on my main task of the day and that’s getting these hard conversations finished.

Now that it’s mid-morning, I pull out my phone, tapping my agent’s contact. The phone rings a few times before his deep voice comes across the line.

“Johnathan,” Greg greets me. “I was wondering when I’d hear from you again.”

“It was time,” I agree with him.

“So, how’d things go the other day?” he asks, since he knew I was seeing Dr. Price again.

“Not the news I wanted to hear and because of that, I’m retiring,” I tell him, and feeling good about the decision. I think this is the first time I’ve said those words and genuinely felt like it was the best decision.

“I’d anticipated that might happen,” Greg states. “I’ll give Laura Erickson-Lee and Daniel Johnston a call and let them both know. Are you available today if either of them wants to meet in person?” he asks, referring to the owner and general manager, respectively, of the Eagles organization.

“I am, or anytime this week, really,” I tell him.

“Sounds good, let me give them a call and I’ll get back to you, don’t go far from your phone.”

I hang up with Greg and actually feel lighter now that the first call of many is done and over with. My phone buzzes in my hand, and I expect it to be Greg, but see my sister’s face pop up on the screen requesting a FaceTime call, so I hit the accept button and hold the phone up.

“Uncle J!” Mason yells when the call connects and he sees my face.

“Hey, buddy, what’s going on?”

“See my new truck?” he exclaims, holding up a little mini truck to the camera. I can only see one of the tires because he’s blocking most of it with his chubby hand.

“That’s awesome, who got you that?” I ask him.

“Nana did,” he tells me, referring to Stephanie’s mom.

“That was nice of her,” I tell him as he wiggles and shakes the phone all around. I have to look away as the constant movement can make me feel sick at times. “What’s Mom up to?” I ask, referring to my sister. To help differentiate between his two moms, Cindi is Mom and Stephanie is Mama.

“She’s makin’ me some lunch,” he tells me as he starts to climb up on a chair at their kitchen counter. He sets the phone down, probably in a little holder they have, as it no longer shakes, and I can see him fully.

“Nice, think she’d make me some lunch?” I ask my nephew.

“You’s too far away, silly,” he tells me.

“I guess you’re right, I’ll just have to make my own lunch. What are you having?”

“Grilled cheese and soup, the red kind!” he exclaims.

“Tomato soup!” I hear Cindi call out in the background.

“Omato soup,” Mason repeats, missing the t at the beginning.

“Sounds like a yummy lunch,” I tell him. “Think I can talk to Mom now?” I ask him and he obliges and turns the phone around so I can see my sister as she stands at the counter making food. “Hey, sis.”

“How’s your day going?” she asks. “You called Greg yet?”

“I actually just got off the phone with him not even a minute before Mason called. He was expecting my call and

was already prepared for me to deliver the news that I did. Said that he'd get the ball rolling and would call me back shortly once he'd contacted the team."

"I'm glad that you've started the ball rolling, so to speak."

"I'm finally coming to terms with everything, I think. While I haven't found a counselor yet to talk to, I talked to Richard and Madison yesterday for a few hours and with Jill last night. She's had some good perspective and ideas for me."

"Sounds like things might be getting serious between the two of you?" she questions.

"Maybe. I took her out the other night on a date and then she came over last night and I cooked for her. Things got heated and she ended up here for the night," I tell my sister without telling her everything about last night. We don't have many secrets, but I also don't feel the need to tell her all the details. I'm sure she can read between the lines.

"I'm glad that it appears to be working out for the two of you then. I look forward to meeting her if things continue to progress."

"Don't be getting ahead of yourself now. We've been on two dates, if you call me cooking for her a date."

"And spent the night together," she sing-songs.

"Why do I tell you these things?" I groan.

"Because I'm your best friend and you can't keep secrets from me," she states matter-of-factly.

"I guess. But just chill about it, okay. It's new and, yeah, it's something that I'm hoping evolves into more than a few nights wrapped up in one another, and that's something that I'm not used to. So, I'm proceeding with caution. I'm also about to become unemployed, so not sure how appealing that would be to someone."

"Please, like you need to work a day again in your life with the contracts you were lucky enough to get over the years."

"That's beside the point."

“Hold on a minute,” Cindi says as she steps away from the camera. I can hear her in the background getting Mason set up with his lunch, probably at their kitchen table. “Okay, I’m back. Now, this Jill girl, she’s obviously nice since you’ve taken her out on a date, and you’ve known her for a few months now. Is she after you because of your bank account balance or the fact that you played a sport for a living?”

“Nope, definitely not a puck bunny. And I’ve never gotten the feeling from her that what I’ve done for a living is something that puts me up on a pedestal like it does for some people. She’s pretty amazing, Cin. A little young, if anything. But she’s got determination and drive. She started her own business almost right after college and it’s a successful business at that. She’s big on giving back and charity functions. That’s one of the ways we first met. Her best friend is Beckett’s girlfriend, so she’s been around hockey players for a long time.”

“She sounds amazing and I hope that things work out. You seem a little smitten. And there’s nothing wrong with a little age gap. If it doesn’t bother the two of you, then no one else should have a say in things. If she’s been out of college for a few years and has a successful business, she can’t be that much younger than you.”

“I think she’s around twenty-five, so ten years,” I tell her. I should probably ask her just how old she is one of these days. “I joked with her last night that I was an old man compared to her, but she didn’t seem to agree.”

“Aww. My baby brother is growing up. About damn time you do that. I need you to hurry up and settle down so you can make me an auntie. I’ve been nice and made you an uncle, it’s about time you repaid the favor.”

“Slow your roll,” I laugh at my sister. “Remember, we’ve been on, like, two dates. T-W-O.” I spell out the word and hold up two fingers to the camera. “I’m not ready to be popping no questions and walking down aisles or having the stork arrive on my doorstep. Give us some time before you start planning all that.”

“Fine. But I’m calling it now. In all your thirty-five years, I’ve never seen you so gaga over a girl, so I think this one already has you tied up, even if you’re not able or willing to see it just yet. The fact that you invited her over and cooked for her is very telling,” she says as she dips her sandwich into a bowl of soup and then shoves it into her mouth.

“Hey, Greg is calling me back, I’ve got to go. I’ll talk to you later,” I tell her quickly.

“Love you!” she calls out just as I hit the end button and accept Greg’s call.

“Hello,” I greet as I put the phone to my ear.

“Johnathan, I talked to the powers that be and they are available this afternoon at two if that works for you?” he asks.

“I can be there,” I assure him.

“That’s what I already told them, but just wanted to verify with you, first. I’ll meet you there, say ten minutes beforehand. We can go over the standard things that they’ll want to discuss and if there’s any other points you’d like negotiated on.”

“I’ll be there,” I tell him before we hang up.

I grab my keys and wallet and head for my truck. I remember to slide my sunglasses over my eyes before I get outside, keeping me from having any light sensitivity issues today. I really hope it goes away over time, but I’m also prepared if it doesn’t.

I swing in to a local sub shop, picking up a couple sandwiches, chips, pickles and two drinks. I head over to Jill’s building, hoping that she’ll be able to have lunch with me, and if not, hopefully my delivery will help her out today since she was late this morning and I feel a little responsible about that. The thought didn’t even cross my mind last night when we finally fell asleep, well after midnight.

“Hello, can I help you?” a woman behind the front desk asks when I enter the office.

“I was hoping to catch Jill before she left for lunch,” I tell her, flashing her my kindest smile.

“She’s in with a patient but should be done in the next ten minutes. You can have a seat and I’ll let her know you’re here when she comes out.” I don’t miss the once over she gives me.

“Thank you,” I tell her before I take a seat. I set the drink holder down, then the bag filled with the food. I pull out my phone and scroll through some pictures posted on Instagram while I wait. So many of my teammates and friends out doing cool shit during their time off this summer. Beckett and Julia are off in Sweden. She’s meeting his family for the first time as he shows her all around for a few weeks. Their pictures make me want to visit there and see it firsthand. Maybe one day I’ll be able to whisk Jill away for a fun, romantic trip like that.

“Hey, stranger.” Her sweet voice fills the waiting room. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought that you could use some lunch today. A little birdie told me that you had a bit of a rushed morning.”

“That was sweet of you,” she says, closing the distance to stand in front of me. I grab her hips and pull her closer before leaning down to kiss her.

“I’ll let the sweet comment pass if I get to have lunch with you,” I say against her lips.

“Come on back, we can either sit in our tiny-ass break room or go outside and sit at one of the picnic tables.”

“I should be okay with outside, the sun hasn’t bothered me yet,” I tell her, knowing she gave me the option because of that.

“It’s a nice, shaded area, so hopefully that will help.”

“Sounds good,” I say, grabbing the bag of food. Jill grabs the drink carrier and I follow her down a hall, through a door that leads us down another hall with a few open doors off of it. Looking in as we pass by the rooms, I see these are the rooms with her ultrasound machines set up. We also pass by the break room she mentioned and what looks like her office before we

leave through a back door. Once outside, the building has a nice little courtyard area with a few benches and picnic tables for employees of the businesses here in the building to use. We select one that is under a large tree, offering the most shade. We sit down across from one another and I pull everything from the bag.

“I didn’t know what you’d want, so I went safe and got a ham and turkey club and a roast beef. Do you have a preference?” I ask, setting them both out between us along with the wrapped pickles and bags of chips.

“The ham and turkey is great,” she says, reaching for it. “Thank you.” I get a flash of a smile as I hand over the sandwich.

“You’re welcome. I also got pickles and chips.” Her face scrunches up in a disgusted look and makes me laugh at how repulsed she is about one of those things. “What’s wrong?”

“Pickles. Yuck! I can’t even stand the smell of them,” she says, shaking her head, her nose still all scrunched up.

“Noted. I’ll just have to eat both,” I tell her, snagging them and putting them back in the bag. I laugh at how disgusted she is over a pickle, of all things.

“How has your morning gone?” she asks between bites of her sandwich.

“Good, my nephew called me, and we talked for a little while. I also talked to my agent. I’m meeting him at the team offices at two today to have a meeting with the GM and team owner.”

“That’s good, right?” she questions.

“It’s a start. I’m sure they won’t be shocked about the news, hell, my agent told me that he’d been waiting on the call from me all week.”

“Well, I hope everything goes smoothly.”

“I’m sure it will, the family that owns the team, the Ericksons, are a pretty stand-up group of people. The

managing partner, Laura, is actually married to our team captain.”

“Now that you mention it, I remember reading about them. There was a big article on her when she took over as the managing partner when her dad stepped down, right?”

“Yep. She’s worked in the organization’s office for as long as I’ve been with the team, and when David had a heart attack a few years ago, it was time to retire and hand over the reins to Laura. She’s done a pretty great job as the team’s president. Broke some glass ceilings being in her position for a professional sports team, especially one that has had such success in their relatively short existence in the league.”

“That’s so awesome. I love hearing stories about women kicking ass, especially in such male-dominated positions.”

“She’s definitely turned some heads. I think there was some apprehension on her part when she started dating Mark. She was married before and the guy was a total asshole. Mark was traded to us right around the time she got divorced, and he just waited quietly in the wings until she was ready to start dating again and swooped in and they’ve been together ever since. They have a couple kids now. She even went into labor the night we won the cup last year. It was kind of crazy, she was out on the ice with us for the presentation of the cup and her water broke while she stood at center ice. I’ve never seen Mark move so quickly. He had to strip out of all his gear still. Missed most of the celebration that night, but I guess the birth of your daughter is a little more important.”

“Wow, that is pretty cool, but also a crazy place for her to go into labor. I had a patient, once, whose water broke while I was doing an ultrasound to check on the baby and the fluid level. That was an experience.”

“I bet. What did you do?” I ask.

“It was all so surreal. I’d just put the gel on her stomach and set the transducer on top of that. We both heard a little pop sound and she looked at me with the biggest eyes ever. We both looked down and saw the small gush of fluid. Thankfully, this was at her doctor’s office, so I stopped and popped my

head out of the room to get one of the nurses and doctors. They helped her down to the labor and delivery unit to give birth.”

“Amazing,” I say, a little impressed about the situation. We both fall into a comfortable silence as we finish off the remainder of our sandwiches.

“What are your plans after your meeting?” Jill asks once she’s finished her sandwich. She balls up the paper wrapping and sets it aside as she reaches for her drink.

“I don’t really have any. I was kind of hoping this beautiful woman who I had dinner with and the most amazing night last night might want to have dinner with me again tonight.”

“Is that so?” she muses as she plays with her straw. “And what’s in it for the woman?” she asks, looking at me with questioning eyes.

“So many answers to that question, but pretty much anything she’d want.”

“So, dinner and multiple orgasms?” she says, and I about choke on my own tongue.

“Sure,” I cough out. “If that’s what she wants, who am I to disappoint and tell her no.”

“The way I see it is that’s a pretty mutual benefiting night for the both of you.”

“I like the way you think.” I wink at her across the table.

“My only rule is that an alarm gets set tonight. I can’t be late or rushing again tomorrow morning. Cassie would never let me live it down. She was already teasing me all morning. I can only imagine what she’s going to say after I come back from lunch and you leave.”

“She gave me quite the once over when I came in with lunch,” I say with a chuckle.

“She’s very opinionated, but I couldn’t survive without her. She’s a godsend and helps me keep things running smoothly.”

“Sounds like a good person to have on your team.”

“She really is. Even if I do have to remind her sometimes who’s the boss,” Jill says with a laugh.

I look down at my watch and see that it’s almost one. We’ve been outside here for at least forty-five minutes or so. “What time do you need to get back to work?” I ask, picking up the trash from both of our finished sandwiches and placing it all back in the bag.

“I should probably get back inside. I need to finish up on some notes from my last patient before my afternoon ones arrive.”

“Sounds good, I don’t want to keep you longer than you have time for. What time will you be off tonight?”

“I should be done with my last patient by five, and I will try and get out of here by six.”

“Does seven work for dinner, then?” I ask.

“Sure. That gives me time to run home and change. Should I pack an overnight bag?” she asks, the look in her eyes a smoldering fire that tells me she’d undress me right here if she could.

“That’s up to you. Do you want to stay the night? Would it be easier if I came to your place?” I offer.

“Either works. I have a cat, have I ever told you that? Just in case that’s a problem?”

“Not a problem, and why would it be?” I ask.

“I’ve found that most guys don’t like cats, and I dated one guy that was apparently deathly allergic to them, he just didn’t know until about ten minutes after coming over to my place. He ended up having to go to the hospital for the reaction. It was so bad. I never heard from him again after that,” she muses.

“That’s a really shitty way to find out you’re allergic to something.”

“Have you ever seen that movie with Will Smith, the one where he’s the dating guru and he has an allergic reaction while he’s out on the date?”

“I think maybe once,” I tell her.

“It was like that. He swelled up and started having trouble breathing. I freaked out and called an ambulance for him. Since it was only our first date, he didn’t want me to go to the hospital with him. I felt bad about it. But like I said, I never saw him again after that.”

“I think that takes the cake for obscure date experiences. I can’t say that I’ve ever had a date end with someone going to the hospital in an ambulance.”

“I’m glad I can bring something interesting to this relationship,” she says as we start to walk back to the building.

“Thank you for bringing me lunch, it was a nice surprise,” Jill says as we both slow down just before we reach the door to the building.

“Anytime. Plus, I felt bad about this morning.” I brush some of her hair off her shoulder before I slide my hand up her neck. I close the few inches between us and bring my lips down on hers, capturing them in a kiss that I do my damndest to keep PG.

“I should go so that you can get back to work,” I tell her once I’ve stepped back.

“I’ll let you know when I’m leaving work.”

“Sounds good, and how about I swing by and pick you up for dinner, then we can go back to your place so that you’ve got everything you need to make your morning go smoothly.”

“That works for me,” she says as she heads into her building. I toss the trash from lunch, making sure to keep my pickles from the bag before tossing it. I walk around the building and to my truck that is parked in the front lot. I stop and pick up a coffee on my way to the team offices, still arriving a few minutes early. I sit in my truck waiting on Greg to pull in, so I pull my phone out, trying to decide where I want to take Jill for dinner tonight. We’ve already done

Mexican, and of course the meal that I cooked for her last night. I don't really feel like having to be all dressed up for a fancy steakhouse, so maybe one of the brewery pubs will work for tonight. I don't get the vibe from Jill that she'd expect a fancy upscale restaurant every time we go out.

I startle when someone knocks their knuckles on my window. I look out and see Mark Lee standing next to my truck, a shit-eating grin on his face after startling me.

"Hey, man. How's it going?" I ask once I've got the door open.

"It's going. Just brought the kids down to see mommy," he says, hooking his thumb over his shoulder that's pointing to his SUV, where his kids are buckled into their car seats.

"Ah. I'm about to go meet with her myself," I tell him. I'm sure it's only a matter of time before he hears the news, either because of who his wife is or through the media, who will absolutely report on it.

"Good luck. She mentioned she had a meeting this afternoon, just didn't tell me with whom or about what. Confidentiality and all that jazz," he tells me as I hear a kid start to cry from his open window.

"Yeah, and so that you hear it from me and not anyone else, but it's time. I'm hanging up the skates. My scans don't look good, and they don't recommend I return to playing anymore. Said I've already done irreversible damage and any more could be fatal."

"I'm sorry to hear that, JC. I know that isn't the outcome you wanted. We're going to miss you out on the ice. Whoever fills your line spot is going to have some big skates to fill. Let me know if there's anything I can do for you. Once the dust all settles and more of the guys are back in town, let's get together," he says as he opens his door and places a pacifier in his daughter's mouth, which immediately stops her cries.

"I'd like that, and thanks, man," I tell him as we pull each other into a man hug. I smack him on the back before stepping back. I notice Greg's car pulling into the lot. "There's my

agent, so it's time to go face the music. Have fun with the kids," I tell him, pointing back at his SUV.

"Thanks, and good to see you. Don't be a stranger," he calls out as he climbs into the driver's seat. I wave at him as I start to walk over to the sidewalk that leads to the building where I meet up with Greg.

"Ready to get this done with?" he asks, offering his hand to me to shake.

"As ready as I can be," I tell him as we walk into the team offices.

We're shown to a conference room where we go over the terms already laid out in my contract and what the standard injury clause states that is already written in, as well.

Once we've had the chance to go over things, Greg lets them know we're ready to meet. Laura Erickson-Lee, the managing partner, and Daniel Johnston, the team's General Manager join us. We get down to business hashing out how things are going to be handled. In the end, they decide to pay out my contract over the months that are left on it, which is fine by me.

Chapter Eight

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JILL
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“Damn, you clean up nice,” I tell John as he comes out of his room dressed for tonight’s event. Since he’s one of the bachelors up for auction, he decided to dress a little nicer than khakis and a polo. Instead, he’s dressed in slacks and a button down. His slacks look like they’ve been custom made to fit his thick hockey thighs, and thinking more about that, they probably were. My best friend, Julia, who also happens to be engaged to a hockey player, plus her dad, who is also a former player, all have mentioned how they often have to have clothes custom made or tailored because of how strong their legs and asses are from all the hours on the ice.

“Just trying to make sure the bids are high. I wouldn’t want to disappoint whoever wins me tonight.” He winks as he closes the distance between the two of us. I’m still nervous about his conditions on agreeing to being one of the guys up on the stage. I hate the idea that he wants me to spend his money, what if the bids get crazy high?

“Speaking of high bids, what’s my limit? I don’t want to bid too high if someone else is bound and determined to win you out from under me.”

“I’m not really worried about that happening. Just try and keep it under six-figures, how does that sound?” he asks, wrapping an arm around my waist and pulling me flush against him.

“I’m sorry, did you just say six-figures?” I stammer slightly, repeating him.

“Yes.” He shrugs like it’s not a big deal to drop one hundred grand at a charity event. “If it’s more than that, I’d probably have to set up a wire transfer and not put it on my credit card, and that’s just a hassle.”

“I can’t wrap my mind around all of that. You’re sure you’re up for this and okay with that kind of thing?” I ask, needing the reassurance.

“I wouldn’t have agreed to it, nor made the deal with you if I wasn’t. The cause is an important one, the money will do some real good for them, so I think it sounds like the perfect way to make a donation to a reputable charity.”

“I’m already getting nervous about bidding on something more than a few hundred dollars,” I tell him honestly.

“Just have fun with it, and remember that I only want to be leaving with *you*,” he says, cupping my face and dropping a quick kiss on the corner of my mouth. “We need to get out of here if we’re going to make it on time,” he reminds me. I grab my wristlet, tucking my phone inside it, and make sure my ID, debit card, and a few smaller bills are in it.

“Thank you,” I tell John after he opens the door and then helps me climb up into his truck.

“Did I tell you how beautiful you look tonight?” he asks as he leans in to kiss me before closing my door.

“Only about a million times before I kicked you out of the bathroom I was getting ready in,” I remind him. My dress is a light pink, has a semi-open back with a deep V-neck in the front. I love the details of the cross crossed straps that wrap around my torso before tying in the back. It’s sexy and revealing, but also elegant and sophisticated, and perfect for an evening as hot as it is tonight. It doesn’t hurt that it does wonders for the girls, showing them off quite nicely. Something that I don’t miss John’s eyes zeroing in on each time he looks at me.



“You ready?” John asks once we’ve parked.

“Of course, I can’t wait to see how the night goes, but most importantly, I’m excited to see Julia and Beckett! I can’t believe they’re engaged!” My best friend went off to Sweden with her boyfriend and came back as an engaged woman. He was so sweet and contacted me, and I got to watch everything go down thanks to technology, but I haven’t been able to see her since they got back the other day.

We make it inside, and I spot Julia and Beckett across the room and make a beeline directly to them. We wrap each other up in a huge hug, squealing just a little louder than probably socially acceptable in this type of setting. “Let me see it!” I exclaim, pulling back and grabbing her hand to see the rock that Beckett put on her finger.

“I love it!” Julia tells me. “It is perfect, he did so well!”

“He sure did!” I exclaim, holding her hand up and getting a good look. “I’m so happy for the two of you!”

“Thank you. So how are *things*?” she asks, looking behind me to where John is talking to Beckett. My eyes find his and it’s almost surreal how quickly we’ve fallen into this easiness with one another. Ever since that day I ran into him outside of my work and he randomly asked me out that night, we’ve become almost inseparable. We’ve spent every night after I’m done with work together, as well as the weekends.

“Things are good. A whirlwind, but really good,” I tell her honestly. “I’m not sure I even know what’s going on between the two of us, but I’m enjoying whatever it is and plan to let it play out, however that is. For now, we’re just enjoying getting to really know each other,” I tell her.

“I’m sure that getting to know one another is really fun,” she teases me, bumping her shoulder against mine.

“Like you’ve got much room to talk, Miss go on vacation and come back engaged.”

“I know, and it was so damn dreamy. I wish you could have been there in person,” she says.

“I know, but it was so nice that he thought to have me included over FaceTime.”

“It was. Now, I have to ask, will you be my Maid of Honor?”

“Like you even have to ask?” I tell her as I wrap her in another hug. “Have you guys started thinking of dates or locations?”

“Next summer at the earliest, and I think we want to do it in Sweden. Jill, I can’t tell you just how beautiful it was there! If I wouldn’t miss home so much, I could totally move there.”

“You can’t! I need you here!” I tell her, knowing that they would probably never move there.

“It’s obviously not happening anytime soon, but I could see the possibility when Beckett is done with his pro career. Or at least splitting our time between locations for part of the year.”

“That’s so crazy. How was his family?” I ask as we take our seats.

“They were so amazing. His sisters were so fun, his parents and grandparents were some of the sweetest people I’ve ever met. I’m one lucky girl to be marrying into such an amazing family.”

“I’m so happy for the two of you,” I tell her once again. Our attention is pulled to the on-stage speaker and then to the meal that is being served before the fun of the bachelor auction starts. They also have tables set up along the perimeter of the room with silent auction items that people can bid on and take home with them tonight.

“Don’t forget, I go home with *you* tonight,” John reminds me as he presses his lips to mine before it is time for him to go backstage for his turn up on the auction block.

“What’s that all about?” Julia asks, leaning toward me as I watch John walk away.

“He agreed to do this when I asked, but only under the condition that I bid to win him. When I expressed my concern

on not being able to afford that kind of donation, he insisted that he'd pay for it. When I asked him what kind of budget he was thinking, just in case, since I've seen some of these get pretty out of hand, he told me to try and keep it under six-figures," I tell her, still a little shocked at that conversation.

"Well, then. I guess we've got some bidding to do," she tells me, like dropping one hundred thousand dollars at a charity function is a normal everyday thing. I'm over here in my chair sweating over the thought of spending that kind of money when I don't even make that much money in an entire year.

"Don't overanalyze it, just have fun with all of it," Julia tells me as the first bachelor is brought on stage. Some women right next to it go a little crazy, cheering him on. I watch as paddles pop up around the room as the auctioneer starts calling out numbers so fast I can't even understand him.

"What is he even saying?" I ask Julia.

"Good question." She laughs as we both strain to understand him.

A few guys are auctioned off before John steps up on the stage and is introduced. A few cheers go up around the room and my nerves shoot up once again as the auctioneer readies the crowd to start bidding. I'm hopeful that it will only be a few thousand if the other auctions have any telling as to how much people are willing to spend on these types of things.

The bidding starts and almost immediately jumps up to over a thousand dollars before I can even get my damn paddle up. The auctioneer is busy, calling out bids from all over the room. My palms are sweaty, but I keep raising my hand to outbid the other women in the room. The bids finally start to slow down, bouncing between just one other woman and me. She stares me down from a few tables away, the determination on her face to win the date with Johnathan. Little does she know that I'm even more determined.

"We've got fifteen thousand, do we have sixteen thousand," the auctioneer asks, pointing at me. I know that as soon as I say yes that she's just going to accept the next bid.

“Twenty-five thousand!” I call out, shocking everyone in the room, myself included. I don’t know what in the hell came over me to yell that out, but I can’t take it back now.

“We have twenty-five thousand, do we have twenty-six thousand from the woman at table three?” the auctioneer asks, turning his attention to the other woman. She glares at me from her place and then sits down in her seat, obviously a little pissed off that I beat her out.

“Twenty-five thousand, going once-twice-sold to bidder number twenty-seven,” they call out and I fall back into my seat, the room suddenly spinning around me as the realization of what I just did sinks in. I really hope that John isn’t mad about my outburst and spending so much of his money.

“That was awesome!” Julia says as the auction moves on. “You were a badass the way you took control and won your man!”

I grab my glass of wine, chugging what is left in it. “I still can’t believe I just spent twenty-five thousand dollars of someone else’s money like it was nothing,” I tell her.

“Yeah, but he told you to and it’s for a good cause.”

“That was awesome,” John’s voice pulls me from my daze as he sits back down next to me.

“You’re not mad?” I ask, almost scared to look at him.

“Mad? Hell no,” he tells me, tugging on my chair to get me to turn and face him, “I might be a little turned on by how take charge you were.” He whispers so only I can hear him. “That was hot, babe,” he tells me before kissing me on the lips. The stress from the last ten minutes melts away knowing that he really is okay with it.

Chapter Nine

JOHNATHAN

Standing on the stage as the auctioneer called out bids as paddles were constantly popping up around the room was a bit crazy to watch. I kept my eyes on Jill, making sure she kept her end of our little agreement. I've known a few other guys who've participated in events like this and had their girlfriends do the exact same thing. Kept them from having an awkward date with someone they don't know, but the charity still got the benefit of the donation.

I knew the amount of the bids were starting to make Jill worry, so when she stood up and shouted out twenty-five grand, my chin about hit the ground. I loved every second of her doing it, and damn if her determination wasn't sexy as all get out.

"Are you ready to get out of here?" I ask Jill as the event starts to wind down. We've mingled and done our part to support the charity. Now I want to take my girl home and watch as her dress hits the floor. Not that it doesn't look smoking hot on her, but I think it will look even better on my bedroom floor.

"Yes, let me just say goodbye to Julia and Beckett," she says. We make our way over to where they're talking with a few other attendees.

"Good seeing you," Beckett says, offering his hand for me to shake. We became pretty good friends over this last season. First, with him moving in with me for a while, and then, just from being teammates. He's one damn good goalie and the Eagles organization is lucky to have signed him. He'll

definitely be a good asset to the team for many seasons to come.

“You too, I’m sure we’ll see each other around sooner than later,” I tell him. If things keep going the way they are between Jill and I, I can foresee many double dates and hanging out together happening

“Yeah, things are going good between the two of you?” he asks.

“Yeah, we’re enjoying one another. Things are getting semi-serious at this point. We’re probably more in the serious category ,” I tell him. I know he fought his attraction to Julia for a few months, mainly because her dad is his goalie coach and he didn’t think he’d approve. I’m guessing he got over that fear considering he proposed a few days ago and she said yes.

“Well, good luck with that,” he muses, smacking me on the back as we watch the girls hug goodbye.

“Thanks,” I call out over my shoulder to him as I step forward, accepting Jill’s outstretched hand. I link our fingers together and let her lead me through the crowd and out to the parking lot. Once at my truck, I hit the unlock button on the key fob in my pocket, but before I open the passenger door, I back Jill against it, boxing her in with my body.

I drop my lips to her neck, finding her pulse pounding against my touch. “This dress has had me half hard all night,” I say before I lightly suck on her neck, leaving the lightest mark possible. “I’ve wanted to strip you out of it since you first put it on all those hours ago,” I say, skimming my lips up the column of her exposed neck and along her jaw. I ghost along her cheek until my lips find hers. I press my hard body into hers, my cock aching as it swells against my zipper and her belly. “Are you ready for me to take you home and fuck you? Maybe on the counter, or against the wall?” I whisper into her ear as I grind my pelvis against hers. A moan escaped her lips, followed by a gasp as her own hips rotated into mine.

“Yes,” Jill moans into my neck. My cock twitches again from her breath hitting my skin. I back up, pulling her with me

so that I can open the truck door and help her up into it. Once she's secure, I quickly make my way around the front and hop into the driver seat.

I don't think I abide by any posted speed limit sign as I drive us back to my place. With one hand on the steering wheel, my right one finds a place on her thigh. The way the slit in her dress falls, it exposes her leg fully to me. I have to keep myself from letting my hand drift too high while I'm driving. I don't need to crash into anything and really mess up my plans for the rest of the night.

"Race you upstairs." Jill smiles over at me. Her hand is already posed on the door handle as I park in my assigned garage spot.

"You sure about that?" I ask, a smirk pulling at the corners of my mouth.

"It's on!" she calls as she jumps down and takes off for the elevator. I quickly catch up to her, sliding my arm around her waist as I pull her flush against my front. My cock rubs against her ass and lower back as I splay my hand across her belly. Thank fuck the elevator doors slide open at that moment and it arrives empty. We walk in together, still fully touching. I hit the button for my floor, then turn my attention back to Jill. She watches me in the reflection of the metal wall. I push her hair off one shoulder then lower my lips to the newly exposed skin. I trail my lips from her shoulder, up her neck, alternating between sucking, nipping, and kissing the skin as I go along. I suck her earlobe between my lips, grazing my teeth along it. I can feel her body tense with each one of my movements. Her skin puckers with goose bumps as I work my way around it, teasing and building her up.

The doors slide open behind me. I quickly spin Jill around, lifting her up and into my arms in one quick movement.

"John!" she shrieks as I walk as quickly as I can down the hall and to my door.

"Pull the keys from my pocket," I tell her, and feel as her hand snakes down and slips into my pocket, pulling them out. She slides the key into the lock, and I swear they are the

longest fucking seconds of my entire life. Longer than the last ten seconds before the final buzzer the multiple times I've won the Stanley Cup, longer than it takes my slapshot to make it from the top of the zone into the back of the net. "Come on, woman, open the damn door," I practically growl as she turns the lock.

"You need to be patient," she teases me as the door swings open. I carry her over the threshold, kicking the door closed behind me. I spin around, locking the deadbolt and pinning Jill up against the door. I let her slide down my body, making sure she feels every single inch of my hardness as she does.

"I'll teach you patience," I tell her as my lips connect with her skin. She's not going to know what hit her by the time I let her come tonight.

With one hand, I gather both of hers, pinning them to the door above her head. I trail my lips down her neck, across her collar bone and down the V-neck of her dress, not skipping an inch of her exposed skin. "You can move your hands, but no touching me," I command as I remove my hand from her wrists. I use my hand to untie the halter portion of her dress, watching as it drops and exposes her lace-covered breasts. Her nipples are hard and pebbled against the fabric, the dusty color showing easily through the pale pink bra. I brush my tongue over one nipple, loving the friction the lace helps create. I can feel it harden against my tongue as I flick back and forth over it. I switch to the other one, paying it the same attention as moans start to fall from Jill's lips. Her hands come up to touch my face, but just before she makes contact, her hands jerk back, balling into fists as she brings them back to her sides. "Good girl," I praise her.

I reach behind her, finding the zipper and tugging it down. I help by placing her hand on my shoulder to steady herself as the dress falls from her body and she steps out of it. I toss it aside and take my fill of her sexy as fuck body. I reach down, adjusting my cock so it doesn't dig into the zipper of my slacks. My cock might not like it, but he's gonna have to wait. I've got some teasing and an orgasm or two to deliver before he gets to be the star of this show.

“Hands back on the wall,” I tell Jill, looking up at her from my position on my knees in front of her. The power play that is going on between the two of us in this moment is a fucking turn on. I watch carefully as she does as I’ve instructed. She’s standing in front of me in nothing but a lace bra and matching thong and some fuck-me heels that I hope are digging into my ass in a little while. “Are you ready to have your world rocked?” I ask, brushing my thumb lightly over her mound. I don’t press it directly on her clit and that has her body aching for me to do so.

“Yes,” she moans a little breathily.

I replace my thumb with my mouth, kissing her mound through the scrap of fabric that covers her. I slip a finger beneath, tugging it out of my way. My tongue traces her slit. She’s already so fucking wet and ready for me. I blow lightly against where my tongue just traced and watch as her body shudders from the cold air. I slide forward a little then hook one of her legs over my shoulder. With her open to me, I feast on her pussy. I lap at her before finally sucking her clit into my mouth and lashing at it with my tongue. Her cries of pleasure fill my ears as I slide two fingers deep inside her, finding her G-spot as my tongue works her clit. I know her body is about to crest over the edge, I can feel it start to flutter around my fingers, so I back off, releasing her clit and pulling my fingers back.

“Fuck, John!” she cries, her fingers digging into my scalp as she tries to move my mouth back to where she wants it.

“Patience, baby,” I remind her. “Hands back on the wall,” I instruct, and it takes her a few seconds to do as I’ve said. “How attached to this thong are you?” I ask her, running my fingertips along the top edge.

“What?” she asks, obviously my question has thrown her off.

“How attached to this thong are you?” I ask again.

“I don’t know, not really, I guess,” she says and that’s all I need to know. I’ll buy her ten new ones if she wants. I grip the

fabric in my fist and pull. It rips at one of the seams, just like I knew it would.

“Holy shit that was hot,” she tells me as she looks down, our eyes locking once more.

With her panties out of my way, I return to playing and teasing her pussy. My fingers circle her clit as I bring my tongue to her opening, lapping at it as I build her back up. It doesn't take nearly as long this time to bring her to the edge of orgasm. I back off a second time, her dismay not lost on me. This time, I stand, shucking my own clothes as quickly as possible. I open my wallet, pulling out the condom I stashed in it just the other day. I roll the latex down my cock, giving it a few strokes once on.

“This is going to be hard and fast,” I warn Jill as I line my cock up with her entrance.

“Yes!” she cries as I thrust inside, pinning her against the door. I thrust as hard and fast as I can. Her pussy instantly starts to flutter and squeeze my cock as her orgasm barrels through her body. I piston my hips through it, milking her of everything I can get. I crash my lips against hers, sucking her tongue hard against my own as my hips smack relentlessly against hers. I swallow her cries of pleasure with each thrust. I can feel my own orgasm start to build. The tingle at the base of my spine that quickly makes its way down and into my balls as they smack against her ass with each thrust.

“Come again with me,” I say, nipping at her lips as I thrust my hips one last time. I groan her name as my orgasm hits me full on, triggering her body to spasm with mine. I don't know how I manage to stay standing, especially with holding all of her weight along with mine. My legs are shaking by the time I stop filling the condom with my release. Because of the weird angle, I slip from her pussy much sooner than I would have preferred. Jill's sated body slides down mine, until her feet find the floor. Once I'm convinced she's got her feet under her, I step back, sliding the condom off and tying it so I can toss it in the trash.

“That was incredible,” she tells me when I’ve returned from tossing the condom.

“I’d have to agree. Shower with me now?” I ask, sliding my hand around her side, resting my palm against her lower back and I press her mostly naked torso against my own naked body.

“Sure,” she agrees. I lead her into my room and to the edge of the bed where I motion for her to sit. I sink down and remove her fuck-me heels, then remove her bra, the only two pieces of clothing that managed to stay on during our tryst just now.

“Okay, now we can shower,” I tell her, pulling her back up and into the bathroom. I start the water, making sure it is turned up nice and hot like she likes before we both step under the spray.



“Did you have fun tonight?” I ask once we both slide into bed. Jill is lying with her head on my chest, our legs intertwined together, and I have my fingers running through her hair. We’ve easily found comfort in one another these last couple of weeks, finding mutual pleasure in one another’s bodies, but what I find myself craving the most is our conversations that follow the sex. I find them more intimate than the sex can ever be.

“I did. Thank you for being my date.”

“Of course, you make it pretty easy to be by your side,” I tell her, dropping a kiss to the top of her head. We lay here for a few minutes, the silence not awkward at all. Jill runs her fingertips over the ridges and valleys of my muscles. They occasionally twitch under her touch, which draws the cutest little giggles from her lips when it happens.

“Can I ask you a question?” she asks, shifting so that she can look up at me.

“Of course, you can ask me anything,” I assure her.

“I know we’ve just been enjoying one another, seeing how things were going to play out here,” she says, and I’m not quite sure where she’s going with this. I start to internally panic that she’s going to tell me that she doesn’t want to keep seeing one another.

“Yeah,” I say, trying to encourage her to finish her train of thought and get to her question.

“I thought that I could do the casual thing, but I don’t think I can. The thought of you seeing someone else doesn’t sit well with me. Not that you’d really have time to, seeing how we’ve practically been attached to one another for the last couple of weeks. I need to know that you want the same, I don’t want things to end.” As soon as those last six words leave her lips, my heart soars and I realize that I want this woman more than I knew I could want anyone.

“Thank fuck,” I grit out. “I don’t want anyone else but you. And I sure as shit won’t share you with another man,” I tell her, pulling her to straddle my lap. I sit up until I can lean my back against the headboard and we’re sitting face to face. I cup her cheeks in my large hands, pulling her the rest of the way into me until I can press my lips against hers. My cock twitches between us and I can feel her body starting to respond.

Jill pulls away from the kiss, a blissful look on her face. Her lips are slightly swollen from all the kissing we’ve done tonight, and her skin has a pinkish tint to it. She sucks her bottom lip between her teeth, sawing at it with them. I can tell something else is on her mind, I just don’t know what exactly it might be. “What’s got you thinking so hard?” I ask, running my thumb across her bottom lip, pulling it from her teeth. “I should be the only one biting this lip,” I say as I lean forward and nip at it.

“I know we just had the exclusivity talk, like, ten seconds ago,” she pauses, almost pulling that lip back in, but stopping herself.

“And,” I motion for her to continue with a roll of my hand between us. She’s sitting up straight with about eight or so

inches between our torsos now.

“Are you clean?” she finally blurts out.

“Clean?” I repeat before I let what she just asked fully sink in. “Yes,” I follow up. “My last physical, all tests came back with a clean bill of health, plus, I’ve always been safe and used a condom with anyone I’ve been with, why? Is something wrong?”

She shakes her head as a small smile pulls at the corner of her lips. “I just wanted you to know I’d be okay with us forgoing condoms if you were comfortable with that idea. I’ve been on birth control for years, have never gone without a condom, either, and just thought that I’d throw the idea out in the open. If you aren’t comfortable with it, that’s fine, I just —” I cut her off, slamming my lips down on hers. I’ve never once, in my thirty-five years, had sex without a condom on, so the thought has my cock hardening between us.

“You sure?” I ask her once we break apart.

“I wouldn’t have said all of that word vomit if I wasn’t,” she says, laughing.

I let my fingers trail down her exposed chest, loving how it always puckers under my touch. I slip my hand between us, feeling how ready she is for me. Without me even saying anything, she lifts up a few inches and grabs my hard cock. The tip slips through her wet folds and I don’t know how I’m going to last more than a few pumps if being inside her bare feels anywhere near as good as that just did.

“Fuck, that feels good, baby,” I tell her as she teases both of us. My eyes just about cross when she lines me up with her entrance and slowly sinks down on me. My cock disappears, inch by excruciating inch, until her ass is seated against my thighs once again.

“Oh my god,” Jill moans as she rotates her hips. I can feel as her clit presses against me and she grinds forward.

I grab a hold of her hips, sliding down the bed slightly to give myself the ability to thrust up into her. I hold on tight, start with a few slow, drawn out thrusts that allow both of us to

feel every inch of my cock sliding out and back in. I can't take the slowness any longer, my hips now thrusting as fast and hard as I can muster up. The cries of pleasure that fall from both of our lips fill the room as we both chase our release. The warmth and tightness that grips my cock is like nothing else I've ever experienced. Having sex without a condom is almost night and day different. I can't believe I've gone this long without it ever happening.

"I need you there," I grit out, trying to work a hand in between us so I can rub her clit. It's not the easiest with our current position, so I slow down and slip out so we can reposition.

"Why'd you stop?" she pouts.

"Because I want you like this," I tell her, flipping her onto her back and pulling her right to the edge of the bed. I stand, wrap her legs around my torso as I grab my cock, and slip it back through her folds, rubbing my tip against her clit.

"Yes!" she cries out with the direct contact. I lean forward, capturing her lips and swallowing her cries as I thrust back inside her pussy. I don't build anything back up, I just start thrusting hard and fast. My thumb finds her clit, rubbing circles around it until I feel her body start to flutter around my cock. Feeling that bare for the first time has me losing control. My orgasm barrels through me, and I bury my cock as deep as I can get it as I release every last drop I can. Jill's fingers scrape my scalp as she tugs on my hair. The sensation has chills running down my back, and I can feel her orgasm all the way in my balls as they rest against her ass.

"Fuck, that was," I say into her neck as I suck in much needed air.

"Incredible," she finishes the thought for me.

"That's one way to describe it," I say on a chuckle. "Life changing," I tell her as she flexes her muscles, causing them to squeeze my cock. "Fuuuck," I groan.

"You like that?" she asks, doing it again and laughing at my reaction.

“Yeah, we’re going to have to do this again,” I tell her, leaning down and sucking a pebbled nipple into my mouth for just a second. “Only problem is we’re going to have a mess on our hands, or rather bedsheets,” I tell her as I look around for anything I can use to give her before I pull out.

“Yeah, we didn’t really think that one through, did we?”

“Nope,” I say, kissing the tip of her nose.

“On the count of three, you pull out and I’ll jump up. Hopefully that will keep us from having a wet spot.”

“Okay, one...two...three,” I count, doing just as she said. Unfortunately, we didn’t say who was going left or right. We both go the same way, ending up a tangled mess as we fall back on the bed together.

“Dammit,” Jill laughs. “So much for no wet spot.”

“We can change the sheets and be better prepared for next time.”

“Sounds like a plan,” she tells me, planting a kiss on my lips before she pushes me out of the way and makes her way to the bathroom. I watch as she walks away, the sexy way her hips sway as she walks. The confidence she has being completely naked around me is such a turn on. I’ve been with women who had no self-confidence, wouldn’t allow the lights to be on, or didn’t want to be completely naked. Jill isn’t that way at all and that confidence is definitely sexy.

Chapter Ten

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JILL
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Three months later

“Hey, babe.” I lean down, kissing John as he sits on the couch. Walter is curled up on his lap purring away. Thankfully, the two of them have found a liking in one another since we started dating. I wasn’t so sure the first few times they were around one another as Walter can be picky about who he likes and dislikes. “How was your appointment?” I ask, scratching Walter’s head.

“No changes to the scans,” he answers, the aggravation noticeable in his voice. I knew he was stressed out about his checkup today and I offered to go with him, but he insisted that I didn’t need to.

“That’s good!”

“I guess.”

“What’s wrong, babe?” I ask, sitting down on the coffee table so I can face him.

“Don’t worry about it, just having a bad day and I don’t want to take it out on you,” he tells me. He cups my cheek, rubbing his thumb along my lips. I’ve noticed the last week or so he’s been a little more irritable. I have a small inkling that it has to do with the fact that the regular hockey season started back this week. Tonight is the home opener, one that we’re supposed to be leaving for soon.

“It’s bothering you that you aren’t getting ready to hit the ice tonight, isn’t it?” I ask.

“Yeah,” he admits, hanging his head down.

“John,” I say, linking my fingers with his and squeezing them to get his attention. I wait him out until he looks at me. “It’s okay to be mad, it’s okay to be hurting and upset that something that was your entire life has been taken away from you. All of those feelings are valid, and no one would think twice about you having them.” This is one of the reasons I really wish he’d find a counselor to go talk to. I think that they could help him through these kinds of days.

“I know, it still doesn’t change the fact that it fucking sucks I’m not at the rink right now, stretching in the back halls. Kicking a soccer ball around with the guys or getting stretched out by one of the trainers. That was my life for the last thirty years. I’m not just going to get over it in a matter of weeks,” he grits out. He’s getting pissed, but also trying to hold it back.

“I understand that,” I tell him, trying my damndest to sympathize with him. I can’t even begin to understand what it’s like to go through a career-ending injury and to have your entire life change in the matter of seconds. “Did you still want to go to the game tonight?” I ask, not really knowing what would be best for him. To be in that environment and not being able to participate, or staying away but knowing that it is going on without him.”

“I think I’ll hate myself in the morning if I don’t go. My boys need my support. I also think it might help turn my shitty mood around if I can see and talk to them. Watch them kick Edmonton’s ass.”

“I think that’s a good choice,” I tell him, squeezing his hand once more. “I’m going to go change and then we can head out, sound good?” I ask him.

We have plans to meet up with Julia at the arena. John talked to the front office and got us passes for the family suite. He didn’t want to deal with fans recognizing him and causing a big scene when all he wants to do is watch the game. I think for tonight’s game, it’s probably the best plan. Going forward, I’m not sure what he’ll want to do.

“Sounds good,” he calls out to me as I head into my bedroom. I pull out the Eagles T-shirt that Julia got me awhile back, along with some jeans and a pair of flats. It’s October, after all, and I’ll be inside an ice rink. It might not be quite fall weather outside yet, but I’m so ready for it to be upon us.

“Damn, baby. That shirt looks good on you.” John whistles when I come out ten minutes later.

“Why, this old thing?” I say nonchalantly. “Just something I had in the back of my closet.”

“You look good. Only thing better would have been my jersey,” he tells me, pulling me in for a full hug. His arms wrap around my entire body as he engulfs me. Something shifted in his mood in the ten minutes I was changing and getting ready for tonight. I’m not sure if it’s the excitement that we’re headed to the rink and he’ll get to see his friends or what, but for now, I’ll take it.

“I can always wear your jersey later,” I tell him as I push up on my toes to kiss him.

“Yes,” he growls against my lips. “Tonight. In bed. You in nothing but my jersey,” he says, punctuating each statement with a kiss.

“Sounds like a plan,” I tell him as I lower back down to my normal height.



“JC! How’s it going, man?” the security guard at the side entrance we’re at asks John as he flashes our tickets to him.

“It’s going, how are you doing? How’s the wife?” he asks the older man.

“Been good, she’s doing okay. Dialysis has been tough on her these last couple of months.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, George. Give Gladys my love and I hope things get easier on her. Are they thinking a transplant will be an option?” he asks George, and I can tell he isn’t just

saying something sympathetic to say it. He really means it and is curious.

“She’s on the list. We just have to wait for a donor to come along. Since we didn’t have any biological kids, and we don’t have many living relatives, the list of people to test wasn’t long. We can still hope for a living donor, but at this point, it is just luck if we find one before it’s too late.”

“I’m sorry that it hasn’t been an easy road,” he offers. “I hope that a donor is found sooner than later,” John tells the man before we fully pass through the door.

“Thanks, have a good time at the game!” he calls after us.

“I’m guessing he’s been working here for a long time?” I ask John as we walk down the hallway. It is practically empty, seeing as how we’re in a limited access area. I’m only used to coming in the main entrance with all the thousands of other fans, having to wait in long lines to do anything, so this is a wee bit different. John leads me to an elevator, pressing the button to go up. The suite that we’re going to is up high, around the top ring of the arena.

“Yes, I think he’s been here since the team was formed.”

Once we’re on the floor with suite access, he leads me to the one marked with the Eagles logo. He flashes a card in front of a sensor and the door opens for us. “That’s pretty slick.”

“Yeah, they updated things years back. Makes it so they don’t have to have someone stationed outside the suites to let people in. Since this is the team’s suite and reserved mainly for the girlfriends, wives and kids of the players, they have full season access, so it just makes sense. I’m not really sure what they do for the ones that aren’t necessarily used for the same people game after game.

“Johnathan.” An older man calls his name from across the room.

“Excuse me, please,” he says, dropping a quick peck on the corner of my mouth. “I need to go talk to Mr. Erickson.”

“Of course,” I tell him, shooing him away. I make a beeline for the bar set up along one wall in the back.

“What can I get you tonight, miss?” the bartender asks.

“7-Up with a splash of cranberry juice if you have it,” I ask, hopeful.

“Of course, coming right up,” he says, filling a cup with ice before adding the 7-Up and cranberry juice.

I pull a twenty out of my pocket, ready to pay him. “What’s the total?” I ask.

“No charge, ma’am. Everything in this suite is provided for the guests, courtesy of the team.”

“Oh, wow. I wasn’t aware of that,” I told him. I drop the twenty I’d taken out for my drink into his tip jar. “That’s really nice of them,” I add as an afterthought.

“Thank you,” he says, nodding his head toward the tip jar as he hands over my drink. “The owners are very family oriented and want all the family members of anyone on the team to be taken care of.”

“Thank you,” I tell him before stepping away. Julia walks through the doors, her face lighting up with a smile as soon as she sees me. She beelines it over to me, stopping right in front of me, and pulls me into a hug.

“I’m so glad to see you here! How’s JC doing?” she asks so only I can hear. I’d confided in her the other day that I thought he was having a hard time these last few days, and she assured me that it was a pretty normal thing for players to go through. Even though her dad retired on his own accord, he still went through a mourning period when the next season rolled around.

“He’s doing,” I tell her as I look over at him. He’s deep in conversation with the older man that he left my side to go talk to. “When I got home from work he was in a mood, didn’t get the news he was hoping for at his appointment today, not that it was bad,” I rush to add so she knows it wasn’t anything bad, just not what he was hoping for.

“That sucks, but kinda what you guys expected, right?” she asks.

“Yeah, as you know, fully recovering from a TBI is pretty rare. At this point, we can just hope that his symptoms don’t worsen over time. If we could keep them as they are, which is manageable, I think he’ll do just fine. We just need to find him something to keep busy with. If he sits around much longer with no real motivation or task to focus on, he’s going to fall into a deep depression.”

“Any more talk about starting a foundation and working with the league on furthering the safety protocols to prevent other guys from suffering a TBI?” she asks.

“I keep encouraging it, but he’s got to take the initiative to actually do it, ya know?”

“Oh, I know. It’s like my patients at work. I can walk them through their PT exercises and work them while they are at their appointment, but if they don’t do the exercises at home, then they’ll recover so much slower. Some just don’t understand that and then get frustrated at me when they aren’t miraculously healed after seeing me two to three hours each week.”

“Hello, ladies.” John’s deep voice startles me slightly. I was no longer paying attention to him talking and didn’t notice that he was headed over to where Julia and I were standing.

“Hey, JC, good to see you,” Julia greets him.

“Nice seeing you, how’s your boy today?” he asks, nodding his head toward the ice.

“He’s pretty excited!” she says, her eyes going wide with her own excitement.

“Is it weird to be here because it’s your fiancé playing and not your dad?” I ask.

“I’ve spent so much time here that I feel at home in this rink. It was a little weird last season when I attended my first game as his girlfriend. The weirdest part was wearing someone else’s jersey. I always cheered for the other guys, so that part wasn’t all that awkward.”

“I can see how that would be weird.”

“How are you holding up, JC?” she asks as he slides his hand into mine, lacing our fingers together. I give him a quick squeeze, just letting him know I’m here for him to lean on whenever he needs me.

“I’m doing okay. Actually, being in here has my spirits up. It’s hard to be down when there is so much anticipation and excitement in the air.”

“That’s great. I hope they pull out the win. Beckett was feeling the pressure to get that win under him to start the season off on the right foot.”

“I’m sure he’ll kick ass, he’s a solid goal tender and he’s got one hell of a coach in his corner,” John tells her. Not only referring to her fiancé, but her dad, since he’s the goalie coach for the organization.

“Sounds like we should take our seats!” I say to both. The announcer just stated who is singing the national anthem for tonight’s game. We make our way down to the seats that are behind large walls of glass. We find three seats together just in time to stand for the anthem to start.

As soon as the singing is done, the ice is cleared. I watch as the players skate around, shaking out limbs of what I can only imagine is pre-game jitters. Even for the most seasoned players, I imagine that the first game of a new season is like a high. New beginnings. A new title to contend and fight for. Once the ceremonial puck is dropped, the game is finally underway. I watch as the guys expertly move up and down the ice. I’ve attended a handful of games over the years with Julia and her family, but for some reason, this game, I’m seeing things with a new light. Maybe it’s because I have John next to me giving me his insight on each play that the guys run, telling me what is going correctly and what’s going wrong.

“I know I don’t know much about all that is going on down there on the ice, but everything you’re telling me sounds like important things the coaches down on the bench would want to know. Are there any positions that look at that kind of thing and feed it to the coaches down on the bench? Even if it

isn't actually during the game, but things that they can work on during practice?"

"There are coaches who focus on every aspect of the game. They use the tapes from the game to break things down to show the guys all of that."

"You'd be good at that," I tell him.

"I think it just comes with the experience. Most guys could sit up here and watch what is happening on the ice and tell you if it's good or bad. We've got these plays so ingrained that we could practically run them blindfolded and in our sleep. There are just so many variables that can mess up a play, so it's hard to be ready for every possible outcome," he tells me as the goal horn blows. I look out and see the crowd on its feet, cheering loud as the guys on the ice all come together in a little huddle. I watch the big screen for the replay video as I missed the goal talking to John. He walks me through why the play worked, how they were able to pull the defenders out and slip past them to put the puck in the back of the net in what looked like such an easy maneuver.

"That was a sweet goal!" I tell him, watching it one last time on the screens.

"It sure was, will probably make the highlight reel tonight on the NHL Network."



"Good game, man!" JC calls out to Beckett as they pull one another into a man-hug, slapping each other's backs. We followed Julia down to the lower level of the arena once the game was over so that John could congratulate the guys on their home opener win over Edmonton. They held their own out on the ice, skating to an easy four to one win.

"Thanks, it was a good one," Beckett tells us as he pulls Julia into his side, dropping a kiss to her lips. "Söt nos," I hear him whisper against her lips before they pull away from one another. I love all his little Swedish terms he's used on her and I know she loves it when he calls her that.

“Missed you out on the ice and in the locker room,” Beckett tells John.

“It was definitely weird not being out there today,” John admits.

“JC!” A few other guys call out to him as they exit the locker room, waving in our direction as they’re greeted by waiting family members. I observe as he waves back, watching his demeanor to make sure this all isn’t too much for him tonight.

“Are you ready to get out of here?” he asks.

“If you are.” I smile up at him.

“I am,” he says, and I can tell with those two words that he’s going to be okay.

“Then let’s go,” I tell him, squeezing his fingers. He returns the motion as I turn to say goodnight to Julia and Beckett before we head out and head back to his place.

Chapter Eleven

JOHNATHAN

“Mason!” I call out as I stand outside the security checkpoint at the airport.

“Uncle Johnathan!” He comes barreling into my arms, yelling my name at the top of his lungs.

“How are you, buddy? Were you good for Mom on the airplane?” I ask as I squeeze him tight, picking him up.

“Yes, I got to watch a show and have snacks!” he excitedly tells me.

“A show and snacks? You must have been one special boy!” I tell him, loving the excitement that just pours from him. “Hey, sis,” I greet my sister once she joins us. I wrap an arm around her shoulder, pulling her in for a side hug.

“Hi, thanks for picking us up,” she says, resting one of her hands on her lower back while the other goes to her growing bump.

“Pregnancy is already causing you pain?” I ask as I take her bag from her.

“Twins, remember. That means I’m bigger than I was with this one,” she says, hooking a thumb in Mason’s direction. “Combine that with an uncomfortable airplane seat and yeah, my back isn’t very happy with me right now,” she tells me.

“Sorry about that. I would have booked you in first class if you’d have let me. Maybe we can still upgrade your flights home,” I tell her as we start to make our way to baggage claim.

“That isn’t necessary, plus, on the way home, Stephanie will be with us, so if I need to get up and walk some I can do that without leaving Mason by himself.”

“When does she get in again?” I ask. My sister-in-law couldn’t fly in with Cindi and Mason due to being out of town for work this week.

“Late Friday night. I think around ten,” she tells me as we find the baggage claim carousel for her flight.

“I can plan to pick her up by myself then, since I know you like to go to bed early in your old age.”

“I’m not that old.” She glares up at me as she reaches over and pinches my side.

“Ouch!” I state dramatically, which causes Mason to laugh at his mom and me.

“No pinching!” Mason comes to my defense. “That’s not nice, Mom,” he chides her.

“That’s right, buddy! You tell her.”

“Oh, please.” Cindi rolls her eyes at me. “Like that even hurt one bit.”

“Okay, so it didn’t,” I admit.

“So, when do I get to meet Jill?” Cindi asks once we’re in my truck and on the road to my place.

“She should be off work and home around six,” I tell Cindi as I change lanes.

“Home, huh?” she says, picking up on my slip of the tongue.

I just shrug my shoulders. “We split our time between each other’s places pretty much fifty-fifty. She has a cat, so she at least stops at her place every day for a little while to be with Walter.”

“If you guys are together all the time, have you had any talks about consolidating and moving in together?” she asks.

“We’ve kind of skirted the conversation. It’s one we should probably have sooner than later with how serious things are getting between the two of us.”

“Do you love her?” my sister asks, hitting me hard right out of the gate with her questions.

I look over at her for only a quick second, not wanting to take my eyes off the road for too long. “I do,” I admit.

“Have you told her that?”

“Not exactly. Again, I think that it is something that we’re skirting around. You know how it is, you never want to be the first one in a relationship to lay it all out on the line. Leaves you pretty vulnerable and open to having your heart broken. I think it’s something that’s mutual, or at least I hope that it is, at this point.”

“You’ll figure out the right time, just don’t wait too long. If she’s as amazing as you’ve told me she is, then you don’t want to let her get away.”

“Got it,” I tell her, knowing that she’s probably right. “Hey, Mason, are you hungry for some lunch?” I ask my nephew, who’s focused on his iPad in the back seat.

“Yes! Can we get McDonalds?” he asks, hope and excitement filling his voice. I inwardly groan, I can’t stand the fast food place myself.

“You leave it open-ended like that and he’ll always suggest that.” My sister laughs at me.

“So how about nuggets for him from there and lunch for us from somewhere a little more appetizing?” I suggest.

“Works for me,” Cindi says.

“Have you hit the cravings portion of pregnancy yet?”

“Not the real weird ones, yet,” she says, laughing.

“Any requests for lunch then?”

“Tacos from that place you love!” she says, rubbing her hands together. “With the biggest bowl of their fresh made

guacamole and chips.” She smiles at me, and I can practically see her salivating at the thought of the food.

“That I can do,” I tell her as I pull into a drive through to order Mason’s nuggets. “Here, call the restaurant and put in a to-go order. We can swing by and pick it up next,” I tell her, handing over my cell with the contact pulled up. Order me a lunch number seven,” I tell her as the employee comes over the intercom saying to order when I’m ready.

With Mason’s food secure, I hand over his kid’s meal box so that he can start eating while his food is hot. “Be careful, buddy. No making a mess of my back seat,” I tell him playfully, helping him get things open and as secure as possible. I turn back around in my seat and pull out of the parking lot.

“God, I’m starving,” Cindi says once I’m back in the truck with two bags of food. The smells fill the cab of the truck and have my own stomach growling.

“We’ll be to my place in just a couple of minutes,” I tell her with a chuckle. I look over and see she’s already digging in to one of the bags of chips and has the lid off her container of guacamole.

“Too late.” She smiles at me, a chip full of the guacamole already set to be devoured.

I laugh at her antics. “You act like you’re pregnant or something,” I tease her.

“Laugh all you want, mister. Who’s got all the food in her lap?” she asks, raising her brows at me in question.

“Okay, okay.” I laugh again. “I’ll be nice, but if you hold my lunch hostage, I won’t be so nice. Pregnant with my two nieces or nephews or not,” I tell her in my not so stern, but trying to be stern voice.

“Johnathan, you crack me up and I love you for it,” she tells me as I pull into the garage.

“Love you, too, sis,” I tell her as I back my truck into my spot. “Ready to help Uncle John with the bags, Mase?” I ask my nephew as I turn the truck off.

“Yeppers!” he exclaims. I hop out of the truck, opening the back door and reaching in and unbuckling him from his car seat. I help him pick up all his trash from his lunch. He successfully ate it all while we drove to get our food and then home. I help him down from the truck, then head for the bed to grab their bags. I hand Mason his suitcase, pulling the handle out for him so he can roll it. I grab Cindi’s suitcase and carry on while she handles the takeout bags.

“Does Jill live in a house or apartment?” Cindi asks once we’re sitting down and eating our lunch. Mason is playing with the toys that he packed in his backpack for the flight.

“She rents a condo across town,” I tell my sister between bites.

“Whenever the conversation comes up about moving in together, I think that you should think about picking out a place together. That way it is a fresh start for both of you,” she suggests.

“That’s not a bad idea. I’ve just lived in this place for so long that I’ve kind of forgotten that I’m paying someone else’s mortgage with every rent payment each month.”

“With the close proximity to the rink, it made sense to be here. Plus, it worked out really well over the years with having guys on the team as roommates, but with your retirement now finalized, I think it would be good for you to move on. Find a place that can be yours. Hell, buy a house that needs to be fixed up and do the work yourself. It would give you something to focus on and do. Work with those hands, and get your mind off all the ‘could have beens’.”

“I don’t think I’m cut out for home remodeling.”

“Maybe not, so maybe a turn-key house would be more your style, but even with a turn-key, there are always things that need tending to. You could become the guy with the perfectly manicured lawn.”

“Doesn’t sound like me much, either.” I laugh again at my sister’s suggestions. I know that she’s just trying to give me

ideas and cheer me up, and hell, what do I know, maybe one of her crazy ideas will help me.

“Tired?” I ask once we’ve finished eating and I have the leftovers packaged up and in the fridge. When I looked over at Cindi on the couch with Mason, her eyes looked a little heavy as she tried to hide a yawn behind her hand.

“Exhausted,” she says, her head rolling back on the cushion.

“Go take a nap, I’ll watch Mason, maybe take him down to the p-a-r-k,” I say, spelling out the last word.

“You sure?” she asks, yawning again.

“Yep,” I tell her. “Hey, Mason, you want to go to the park with Uncle John while Mom takes a nap?”

“Yes! Can you go down the slide with me?” he asks, hopping off the couch and running over to the door to put his shoes on.

“You are the best,” Cindi tells me as she stands up. She kisses Mason on the top of the head. “Be good for Uncle John,” she tells him before she makes her way down the hall and into the bedroom she uses when she visits.

“All right, buddy, it’s just you and me, kid. Shall we blow this popsicle stand?” I ask him and he gives me the most quizzical look I’ve ever seen on a three-year-old’s face.

I grab his hand and we head out. Once off the elevator, I slip my sunglasses on and we head outside. The park is only a couple blocks away. Mason is excited to get there, so his little legs are practically running, wanting to get there as quickly as possible.

“Slow down, buddy. You don’t want to fall and hurt yourself,” I warn him.

“It’s a big boy, Uncle J,” he tells me, shortening my name.

“I know you are. How old are you now? Twenty?” I ask him teasingly. He giggles at my questions.

“No, silly, I’m still only three,” he says just as we reach the edge of the park. Since it is a nice day out, there are a decent number of people here. We head straight for one of the play structures. After climbing to the highest point, Mason heads for the slide next. “Are you coming, Uncle John?” he asks me as if I’m not on his heels.

“I’m right behind you, should we go down together?” I ask him as we wait our turn to go down.

He looks down the winding slide, then back at me. “It’s big!” he exclaims.

“It is, how about you sit on my lap and we’ll go down together?”

“Sure,” he finally agrees. I position myself at the top of the slide, sitting him between my legs. I push us off and we go sliding, picking up a pretty good speed on the way down. “That was fun!” he exclaims as we come to the bottom. “Can we do it again?!” he asks.

“Sure, but did you want to check out the other things they have here, first?” I offer. I hardly have the question out when he’s beelining it to the next structure.

We play hard for about forty-five minutes when I notice he’s starting to yawn. “How about we go back to my place and have some quiet time. Maybe we can lay on the couch and watch a movie together?” I suggest, knowing that if I said anything about taking a nap it would have him balking at the idea. Cindi has told me many times how he doesn’t think he needs naps anymore, but really he does. So she just has to get creative with how she gets him to do so.

“Okay,” he agrees.

“Want a piggyback ride?” I offer, knowing he’s tired.

“Yes!” he says, the excitement in his voice, but his outward emotions aren’t. I get him on my back and start the return walk. We aren’t even a block away when I feel his body start to relax. I look behind me as best as I can, and between that and the feeling of dead weight on my back, along with his

head now resting on mine, I'm confident he's fallen asleep already.

I carefully make it back to my place, somehow getting through unlocking my door without dropping him. I take him in and lay him on my bed, slipping his shoes off and moving him to the center so he doesn't roll off and hurt himself. I sneak out of the room, pulling the door most of the way closed so I don't wake him.

I pad out to the kitchen, rummaging through the fridge and cabinets to figure out a plan for dinner. I've got a good group to cook for with Cindi and Mason visiting this week. It takes me ten or so minutes to figure out a dinner plan before I'm plopping myself down on the couch. Mason has worn me out. I don't know how Cindi and Stephanie do this on a daily basis. Parenthood isn't for the faint of heart.

John: How's your day going? Mason and Cindi are both napping, and I am worn out. Took Mason to the park so Cindi could get a longer nap in.

I toss my phone on the couch next to me, knowing that Jill is most likely with patients now. She sometimes has time between them to text me throughout the day.

Jill: Going good, just have a few minutes before my next patient will be here. Glad to hear things are going good so far today! I can't wait to get off work and get there. I'm dying to meet them both in person for the first time!

John: Cindi was grilling me about when you'd be here before we'd even left the airport.

Jill: I plan to leave here right at five. I need to stop and check on Walter for ten or so minutes and repack my bag and then I'll be there. Plan on me arriving around six.

Jill: Unless you need me to stop and get anything on my way over? Do you have dinner planned out?

John: Just get your pretty little ass here ASAP. I've got dinner under control and we have everything we need.

If Cindi wants or needs anything for her or Mason, we can run to the store after they're both awake.

Jill: Sounds good! See you in a few hours! GTG, my next patient is here. {kissy face}

Chapter Twelve

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JILL
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“Hello!” I call out as I push the door open. The aromas from John’s cooking hit me, and my stomach starts to growl as my mouth salivates just thinking about tasting whatever it is that he’s cooked up for us.

“We’re in the kitchen!” he calls out, stepping out slightly, a whisk in one hand. I set my bag down on the floor as I slip my sandals off, then place my keys down on the little table I put next to the door a few weeks ago.

I make my way into the kitchen, finding Cindi and Mason sitting at the counter as they watch John cooking. “Hi! I’m so glad we finally get to meet in person!” I officially introduce myself to Cindi. We’ve met via FaceTime, so we already kind of know one another.

“It’s so nice to finally meet you face to face!” she exclaims, hopping down from her stool to pull me into a hug.

“And you must be Mason!” I say to him. He looks at me kind of shyly, before his face breaks out into a huge smile.

“Ms. Jill!” he exclaims as he scampers off the stool and runs around to hug me. He wraps himself around my legs, so I bend down to be at his height.

“It’s nice to meet you in person,” I tell him. “Did you have fun at the park with Uncle John?” I ask him.

“How’d you know about the park?” he asks me.

“When you were sleeping, he sent me a text message,” I explain.

“Oh, yes, it was so fun! We went down the big slide, and climbed the tower then went on the monkey bars and swings,” he rushes to get out all in one breath.

“Sounds like fun!” I tell him as he pushes out of my embrace. “How was your flight?” I ask Cindi, standing back up to my full height.

“It was okay. My back was bothering me, but other than that it wasn’t bad. A pretty quick flight in the grand scheme of things. Only about an hour long.”

“That’s not bad,” I agree with her. “Anything I can help with?” I ask John.

“If you want to get the table set, the food should be ready in about five minutes.”

“Will do,” I tell him, pushing up on my toes to kiss him. With an audience, we keep it PG.

“Missed you today,” he says, just above a whisper and only for me to hear.

“I missed you, too,” I whisper back.

I get the table set, Mason helping me with the forks and spoons.

“All set,” I tell him once we’re done.

John carries the dish with homemade lasagna. The cheese and sauce is still bubbling hot around the edges and the smell is almost overwhelming. He goes back to the kitchen, coming back with a plate filled with garlic bread and a bowl of salad.

“This looks amazing, John,” Cindi praises him as we all take our seats. John helps everyone dish out a serving of the lasagna, while we pass around the plate of bread and bowl of salad.

“Damn, baby brother. Who taught you to cook?” Cindi asks him.

“Mostly self-taught, although, I did have one billet family I lived with for a portion of a season and the mom would try and teach us guys things. Said one day we would need to fend for

ourselves and an important skill in life is knowing how to cook yourself a healthy meal. The basics she taught me are still ingrained in my mind,” he tells us.

“I’m impressed,” she says, taking another bite.

“How’s yours?” John asks Mason as he shovels his food into his mouth, hardly stopping to breathe between bites.

“So good, can I have more?” he asks, holding up a nearly cleared plate.

“You’re going to have to share your secret with me. It is almost always a struggle to get him to eat dinner each night. I can’t tell you the last time dinner was this easy with him,” Cindi tells us.



“So, Jill, while my brother is occupied putting Mason to bed, let’s have some girl chat.”

“Of course. Can I get you something to drink, first?” I offer. “Then we can go sit out on the balcony and enjoy the sunset.”

“I’m good with some ice water, thanks.” I grab a large cup and fill it with ice and water from the fridge. I fill a wine glass half full for myself, then carry both out to the balcony where I find Cindi already relaxing.

“Here you go,” I tell her, handing over the cup.

“Thank you,” she replies.

I take a seat, our chairs are not directly facing one another, but also not side by side. “So, how is he really?” she asks, not beating around the bush.

“He has his good days and bad. I was really worried about him last week with the start of the season. The day of the home opener he was having a hard time before we got to the arena, but once there it was almost like a switch was flipped. We walked through the doors and he immediately started talking to employees that he knew. He talked for a while with

the guy who owned the team or something like that. I think his daughter is the owner now?" I tell her, not really remembering all the details.

"How was he at the game?" she asks.

"Completely at home. He has a gift for breaking the plays down from above. He gave me so much information as things were playing out in front of us. I could see someone like that being a really big asset to a team, but he didn't seem to agree with my assessment."

"I wish he'd planned ahead a little more on what he was going to do after he retired from playing. I know that this injury has caused that to happen a few years early, but it isn't like he could have played until his true retirement age. He had maybe five to six years left in him, at best. Thirty-five is already kind of on the older side for professional players."

"It is a bummer he wasn't thinking ahead, but he'll figure it out," I tell her.

"Oh, I know he will. I just worry that with nothing to keep him busy he will get into a rut and have a hard time getting out of it. John's been through a lot in his life. I don't know how much he's shared with you, but our childhood wasn't the easiest and I think that he carries a lot of that burden with him still."

"He's shared a few things here and there, but I've tried to not push him to talk about things he isn't comfortable sharing yet. I figure he'll tell me when he's ready, if he's ever ready."

"It isn't all my story to tell, so I'm not going to, just know that my brother cares for you greatly. I've never seen him like he is with you with anyone else, ever, and we're best friends. We tell each other just about everything."

"I love the bond the two of you have. I think that it's great. Being an only child, I don't know what it's like to have that sibling relationship. Julia, my best friend, is the closest I've got and while we might not be blood relatives, we've been connected at the hip since we met as kids."

"Have you lived in the area all your life then?" she asks.

“I have, my parents still live in the house they brought me home to from the hospital.”

“That’s amazing. You don’t hear of that happening all that often these days,” Cindi says.

“I know. But it was their forever home and it still suits them perfectly fine. My dad is a pharmacist and my mom was a housewife most of my youth. She’d work the occasional odd office job part-time when I was at school, filling in when people went on vacations and such for a couple of family friends’ small businesses. She now helps coordinate the volunteers at one of the nursing homes in the area.”

“Sounds like you’ve got great parents.”

“They are pretty great,” I agree. “John’s talked a little bit about your parents. I know that your dad was in and out of your lives until he was seven or so. I also get the feeling that he’s almost as close to your mom as he is you,” I state.

“Yeah. Our sperm donor, as I like to call him.” She pauses long enough to take a drink of her water. She sets it down on a little table next to her chair, then cradles her small baby bump with her hands. “He wasn’t a good dad. The drugs and alcohol were a big problem. He’d come around for a few weeks, maybe months, at a time. Promise Mom the world one day and then drain what little money she’d worked her ass off to save and disappear again for weeks or months at a time, leaving us with nothing. We spent many weeks of our childhood in and out of shelters.”

I knew women’s shelters had some kind of importance to John’s life, I just didn’t realize how important they were and now I know why he was so agreeable to donating when we’ve gone to fundraisers for them. “I knew about your dad’s behaviors, but John hadn’t ever told me about the shelters. It all makes sense now. Last year, he donated to a charity event I was helping with once he heard that it was for a local shelter, and just a couple weeks ago he was my date to another event. For that one, he even agreed to be one of the bachelors that were up for auction—well, as long as I agreed to be the winning bid,” I tell her, laughing at the memory of yelling that

huge bid out. “When I reminded him that I couldn’t afford what these bids tend to get up to, he told me he’d cover it.”

“Sounds like something my brother would do,” she says, a smile tugging at her lips. “He’s really private about our childhood, and I’ve probably already said too much, but I trust that you can keep what I said confidential.”

“Oh, absolutely,” I assure her.

“I know when he got his first professional contract, he donated probably half of it to the shelters in our hometown that Mom would bounce between.”

“That doesn’t surprise me.” I let her words sink in. “How did he get involved in hockey if things at home were so turbulent, especially with hockey being so expensive?” I ask.

“There was a free program that started with the basics. I think they targeted our area because of the income levels that tended to reside where we lived. He impressed the coaches so much that they talked to my mom and asked if they could provide scholarships for his fees and equipment if she’d sign him up to play. She agreed and the rest is history. He’s been playing since he was five.”

“That’s incredible.”

“It really is, and one of those kismet kind of things. Had we not been at the rec center one summer day when they brought in this organization, he’d probably have never had the chance to even try out hockey.”

“Funny how things like that work in our lives.”

“It is.”

“And you used to be a paralegal, right?”

“Yes. I earned some scholarships and worked my way through in state school. Did my best to get out of school with as little bit of debt as I could. My last two years of school I worked for a larger law firm. They offered tuition assistance once you’d work there for six months. I planned things out perfectly and they basically paid for my final two years of

school, so that definitely helped me graduate with very little school debt.”

“Good for you. I also went to school on some scholarships. My parents were able to help out with the difference and they also helped me out with a loan when I started my business up a few years ago.”

“That’s really awesome.”

“Did you meet Stephanie at that firm?” I ask. I finish off my wine, setting the glass down on the ground next to my chair.

“Yep. She started working there during my junior year of college. We didn’t work directly with each other, though, until after I’d graduated, so we didn’t really know one another all that well. It’s a pretty big firm, they usually have around twenty attorneys on staff at any given time.”

“Wow, I didn’t realize that it was that large.”

“Yep. We started dating a few months after I graduated. It was big office gossip, at first, but then people got over it. When we decided to start a family and I got pregnant with Mason, we decided that I’d quit and stay at home with him and now, of course, these two that are on their way.”

“Do you miss working at all?” I ask. With owning my own business, I have no idea how that will look for me down the road when I’m ready to start a family.

“Sometimes, but I also love being at home with Mason. I love not stressing over daycare pickup and drop offs and the hectic hours. With being married to an attorney, I keep my skills up to date helping her occasionally when she’s working at home late at night or if she needs a second pair of eyes on something.”

“And Stephanie likes being the breadwinner?”

“I think when she picked the career path, she knew that it was definitely a possibility. She hasn’t complained yet,” she says, laughing.

“That’s great that it all worked out so well for the two of you. Since I haven’t been in a serious relationship since opening my business, I haven’t really thought ahead to what things would look like if and when I have kids. Do I stop seeing patients and just run the business side of things? Sell the business to someone else? Keep working? So many possibilities to consider. But before I need to worry about that, I have to find a husband.”

“Have you and John talked about a possible future together?” she casually asks.

“Nothing like marriage or kids. I mean, I think we’ve said casually how we both would like kids, but that it isn’t something on either of our radars, at least not in the next year or two.”

“Like I said just a little bit ago, my brother is pretty taken with you. If you want my two-cents on the two of you...” she pauses for a second.

“Yes, please,” I tell her.

“He’s very smitten with you. I’d be willing to say head over heels in love with you, he’s just scared to come out and say it. He doesn’t want to get hurt or put you on the spot. He’d probably marry you in a heartbeat if he thought that’s what you wanted out of your relationship.”

I’m a little shocked over what she’s just said. “I knew things were good between us, and I know that I’ve developed big love feelings for John, I just haven’t been sure if he’s on the same page,” I tell her honestly. “It’s only been a few months since we started dating, so I didn’t want to rush things.”

“I don’t think things need to be rushed, but I’d encourage you to maybe have some of those bigger talks with him. I know love can be scary and marriage takes work, trust me. But it can also be the best thing in life. To have that one person—*your person*—to lay in bed with every night and just talk about random things, or whatever is bothering you or what you’re excited about. Just having that person that knows you had a bad morning so they show up at the office with your favorite

cup of coffee or lunch, or make you your favorite dinner just because.”

“We already have some of that down. I know this might be TMI, and I’m sorry if it is. But some of my favorite moments are when we’re cuddling up together in bed at night, all sleepy but not yet asleep. John likes to run his fingers through my hair—I think he doesn’t even realize that he’s doing it sometimes—but anyway back to what I was saying. We’ll talk about our days or what we want to get done the next day or weekend or whenever. He’ll sometimes tell me a story about something that happened during college or his early years playing in the pros.”

“Stephanie and I do the same, and I agree, it is some of the best moments of my day.”

“There you two are,” John’s deep voice greets us, causing me to jump slightly.

“Did Mason give you any trouble falling asleep?” Cindi asks him as he walks over and leans against the balcony railing.

“Not really. We did his bathroom stuff and then read a couple of books. He fell asleep about halfway through the second one, but I kept reading until the end just to make sure he was completely out.”

“Thank you for taking over and doing that for me tonight.”

“I don’t mind, you know that. Plus, it gives me a little bonding time with my little man,” he tells her. The love for his sister and nephew is so evident on his face that it makes my heart melt. It also has me thinking of what it would be like to watch John holding his own child—our child. I can only imagine that he’d be an amazing father, especially after seeing him with Mason tonight.

“I know, and he loves it, too,” she says.

“So, what are you two chattering about out here?” he asks, looking between the two of us. I don’t know if we look guilty, or he just assumes that we were discussing him. “Don’t believe a word she says,” he tells me, pointing at his sister. He

almost finishes his statement without cracking a smile, but all it takes is Cindi to start laughing and he loses it.

“I didn’t tell her anything bad,” she insists.

“She didn’t,” I tell him, backing her up.

“Uh huh,” he grunts, not believing a word we’re saying. “I don’t believe that for one bit.”

“Don’t worry, I’ll save the embarrassing stories for Mom to tell,” Cindi tells him in a sickeningly sweet voice.

John just groans again, holding his hand up over his heart. “You wound me. And here I thought that you were my best friend,” he says dramatically.

“Oh please. Like you didn’t try and embarrass me when you first met Stephanie.”

“I plead the fifth,” he volleys back to her.

“That’s what they all say,” she mutters. “Just remember, baby brother. Payback is a bitch.” She practically cackles in laughter as she rubs her hands together.

“On that note, are you ready for bed?” John asks me, I’m sure to try and get me away from his sister.

I look down at my watch and see that it’s already almost ten. “I guess so, I have to be up early tomorrow for work.”

“I’m exhausted, as well. I haven’t been staying up much later than Mason these days. Baking two babies has been sucking all my energy right out of me.”

“I can only imagine,” I empathize with her. I haven’t ever experienced it myself, but have been around many pregnant women who’ve told me all about the highs and lows of pregnancy.

John helps Cindi up from her chair, then does the same with me. I grab my empty wine glass and head inside. I make quick work of adding the few dishes that we’ve used since dinnertime to the dishwasher, then pulling out things I’ll need in the morning so they’re on the counter and ready for me. I’m

not a huge morning person, so having things set out the night before is very helpful.

“Have a good night, I’ll see you tomorrow, right?” Cindi asks as she comes out of the bathroom.

“Yes, probably not until after I’m off work, but I planned on coming back over. I just need to stop at my place after work for a little while and check on my cat.”

“Sounds good. Have you ever thought of just bringing him here?” she asks.

“Not really. We usually split our nights between here and my place, so it works out. He’s kind of a recluse sometimes and doesn’t really like new places. I think moving him back and forth would just stress him out, more so than me not being there every night.”

“That makes sense. I guess letting Mason meet him wouldn’t be the best idea then, huh?”

“He’s never been around kids, so I have no idea what he’d do, to be honest with you. He doesn’t take to new people very quickly. Unless, that is, you’re John, who apparently is the cat whisperer,” I tell her.

“Is that so?” she questions, her eyes lighting up.

“Yep, John comes over and Walter will come out, curl right up on John’s lap and everything.”

“Interesting. I never thought of my brother as a cat guy.”

“I don’t think he thought he was a cat guy until we started dating, and I think he more tolerates him than anything,” I tell her as John comes down the hall to join us.

“Are you two talking about me again?”

“Not really, we’re talking about Walter. Cindi was asking why I don’t just bring him over here with me.”

“Ah,” he says, sliding his arm around my waist. “Are you ready for bed?”

“Yep,” I tell him, “I’ll see you when I see you. Don’t wake up early just to see me off to work, sleep in and let this guy

look after Mason in the morning,” I tell Cindi.

“I like the way you think!” she says, laughing. “Good night, you two.”

“Night, sis,” John tells her, stepping away from me so he can hug her goodnight. I head for his room, changing into some pj’s and hitting up the bathroom to get ready for bed.

I slip between the sheets, the smell from the laundry detergent hitting my nostrils. I love the smell of clean sheets. “You have a good time talking to my sister tonight?” John asks as he slides into bed with me. He almost instantly pulls me into his side. His lips find mine in a sensual kiss.

“Yes, we had a good time,” I tell him as I run my fingers through his dark hair.

“Good, she’s one of the best people I know. I’m glad the two of you hit it off. I don’t know what I’d do if two of the most important women in my life didn’t get along,” he tells me.

“I’m glad that it all worked out. We had some good conversations about a lot of different things. Just getting to know one another better,” I tell him. “But don’t worry, she didn’t spill all your secrets.” I wink at him so he knows I’m just playing around with him.

“You know what’s not fair about you being an only child?” he asks, squeezing me a little tighter.

“What’s that?” I ask, shifting slightly to give him better access to kiss my neck.

“That I don’t have a sibling of yours to get to know who can tell me all your embarrassing stories and dirty secrets.”

“Julia has just as much dirt on me than your sister probably has on you, so don’t worry, there will be a day when you can find out what you think you need to know,” I assure him.

“I’ll have to keep that in mind,” he says, smirking before he dips his head, finding my neck to kiss and suck at, all the while driving me crazy with need for him.

Chapter Thirteen

JOHNATHAN

“Morning,” I rasp as I feel Jill start to stir next to me. Her back is to my front, ass nestled right against my cock. Her movements cause my cock to stir, so I pull her tighter against me and bury my face in her neck.

“Someone’s happy this morning,” she moans as I thrust slightly against her ass and suck at her neck.

“Who could blame me when I’ve got a sexy girlfriend rubbing her ass against my dick?”

“Hmm.” She hums as her phone starts buzzing against the nightstand. “Ugh.” She groans, and not the good kind of groaning as she reaches for it, hitting the screen to turn the alarm off. She rolls in my arms, pressing a kiss to my cheek. “Sorry I have to kill the mood, but I have to get up and get ready for work. Rain check?” she asks, her lips just a hair’s breadth away from mine.

“Of course,” I tell her as I press my lips to hers. “Up and at ‘em,” I tell her once we’ve broken apart. I smack her ass to get her moving, and, well, because I’m a guy and I love touching it. “You go get in the shower and I’ll make you some breakfast,” I offer, knowing that it will help motivate her to get moving so she isn’t late.

“You are too good to me, you know that?” she asks, turning to look at me as she backs herself towards the bathroom.

“Only the best for you, babe!” I call out as the door to the bathroom closes, followed shortly by the water turning on in

the shower.

I make my way out to the kitchen, a little shocked to see Cindi up and drinking a cup of coffee. “Morning, sis,” I greet her, leaning down to drop a kiss on the top of her head.

“Morning.”

“How’d you sleep?” I ask as I pull out a pan to start some eggs for everyone.

“Eh, okay, I guess. I got up to pee and couldn’t fall back asleep, so I figured a cup of coffee was in order.”

“Mason still sleeping?” I ask, figuring that he is since I don’t see or hear him anywhere.

“Yep, he was still passed out cold when I checked on him a little bit ago. That doesn’t surprise me though.”

“Yeah, he was pretty tired last night when I put him to bed,” I tell her as I flip some eggs, proud that I didn’t break the yoke when I flipped like I usually end up doing. “Was there anything specific you wanted to do today?” I ask.

“Nope, we’re here to see you, so whatever it is that you want to do.”

“Feel up to walking around outside?” I ask.

“Sure, it’s supposed to be nice, yes?”

“Yep.”

“Where are you thinking?”

“The zoo. I thought Mason might like seeing the animals.”

“He’d love that.”

“Then we can hit it up this morning, and grab some lunch. Maybe after that come back and see if he’ll nap.”

“Sounds like the perfect plan,” Cindi agrees.

“Want some breakfast?” I ask, plating up the first two eggs along with some toast and sausage that I heated up.

“Yes! Whatever you’re making over there smells fantastic and has my stomach growling.”

“Coming right up,” I tell her, grabbing another plate and dropping a few more pieces of toast in the toaster. I hand over the first plate that I made, knowing that Jill won’t be out for a few more minutes.

“How’s Steph this morning?” I ask Cindi.

“She’s good. Already at her client’s offices for early morning meetings.”

“How much longer until she makes partner?”

“Hopefully within the next year. She’s worked her ass off for it, so I hope that it happens for her soon. I worry that she’s going to get burnt out if she doesn’t cut back some of her hours here soon.”

“Will she be able to cut back once she makes partner?”

“I think so, at least a little. Maybe only put in fifty to sixty hours a week instead of sixty to seventy.”

“That’s crazy, I don’t know how she does it.”

“It’s part of the gig. Just like you were used to being on the road so much, just comes with the job.”

“I guess you’re right. We all get used to the demands of our jobs and that just becomes our new normal.” I tell her as I make up plate up breakfast for Jill and me before taking them over to the table where I take a seat.

“Yep,” she agrees with me. Jill walks down the hall, her signature scrubs on with her hair pulled back out of her face. She’s got on minimal makeup, not that she needs any. She’s beautiful just as she is, not that she’d listen to me when I tell her that.

“Morning,” Jill greets Cindi, then bends down to kiss me. “Thanks for breakfast, babe,” she says, taking the seat next to me at the table.

“You’re welcome,” I tell her, digging in to my own plate of food.

“Have you made any plans for today?” Jill asks between bites.

“We’re going to hit up the zoo and have lunch and then a nap, hopefully,” I give her a recap of what we came up with earlier.

“Sounds like the perfect day. It’s supposed to be nice today, maybe we can grill out for dinner tonight?” she asks.

“I’m sure we can make that happen. Any requests on what we grill?” I ask.

“I’m good with whatever, steaks, chicken, burgers and brats... You guys decide and I’ll be here to eat,” she says, laughing.

“Okay,” I say to appease her, knowing damn well I’ll do whatever she asks.

“Sorry to eat and dash, but I need to get out of here and to the office a little early. I’ve got some paperwork to get through this morning and I wanted to try and do it before patients start to show up.”

“Don’t let us keep you. We’ll see you tonight, have a good day at work,” Cindi says to Jill.

“Have a good day with this one,” she replies, pointing at me.

“Will do!” Cindy tells Jill. “I’m going to go lay back down for a little bit, thanks for breakfast, Johnathan,” she tells me before she takes her dishes to the sink, then heads back for her bedroom.

“Have a good day at work, text or call if you need anything,” I tell her, pulling her in for a quick goodbye hug and kiss. “See you tonight,” I tell her before pulling away.

“Bye,” she says quietly. I watch as she picks up her stuff and then heads out the door.



“Uncle John, look at the monkeys! I want to be a monkey!” Mason calls out loudly as we watch the animals play around.

“What are you talking about, you already are a monkey!” I tease him.

“No I’m not! I’s a big boy!” He giggles as he tells me this.

“That’s right, you are a big boy!”

We’ve been having such a great time walking around the zoo and taking in all the animals. We got to feed the giraffes and some birds. “I think he’ll have a blast when we make it over to the petting zoo area with goats and then a koi pond. Both areas he can buy little tins of food for the animals, so I think he’ll really like it,” I tell Cindi as we stroll along after Mason.

“I’m sure he will. I’m not sure if you can tell that he’s having a blast,” she teases me.

“Funny,” I say as I bump my shoulder into hers. “Are you doing okay?” I ask, realizing that she’s got her hand on her back again.

“Yeah, just some growing pains,” she tries to assure me.

“Do you need to sit down for a little bit?” I ask, starting to feel helpless that I can’t make things better for her.

“I’ll be fine for a little longer. I might have to go find us a table early for lunch and just wait for the two of you there,” she says.

“Want me to go rent you one of those electric cart things?” I offer.

“Don’t you even dare,” she tells me, that stern mom voice coming out.

“No electric carts, got it,” I say, laughing at how serious she got when she shot down my offer.

“I’ll be fine. Just a muscle that won’t stop twitching on me. I’ll get an appointment with my chiropractor when I get home and he’ll get it back to normal once again.”

“Would a massage help?” I ask.

“Probably,” she replies.

“I can make a few calls and see if I can find anyone with an opening for late today that you could see.”

“I’ll be fine, little brother. You don’t have to worry about me so much,” she says, trying to reassure me. Little does she know, I can see right through her BS and know that she’s in more pain than she’s leading on about.

At the next animal enclosure, I slip my phone from my pocket, sending off a group text to Becca, Scott, Brian, Kinley, and Jill to see if anyone has any suggestions on where I can get Cindi in for a massage, at the least.

John: Question for all of you, but probably more so for the women. I’d like to book an appointment—today preferably—for my sister to get a pregnancy massage. Anyone have any suggestions on places to call?

Becca: How sweet of you! There is a mommy to be spa type place that I’ve been to a couple of times. I can send you their contact info if you’d like.

John: That’d be great, thanks!

Becca: Anytime!

Kinley: Ditto what Becca said, I went to the same place and they were always really good.

John: Thanks, ladies, I knew you’d have the answer.

I look up from my phone, checking to see where Cindi and Mason are. They’re both watching as the animal trainers check out the elephants, getting them to lift their feet so they can be looked at. I hit the contact from Becca’s text to call this place she recommended.

“Mommy to Be, this is Pam, how can I help you?”

“Hi, I’d like to book an appointment for my sister. She’s visiting and pregnant with twins. Her back has been bothering her, do you happen to have anything available today?”

“Are you looking for just a massage for her or any other services?”

“Uh..” I stammer, “no idea, a friend’s wife recommended your business, what other services do you offer?”

“We’re a full spa, so everything from facials, massages, manicures and pedicures.”

“Oh, okay,” I say. “Do you have any packages that include a few services?”

“We do!” she says, her voice getting a little excited. “I have an opening for this afternoon, starting at two, for a three-service package. She can choose from any three services we offer. I can also do a four-service option, as well, it just depends on how long she’d want to be here. We allot an hour for each, unless she opts for a longer massage.”

“That sounds perfect. Let’s go with the four-service package,” I tell Pam. I give her all of Cindi’s information before hanging up. We’ve got a few hours until she needs to be dropped off, so I slide my phone back into my pocket and join them at the fence.

“Everything okay?” Cindi asks once I’m back by her side.

“Yep, just taking care of something quick,” I tell her, not wanting to spoil my surprise just yet.

“Okay,” she says, leaning her head on my shoulder. I wrap my arm around her, letting her lean more of her weight on me. I’m sure to the average outsider we look like a couple, here with our son, but I don’t really give a shit what other people think.

“Uncle John,” Mason says, getting my attention.

“What’s up, buddy?”

“Can we get a treat from that stand?” he asks, pointing at the ice cream cart.

I drop down to his height and look from him to the cart and back. “I don’t know, do you think we’ve been good enough this morning to have earned a treat?” I ask him, a smile filling my face.

“Of course, we’s always good,” he tells me with a cheesing grin.

“You think Mom will want one?” I ask him, looking up at my sister.

I look back to Mason and he has the most quizzical look on his face as he thinks over my question. “Yeah, she can have one, too,” he finally tells me as he grabs my hand and starts to pull me toward the stand.

“What do you want?” I call over my shoulder at Cindi.

“I’ll take a frozen lemonade cup,” she answers, laughing at her son’s antics.

I tell the clerk what we want, two frozen lemonades for the adults and a lion face-shaped fruit pop for Mason.

“This isn’t going to spoil your lunch, is it?” I ask Mason, handing over his treat.

“No,” he tells me as he shakes his head. I can hear Cindi still laughing at the two of us, but what the hell, they’re on vacation and it’s my job as his uncle to spoil him when he visits me.

“He’s got you wrapped around his little finger. I can’t wait to see what it’s like when you have your own kids,” she muses as I hand over her frozen treat.

“Yeah, yeah,” I tell her. “I’ll spoil those two just as much,” I add, pointing at her belly.

“I’m sure you will.”

We meander around the rest of the zoo, taking in the animals and having a good time together, as we always do.

“How about some lunch, then I’ve got a surprise that’s just for Mom,” I tell Mason as we make it out to my truck.

“Yes! Can I have a surprise, too?” he asks.

“Uh, maybe. Let’s have lunch first, how does that sound?” I ask him, turning the truck on and getting the air conditioning going. It’s a bit warm out and my truck is stifling hot.

“A surprise?” Cindi questions, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Yep,” I tell her, popping the p. “And that’s all I’m telling you for now. You’ll just have to be patient.”

“You’re no fun.” She pouts as I drive down the road.

“You’re the one that is impatient.” I chuckle. She’d always try and sneak and spoil her Christmas and birthday presents when we were kids. It drove our mother nuts since she could usually only afford one or two small things for us, and those sometimes came from the angel tree programs.

“Sorry not sorry,” she tells me, a smile tugging at her lips. Having my sister and nephew here with me is just what I needed in my life right about now. With the new season starting, my first since announcing my retirement from the game I played and loved for so many years, it’s helping to lift my spirits.



“So, are you going to tell me yet what my surprise is?” Cindi asks now that we’ve finished up our lunch.

I look at my watch, seeing that we need to get going in the next five or so minutes so I can drop her off on time.

“You’ll see when we get there,” I tell her, making her wait just a tad bit longer.

“You’re evil,” she says, staring at me with a glare that would bring most men to their knees.

“You’ll be singing a different tune in about twenty minutes,” I tell her.

We head out to my truck, Mason hopping right up and into his car seat. I get him buckled as Cindi situates herself in the passenger seat.

“Ready to drop Mom off and then have a boy’s afternoon?” I ask him before shutting the back door.

“Yep!” he exclaims.

“What are your plans for the two of you while I’m wherever it is that you’re dropping me off at?”

“Not sure yet. Think he’d like an indoor trampoline place?” I ask.

“Is the sky blue?” she deadpans.

“Okay, stupid question,” I say, laughing. “I guess we’ll head over and jump and play for an hour or until he’s wiped out. Then I’ll take him back home and see if I can convince him to n-a-p for a little bit before it is time to pick you back up.”

“Just how long are you dropping me off for?” she asks, and I can tell her mind is racking with what I’ve schemed up for her this afternoon.

“Your appointment is four hours long,” I tell her, giving her that one little piece of information.

“Four hours?” she questions. “Hmm... what could take four hours?”

I drive across town and pull into the large spa’s parking lot. I look over, catching a glimpse of her face as she realizes where we are at. “You didn’t!” she practically squeals.

“I did. You’ve got a four-service package. I figured you could use a maternity massage with how bad your back has been bothering you since you’ve been here. They asked if you wanted any other services, so I splurged and got the four-service option, or you can do a double massage and two others, your choice.”

“You are seriously the best brother ever! Thank you!” she says, attempting to lean over the center console to give me a hug.

“It’s the least I could do,” I tell her. “Let’s get you inside and checked in. I still need to give them my credit card.”

I help Mason out of the truck, and we follow Cindi inside. I pay for her package, making sure to add a hefty tip and leave instructions that she’s to add anything she wants or needs to the tab and they have my permission to charge my card for it.

She doesn't let me help out as much as I'd like, so doing special things like this is my way of getting away with it.

"Thank you, seriously, thank you for all of this," Cindi tells me, wrapping me into a hug. "You be good for Uncle John," she says to Mason, crouching down to his level and giving him a hug before they take her back.

"It's you and me now, kid," I tell Mason, holding out my fist for him to hit his knuckles against. "Let's go have some fun!" I tell him as I help him up into his seat again.

"Yes!" he cheers. "What's we going to do for fun?" he asks.

"How about we go to this really cool place. They have trampolines and bouncy things inside. I think that it's a pretty neat place. Think we can check it out?"

"Yes!" he cheers once again.

"All right, let's go," I tell him.



"Hey, babe," I greet Jill with a kiss at the door. "How was your day?"

"Good, and yours?"

"It was good, the zoo was fun, followed by lunch. Then while Cindi was at the spa, Mason and I went to that indoor trampoline park. We had a blast there for an hour or so, and then we've just been hanging out here. He napped for about an hour after we got back."

"Sounds like a fun day."

"It was. Cindi just texted me saying that she was finishing up with her pedicure, so I need to head out and pick her up. Can I leave Mason here with you?" I ask as I tuck a chunk of hair behind her ear.

"Of course. Do I need to do anything to get dinner going?" she asks.

“Steaks are already seasoned and ready to go. I’ve got a pasta salad already prepped and chilling in the fridge. I think we should be good. Once I’m back, I’ll get the grill fired up and start cooking.”

“Sounds great. I’ll see you when you get back,” she says, pushing up on her toes to give me another kiss. I pull her tight against my body, loving the feel of her curves in my hands.

I bury my face in her neck for a second, just breathing her in. “I’ve missed you today,” I tell her honestly. “And I need to be inside you tonight.”

“Mhmm,” she hums. “I like the sound of that,” she tells me, pressing herself against me a little tighter. The little vixen.

“On that note, I’d better leave before I take you somewhere private and strip you now,” I say as I nip at her ear.

“Save that for later,” she replies breathily.

I smack her ass, causing her to yelp in surprise. “See you in a little bit,” I tell her, kissing her once more. “Hey, Mason. I’m going to go pick up your mom, you okay with staying here with Jill?” I ask him. He’s zoned out watching some movie.

“Yep,” he answers me, not even looking away from the movie.

“I guess he’ll be fine,” Jill laughs.

“I guess so,” I tell her as I open the door and head out.

Chapter Fourteen

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JILL
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“It’s so quiet in here,” I tell John as we relax on the couch in his condo. We just returned from taking everyone to the airport for their short flight home.

“It is,” he chuckles. “Mason was quite the tornado.”

“It was a good visit with everyone,” I muse. “I loved getting to finally meet them all in person.”

“Yeah, speaking of meeting people in person, when do I get to meet your parents?” he asks.

It isn’t like we’ve purposely avoided them meeting, it just hasn’t worked out yet. Mom and Dad were gone for an entire month celebrating their thirtieth anniversary on a trip in Asia, but they’re back now, and I think that it is time. We’ve been together now for almost four months and things don’t seem to be slowing down between us, so it makes sense for me to introduce them.

“I’ll call and see what their plans are this week. Maybe we can meet up for dinner.”

“Sounds good,” he tells me, pulling me a little closer as he wraps his arm around my torso. I roll so that we’re facing one another rather than lying here with my back to his front. He tucks my hair behind my ears as he cups my cheeks now that we’re lying this way. He slowly brings his lips down, grazing them over mine in a whisper of a kiss. “I could lie here with you for the rest of the afternoon and be a very happy man,” he tells me as his lips find my neck.

I hum my appreciation and agreement. “I’m on board with that plan, maybe with a few less articles of clothing,” I tell him as I tug at his T-shirt. He reaches back and grabs his shirt by the collar and tugs it up and off over his head one-handed and I don’t know that I’ve seen something sexier. I slide down the couch, kissing my way down his abs. I love seeing the way his muscles react to my touch, whether it’s my lips or fingers, his body reacts to it all. I reach his shorts, stopping to unbutton them, pushing them out of the way enough, along with his boxers, to pull his cock free. He’s already hard for me. I stroke him a few times, listening for his breathing to hitch as I lower my mouth to him. I lick up the underside of his cock, along the vein. I swirl my tongue around his crown just as his hand slides into my hair, holding it out of my face.

“Fuck, babe. You’re killing me here,” he grits out as I take him all the way in, his tip hitting the back of my throat before I pull back. I wrap my fingers around his shaft, using them to stroke him as I bob up and down his cock. “I’m going to come,” he warns me, tapping my cheek with his free hand.

I pop his cock from my mouth, looking up at him as I keep my fist moving. “Isn’t that the point of a blowjob?” I ask before I take him back in my mouth, stroking and sucking until he comes, gripping my hair as he releases.

“Come here,” he rasps, pulling me up by the armpits. “That was fucking hot,” he says, kissing my jaw. “Now it’s your turn.” John kisses his way around my neck, stopping only long enough to pull my shirt off over my head. He runs his fingertips along the top of my bra ever so lightly, following them with his lips. He pushes one of my bra cups out of the way, allowing him access to my nipple. He sucks it hard, causing my center to clench as he flicks his tongue across my hardened peaks.

He reaches behind me, flicking the clasp of my bra one handed like an expert. It falls away from my body, as he grabs it and tosses it over the couch and out of our way like it offended him somehow. “Hmm, yes!” I moan as he switches his attention to my other breast, showing it the same love and attention he showed the other one. He slides further down,

kissing along my torso as he flips us into a new position on the couch.

“You want to come on my tongue first or my cock?” he asks, looking up at me. He’s positioned halfway down the couch, the lower half of his body is hanging off the couch, in what looks to be a very uncomfortable position.

“Both, definitely both,” I tell him. “But how about we move this elsewhere. You look really uncomfortable.”

“I’m good out here,” he says, pushing to stand. He grabs hold of my ankles, turning me so I’m sitting correctly on the couch, then motions for me to stand. I follow his direction and he rids me of my pants and panties. He motions for me to sit back down, gripping my hips once I’m seated and pulls me until my ass is at the edge of the couch. He drops down to his knees on the floor in front of me, dropping kisses along my inner thighs until he’s made his way to the apex between my legs. He slides his tongue along my slit, circling my clit. He teases me until my back is arching off the couch. I feel as two fingers slide inside me. While his tongue works my clit, his fingers work my pussy until I’m a thrashing mess. I come hard, my orgasm hitting me fast as my body goes rigid on the couch. He pulls back, kissing my thighs, my belly, between my breasts as he makes his way up my body.

My body is in a completely blissed out state, the endorphins from my release filling my bloodstream. John scoops me up, then sits on the couch, with me on his lap. He lines his cock up with my entrance. I slide down, his cock filling me completely. “Yes!” I cry out in ecstasy.

I feel as his hands slide down my body until they’re cupping my ass. He helps my body rise and fall as he thrusts up from beneath me, his cock hitting me deep. “I’m going to come,” I cry out as he thrusts again, even deeper still. I can’t hold back; my second orgasm takes over and I fall forward into his chest. He’s fully supporting me, still holding my ass as he thrusts up, seeking his own release.

“God, damn,” he growls in my ear. “Your pussy is gripping my cock so tight. I’m going to come so hard,” he pants, as he

continues to thrust through my orgasm. “Fuuuck, Jill,” he yells as he slams home one last time. I can feel his orgasm hit him. His body stills and I can feel his cock as he spasms, his orgasm spilling from him.

I stay on his lap for a few minutes, both of us needing the time to enjoy and recover from our impromptu sexy time. “You good?” he asks, cupping my cheek.

“Never been better,” I tell him before kissing him.

We break apart, and I pull back slightly, about to climb off of his lap so I can go clean up, but he stops me. “Jill,” he says my name, his voice gruff and growly.

“Yeah.” I still, looking at him. I can tell something’s on his mind, I just don’t know *what* is on his mind.

“I...” He pauses, sucks in a deep breath, blowing it out before he shifts me slightly on his lap. He cups my cheek again, running a thumb across my bottom lip, pulling it out from between my teeth. I didn’t even realize I’d sucked it between them, but it’s a nervous habit. “I have something I want to tell you, but I don’t want you to freak out or feel like you have to say anything in reply, okay?”

I nod my head in agreement.

“I...I love you.” He says it so reverently, like it’s the simplest fact out there.

I feel the smile fill my face when his statement hits me. “Can you say that again?” I ask.

“I love you and I have for a while now. I know we haven’t been together all that long, but I just couldn’t hold it in any longer. I’m sorry if that scares you, but fuck, I just can’t not tell you,” he says.

“I love you, too,” I tell him. It comes out as a whisper, and I don’t know if he heard me as I don’t get any reaction, so I repeat it, this time a little louder.

“Hell, yes!” he bellows, throwing his fists in the air. I laugh at his antics, loving this feeling. Knowing that we’re

both on the same page as far as our love for one another goes. “Say it again?” he asks, pulling me close.

“I,” I kiss his left cheek. “Love,” I kiss his right. “You.” I kiss his lips full on with everything I have in me. I can feel his cock twitch and start to harden since he’s still inside me.

“You’re going to be the death of me, woman,” he says, tickling my side as he pulls back slightly. “How about I fuck you in the shower, and then the bed where we can really celebrate this moment.”

“You are incorrigible,” I tell him as we both laugh. I love that we’ve found this comfort in one another. The perfect fit, my person.



“Are you ready?” I ask John. It is Friday night and we’re going to my parents’ house for dinner. John offered to take everyone out, but my mom insisted on having us over and that she’d cook. He quickly gave in when Mom insisted.

“Yep,” he calls out as he comes down the hall. “Do I look okay? Will I pass the test?” he asks, looking down at his slacks and dress shirt. I tried telling him that he didn’t need to dress up to meet my parents, but he insisted he needed to make a good impression.

“You look extremely handsome. I’m almost mad that we didn’t start dating when you were still playing. Think of all those nights I missed getting to see you in a suit going to and from a game. You’d have been getting laid all the time,” I tell him.

“I can put on a suit for you every day if that’s what floats your boat, but I hate to break it to you, babe, I’m already getting laid all the time. I can’t keep my hands off of you, if you haven’t already noticed that, and when I do happen to not have them on you, you’ve got yours all over me.”

“I suppose you’re right about that.”

“Of course, I’m right.” He smirks at me. “Now, let’s go. I’ve got some parents to impress,” he tells me as he grabs the bottle of wine he picked up today, along with a huge bouquet of flowers for Mom and a bottle of some fancy scotch for my dad.

I so want to give him crap about buying their approval with his gifts, but I don’t want to hurt his feelings by teasing him about them, so I keep my comment to myself. I know he stressed most of the week over tonight’s dinner and what he should bring to them.

I follow him out the door, stopping to lock up for him since his hands are full. “Thanks,” he says once we’re in the elevator.

“For what?” I ask.

“Everything. Helping me through these last few months, for loving me through them.”

“You never have to thank me for loving you,” I tell him, pushing up on my toes to kiss him. He can’t pull me in close because of the flowers in his hand.



“Hello!” I call out as I open the front door of my parents’ house.

“In the kitchen,” I hear my mom call out. I slip my shoes off and hang my coat up in the closet. I do the same with John’s and he follows me into the kitchen. My mom gasps when she sees us enter. “Oh, my! Those are beautiful!”

“Hello, Mrs. Kennedy, it is nice to finally meet you,” he says, handing over the flowers. “This is also for you,” he says to Mom, handing her the bottle of wine.

“Well, aren’t you just the sweetest?” she asks, setting the flowers and wine on the counter so she can pull him into a hug. He gives me a quizzical look as he wraps an arm around her.

“Sorry, she’s a hugger,” I apologize, realizing I forgot to mention that tidbit. “Mom, this is Johnathan. John, this is my mom, Diane Kennedy.”

“It is so nice to finally meet you, but please just call me Diane. Mrs. Kennedy makes me feel old.” She chuckles.

“Whatever you prefer,” John tells her.

“Where’s Dad?” I ask my mom once introductions are finished and she’s stopped scaring my boyfriend.

“He was working on something in his office. Why don’t you go yell at him to come down and join us?”

“I can do that,” I tell her. “You want to come with me or stay here?” I ask John.

“I’m good with either,” he says sweetly.

“Oh, you’re here.” My dad’s voice fills the kitchen as he steps in.

“Yep, I was just going to come get you,” I tell him as I step into his embrace. I step out of the hug and back to John’s side. I slide my hand into his, giving him a little squeeze of the fingers. “Dad, this is Johnathan Camps, and John, this is my dad, Beau Kennedy.”

“Nice to meet you, sir, your daughter speaks highly of the both of you and it’s my pleasure to finally meet you.”

“Nice to meet you.” He offers his hand to John.

“This, here, is for you, sir.” John hands him the bottle of Scotch. Dad looks it over, his bushy eyebrows raising up as he reads the label.

“Thank you, this is quite the bottle,” Dad tells him, setting it down on the counter.

“Only the best. I was introduced to that label by a former teammate. It took me a few times trying it before I really enjoyed it, but now it’s my go-to, even if it is expensive.”

“We can have a glass after dinner,” Dad says. “So, John, tell us about yourself.”

“I’m a pretty open book, what would you like to know?” he asks in return.

“Whatever you’d like to share.” Dad chuckles. “Just the basics to start will be fine.”

“Born and raised in St. Louis. I started playing hockey as a kid and quickly realized I had a natural talent. I let that talent lead the way, first by playing in the juniors, followed by being drafted and then heading off to college. Once I was out of college, I played in the AHL for a portion of my rookie season before being called up to play in the NHL. I just retired this past summer after suffering from a career-ending TBI.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” my mom says softly.

“It was definitely a hard pill to swallow, and I’ve had my moments since the injury, but for the most part, I’m healthy and I haven’t suffered debilitating symptoms like some TBI patients do.”

“I imagine you’ve got the top doctors in the area working on your case?” Dad asks him.

“Yes, the team provides all my medical and they only hire the best. I’ve been working with Dr. Price and he’s been amazing.”

“He’s one of the good ones. I’ve met him at a few functions over the years.”

“That he is,” John agrees.

“Shall we take our seats at the table?” Mom asks. “Dinner is ready,” she adds.

“Can I help with anything?” John asks Mom.

“Thank you for the offer, but I’ve got everything under control,” she tells him.

“All right.” He nods before turning to follow me to the formal dining room. He places his hand on my lower back as we make our way out of the kitchen.

Mom’s got a huge spread on the table already. A large pot roast is on a platter, surrounded by potatoes and carrots. On

another plate is freshly made dinner rolls and a salad in a bowl next to that.

“Wow, this looks amazing, Mom,” I tell her as we all take our seats. John pulls my chair out, allowing me to sit before he helps me adjust it.

“Such a gentleman,” Mom whispers to me as John and my dad take their seats.

Once everyone has served themselves, Mom starts back in with the questions. We cover everything from his family—where I interject and tell my parents just how cute his nephew is—to his career and where we each see ourselves five years from now.

“John, would you like to grab that glass of scotch and have a few minutes alone on the back deck?” my dad asks him. It is the fatherly, “*What’re your intentions with my daughter*” speech that I’m sure every father that has girls prepares.

“He’s not going to grill him too much, is he?” I ask my mom.

“I don’t think so, dear. He can see how much the two of you obviously feel about one another. It’s cute, really, and at the end of the day, your dad and I just want you happy. If Johnathan makes you happy, then so be it. He seems like a good man, so I say go for it, m’dear. You only get one crack at life, so make the most of it.”

“Do you think our age gap is an issue?” I ask her.

“Does it bother you?” she turns the question back on me.

“I’ve never felt like it does, I just didn’t know if you thought Dad would have an issue with it.”

“He doesn’t get to have an issue with it since he’s eight years older than me,” she reminds me.

“I never even really thought about that,” I tell her, laughing at the fact that my parents have the same number of years between them that Johnathan and I have between us.

“Have you guys talked about the future?”

“Nothing specific, just things we’d like to accomplish. Marriage, kids, things like that. We did, however, exchange our first ‘*I love you’s*’ last weekend and, gah! Mom, it was seriously the most magical moment.”

“Oh, honey,” Mom says, reaching out to grab my hand. “I’m so happy that you’ve found someone that loves you just as much as you love them. Hold on to that tight. Love like that is rare and doesn’t come around all that often.”

“I know. I’m enjoying it,” I tell her, keeping things a little vague. I tell my mom a lot of things, but my sex life is off limits.

“As you should.” She winks at me, the all-knowing mother that she is. I’m sure she isn’t dumb. She knows I’m a grown-ass woman who’s in a healthy relationship, and part of that is sex.

“So, you’ve met his sister, and her wife, and nephew. Any plans to meet his mother?”

“Nothing concrete yet. I’d love to take a long weekend and go to St. Louis. Let him show me around and get to meet his mom. I’ve said hello a few times when he’s talked to her on the phone or FaceTime, but getting that actual in-person introduction is different.”

“I’m sure that it will happen in due time,” Mom tells me.

“I know. Do you think Dad’s out there grilling him? Should I go rescue John?”

“I’m sure they’re just having a little male bonding time. You are your daddy’s little girl, after all. He hasn’t had too many boys to grill, so I’m sure that he’s taking the chance to do so.”

“That’s what I’m afraid of.” I laugh nervously.

“Give them a few more minutes. I’m sure John is a big boy and can stand up for himself in situations like this.”

“I hope so. He hasn’t had to meet the parents much before. I’m one of his only serious relationships that he’s been in. He

was always so focused on hockey that he never made the effort to date.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Mom says. “Sometimes not having a lot of baggage from previous relationships is helpful.”

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

“How are things at work?” she asks, changing the subject.

“Really good. I want to sit down and look at the numbers to determine if I can afford to hire another technician to help work at the main office. With how busy we’ve been, I think if we had a second technician, we’d be able to double our patient load at the office. If that was the case, then adding a second would more than pay for itself.”

“If it would pay for itself, it sounds like a no-brainer.”

“Yeah, I just need to crunch some numbers and make sure what I’m thinking in my mind is really how it would work out. I don’t want to take on more than I can handle.”

“I’m sure that you’ll figure it out and make the best decision, you haven’t gone in the wrong direction yet.”

“Thanks, Mom. I couldn’t do this without your and Dad’s support and help.”

“You know we’d do anything for you.”

Chapter Fifteen

JOHNATHAN

I take a seat on an Adirondack chair on the back deck. Beau hands me a glass of scotch and I swirl it in the glass around the ice cubes, allowing it to fully cool down. I tip the glass back, taking my first sip of the alcohol. I can feel the burn as it makes its way down my throat. I have to hold back a cough that wants to escape, but I hold it in, not wanting to appear like a kid tasting his first sip of alcohol.

“I’m sure you’re sweating in your boots there, over the grilling you’re excited to receive from me right about now, but that’s not who I am, nor is it what my daughter deserves,” Beau starts to tell me from where he’s leaning against the railing, sipping on his own glass of scotch.

“I don’t understand,” I tell him honestly. I fully expected to be grilled by her parents, her dad in particular, so I don’t really know what to think about his lack of wanting to grill me about my intentions with his daughter. I know that if our places were reversed, I’d be grilling the shit out of him.

“My daughter is a grown woman. One who has made many decisions on her own and I trust her judgment. If she thinks that you are good enough for her, then I love and believe in her enough to make that decision.”

I take another sip of my drink, no longer wincing at the sting from the alcohol. “All I ask is that you don’t lead my daughter on. She loves with her entire being and will put your happiness before her own. If you aren’t in this for the long road, then man up to that now. She deserves the world, so if you aren’t willing to give her that, then there’s the door. But if

you are willing to be the man she deserves; my wife and I will be right here to support the two of you.”

I’m still a little shocked at his viewpoint. Here I am, a man he’s only met just an hour or so ago, eight years older than his daughter. I’m currently unemployed with no job prospects in sight, and even I don’t think I’m all that good looking on paper as boyfriend material. “I would never lead her on,” I tell him honestly. “And I want you to know that I love your daughter. I am not the kind of man that uses that word lightly. I’d only ever told two women that I loved them in my life before last week, and I’m blood related to both of them.”

“So, your intentions are…” he leads, holding a hand up for me to continue.

“Marriage. Kids. I never really had those things on my mind or horizons during my playing years, but things change in the blink of an eye. When we first met, it was just as acquaintances because of our friends dating one another. That led to our own friendship forming, morphing over time into a relationship that I don’t think either of us were really looking for at the time—I know I wasn’t,” I explain to him. “But one that I don’t think I can live without now.”

“She’s got a way of befriending those around her. I’ve always been impressed with her drive and determination in life. I knew from a young age that she’d do whatever it was she set out in life to do. Does that intimidate you?” he asks.

“Not at all. That is one of the things I love most about her. I think from the moment I met her about a year ago, that is one of the things I admired most. I think it was also one of the things that attracted me to her. I’m so used to women throwing themselves at me because all they see is dollar signs and what I can provide to them. They see the social status being with me brings. None of that even hits Jill’s radar. She’s more worried about what she can do to help me. She’s already given me more ideas on what I can do now that I’m not playing, as well as offered to help with setting up a foundation or charity. I know she’s busy with her own business, and I’d never step in the way of that, but to know she’d help with whatever it is I decided to do with my life now that it’s been turned

completely upside down makes me believe that I can actually accomplish something, no matter what it is. And I know I'll have her full support."

"She is reliable, that's for sure."

"I only hope that I can give her the same support that she gives to me."

"Don't make it a competition. That's what relationships are all about. One partner can be the backbone during a hard time for the other, and then it can flip as your situations change. I know you've already gone through a lot in your adult life, and it sounds like all of that has been done without a partner for you to lean on. Don't shoot yourself in the foot by trying to protect her from things you don't think she can handle. Talk to her, keep that line of communication open. If something is bothering you, tell her about it. Even if it is the simplest of things. Talk it out. She might be able to see things from a different light and share that with you."

"I'm working on that. Not easy when you've spent the last thirty-five years not having many people you can lean on or want to burden with your problems."

"We've all got problems. Some people's are just more out there than others."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I agree with Beau.

We both look over at the sliding glass door as it opens. Jill pokes her head out, checking on the two of us. She looks from her dad's stance leaning against the railing to where I'm sitting in the deck chair. "How's it going out here?" she asks, obviously worried about it.

"Just getting to know one another," Beau answers, "but you can join us, if you'd like."

She doesn't hesitate, stepping out on the deck, only stopping long enough to slide the door closed behind her. She walks over to where her dad is standing. She leans in and kisses his cheek. "Love you Daddy," she tells him quietly. She turns and comes over to where I'm sitting and sits on my lap

sideways, her legs hanging over the arm of the chair. She wraps an arm around my neck, and smiles at me.

“You good?” I ask, rubbing a hand along her thigh.

“I am,” she replies. “I’m even better now that I know the two of you are getting along out here. I was a little worried the overprotective dad thing would scare you off.”

“What kind of man would I be if I couldn’t take a grilling from my girl’s dad?”

“I guess you have a point there,” she concedes.

“Do you two have any plans coming up?” Beau asks, pulling our attention back to him.

“Nothing really, just normal stuff,” Jill tells him.

“We’ve talked about planning a trip out to St. Louis, so I think I’m going to work on that in the next few days. I’d really like Jill to meet my mom and see where I came from,” I add.

“I can’t wait,” Jill tells me. “Maybe we can go for a long weekend next weekend?” she suggests.

“That might work. We can discuss things later when we can check schedules and such,” I tell her.

“Sounds good,” she agrees.

“How’s Julia coming along with wedding prep?” Beau asks.

“They’ve locked in the venue and date. I think she wanted to really start planning things, going to look at dresses and such, in the next month. Now that they have the date and venue all set, I need to figure out just how much time I need to take off from work and get that on the schedule so that we have lots of time to plan for it. I want to have a few days before the wedding to adjust to the time difference and to help with last minute things, and then a few days after to have time to explore and enjoy Sweden.”

“Might as well take as much time as you can afford to take,” Beau says. “I think your mom and I are going to go for

two weeks. Probably travel Europe after the wedding, hitting up places we've always wanted to go."

"I'm sure that Julia will love knowing that the two of you plan to attend. I think she was a little worried that not many people would be able to afford to travel for the wedding, but she fell in love with Beckett's hometown and really wants to get married there."

"Nothing is wrong with a small wedding. They can always have a reception back here in the States at some point, if they feel like that many people didn't get to make it."

"I think that is one of the things she's got on her list to plan," Jill tells us.

The door slides open again, Diane coming out to join us. "I've got dessert ready if anyone is up for it," she tells all of us.

"Yes, please," Beau answers his wife. He heads for her and the door. I watch as he pulls her into his arms, kissing her. It really hits me what role models Jill had growing up that I never had. She knows what it's like to be in a loving family, with parents who'd do anything for one another. I can only hope and pray that I can be that for her. Now that I know what it's like to love and be loved by this woman, I don't ever want to let her go.



"Hey, babe," I call out to Jill as I sit at the table in her condo. I've got her laptop open as I look at flights for late next week.

"Yeah?" she calls out from the bedroom.

"Come here for a minute, please?" I ask.

"Just a minute," she calls back. I open a second screen, pulling up the homepage for one of the hotels that I usually stay at when I go home for a visit.

Mom doesn't have a very big place, she refused to let me buy her something that was big when I signed my first

contract, so I bought her a one-bedroom condo. I didn't want her to have to worry about outside maintenance, so the condo made the most sense. Cindi and Stephanie live in a pretty suburban middle-class four-bedroom family home with a nice little yard, and on a quiet street that is perfect for kids to be outside playing on. While they've always said I was welcome to stay at their place, I've always just opted for a hotel so that I can get away and have some time to myself. Coming home is never the easiest thing to do. While I love the city and will always consider it home, there are a lot of negative memories that took place there that I've never really overcome.

"What's up?" Jill asks as she comes up next to me. She slides a hand along my shoulders, rubbing the knots at the base of my neck.

"I found a good flight option, but wanted to run it by you before I book it."

"Oh, good!" she says excitedly. "What is it?"

"Fly out Thursday evening at six thirty. The flight is only about an hour, so pretty quick. We'll get in at seven thirty. Then come home Monday afternoon, leave at two, home at three."

"That sounds perfect. I can totally swing two and a half days off from work."

"I figured that would give us a good amount of time to visit with everyone, time for me to show you around, lots of hotel sex," I say, nuzzling my face against the side of her boob that is in the perfect spot for that with the way she's standing next to me.

"Of course you'd toss that in," she says, laughing as I tickle her side.

"Hotel sex is right up there with make-up sex."

"Is that so?" she asks, quirking a brow at me. "According to who?"

"Everyone," I state, like it's a known fact.

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it. I’ll also expect you to rock my world, big guy,” she says as I pull her down into my lap. My lips crash against hers as I push my erection into her ass.

“I can show you just how big I am right now,” I whisper into her ear.

“No, you can’t, you’ve got a trip to book us and I need to go back to folding clothes,” she tells me as she pushes off of me. I reach out and smack her ass as she walks away from me. I do as she says, pulling out my wallet for my credit card. Within ten minutes, I’ve got our tickets booked, along with a car and our hotel for the long weekend.

“Everything is booked,” I call out as I push back from the table. I head for her room, standing at the doorway as I watch her folding a basket full of scrubs. Walter jumps down from the bed to come and walk his way between my legs, making sure to rub his body against my legs as he does so. I bend down, petting him, which causes him to start purring.

“He’s such a brat,” Jill says, pointing at Walter.

“Don’t be hating on him just because he loves me more,” I tease her.

“I’m the one who rescued him, buys him all his special treats, scoops his poop. You’d think all of that would be worth something,” she huffs out, but I can hear the playfulness in her voice. She isn’t mad at all, just perplexed with how he’s taken to me.



“Did you really buy us first class seats?” Jill asks after I hand her a boarding pass.

“Yep.”

“But it’s only a one-hour flight,” she points out.

“I know, but, honey, if you haven’t noticed, I’m not a short man. Sitting in coach isn’t comfortable for me. Don’t worry,

the cost of these two tickets didn't set me back much. I've dropped more money on skates than I paid for them."

"Okay, but just know I don't expect you to pay for extravagant things for me."

"Let me worry about what's extravagant and what isn't. Plus, I'm pretty sure it's in the boyfriend handbook somewhere that says, 'boyfriend must spoil girlfriend as often as possible to keep her happy and the blowjobs aplenty'."

She smacks me in the chest with the back of her hand. "Johnathan," she hisses my name. "You can't say shit like that in public. There could be little kids around," she says, looking around for them. A few are about twenty feet away from us, but with the noise of the airport, it isn't like they heard me.

"Why not?" I play dumb. "Are you saying that I'm wrong?" I raise an eyebrow in question as I look at her.

"That's beside the point," she tells me as we near the security checkpoint.

"We get to go into that line," I say, tugging on her hand to point her in the direction of the first-class line. "Perks of having a first-class ticket, we don't have to wait in that long line."

"Well, that almost makes it worth the added cost," she says as we wind our way through the line to the security checkpoint. We hand over our passes and IDs, getting waived through right away. I'm so used to flying in the team's jet, and security for those is so much different than when you fly commercial. Thankfully, we make it completely through the checkpoint quickly, gathering our things on the other side.

"Would you like to grab a quick bite to eat and drink before it's time to board?" I ask as we make our way down the concourse.

"Yes, I'm starving. With leaving early today, I didn't have much time to eat a full lunch."

We stop at a bar, finding a small two-person table along the wall of windows that looks out on some gates. The server stops a minute or so after we sit down, taking our drink and

appetizer order as we look over the menus that were stashed on the table.

“So, what’s the plan for tomorrow?” Jill asks, once the server steps away.

“I figured after breakfast we could head over to my mom’s place. As long as the weather holds out, I thought we could take her with us as we explore. I wanted to take you to some of the traditional tourist attractions, although I plan to wait to take you to the Arch until right before it closes. Watching the sunset from the observation area is probably the best thing about it.”

“I can’t wait! I’m so excited to meet your mama.”

“She’s excited to meet you,” I tell her, reaching out to lace our fingers together as we sit across from one another. The table is small enough that our knees touch underneath it.

“When are we getting together with Cindi and fam?” she asks as our server drops off our drinks. I watch as her lips wrap around the straw in her daiquiri, my cock stirring in my shorts as if she was wrapping them around it instead, just like she did this morning before we got out of bed for her to rush off to work.

“Hello, earth to John,” she says, snapping her fingers in front of my face when I don’t answer her.

I shake my head, trying to shake the visual from this morning to vacate my mind. “Sorry, what did you ask?”

She just looks at me like I’ve lost my mind, and I think she might be right. “I asked when we were getting together with Cindi and fam,” she repeats her question.

“Tomorrow afternoon. I think we’re going to have dinner together. I offered to take everyone out to dinner somewhere nice, yet a place that will have something that Mason will like.”

“Sounds good. Does that mean that we’ll do the Arch at sunset another night?” she asks.

“Yeah, I was thinking maybe Sunday night, but we’ll see how things are going and I’ll check the weather once we’re there.”

“I can’t wait!” she exclaims just as our appetizers are set down on the table. We didn’t really have enough time to order more than one course tonight before our flight is scheduled to take off, but this will be sufficient until we make it to our hotel and can grab something else in the hotel bar or from room service.



“Johnathan!” Jill says my name on a gasp as we walk through the door to the suite I booked us for the weekend. “This is too much!” she says, walking right to the wall of windows that overlook the city. You can see the Arch in the distance, all lit up in the dark sky.

“As I told you earlier, it’s my job to spoil you,” I tell her. I drop our bags on one of the high back chairs in the living room area, joining Jill at the windows. I wrap my arms around her from behind, resting my hand on her abdomen as I bury my face in her neck. “I could so fuck you against these windows right now.”

“Is that so?” she says as she tilts her head, giving me better access to her neck. I move her hair out of my way before I suck lightly. I know she’d hate it if I left a hickey on her the night before she meets my mom. I slide her top up enough that my hand can slip under it. I skim it up her skin, feeling as it breaks out in goosebumps. I reach her breasts, cupping one in my hand, the fabric of her bra the only thing between her pert nipple and my palm. I give it a good squeeze as I kiss down her neck.

Jill brings her hands up and behind her as she runs her fingers into my hair, tugging slightly as she holds on for the ride I’m about to take her body on.

“Open your eyes, beautiful,” I instruct. I’m looking at our reflection in the windows in front of us. Her eyes pop open,

and I wish I could see them in this moment. They are always so expressive when she's turned on. It's like they're windows to her soul and only I get to see in.

"John," my name falls from her lips.

"Yes, baby?" I ask as I caress her breast.

"I need you." She moans as she presses her ass against my crotch.

"I know." I smirk. "I need you just as much," I say as I slip my hand from beneath her shirt, grabbing the hem as I pull it up and over her head. I unclasp her bra just as quickly, spinning her around to face me. I drop my head, sucking on one nipple as I roll the other between my fingertips. I alternate between the two, not wanting to ever stop. "One day, I'm going to fuck your perfect tits," I tell her as I hold them together, creating the perfect space for my cock to slide.

"Yes," she agrees as I stand to my full height. I sweep her up into my arms, carrying her into the bedroom and placing her on the edge of the bed. I hover over her, boxing her in on the bed.

"Are you ready to have your world rocked for the first time on this mini-vacation?" I smirk just before my lips slide over hers. I break the kiss when I feel Jill tugging at my shirt. I push off the bed, taking off all of my clothes. Jill follows suit, taking off her flats, jeans and panties.

I take my fill of her beautiful naked body on display for me. "How'd I get so lucky to find you?" I ask her as I stroke my cock. "You're so fucking beautiful," I tell her as she moves back on the bed, stopping once her back meets the multiple pillows stacked behind her. She crooks her finger at me, beckoning me closer.

I'm not one to tell my woman no when she's naked and waiting for me. I crawl up the bed, dropping kisses on her legs as I pass by them. Jill opens her legs wider, allowing my body room between them. I kiss her inner thighs then slide my tongue up her slit. I know she's expecting me to suck her clit, but I don't. I tease her until she's withering under me as I kiss

along her abdomen, leaving sucking, biting kisses along her sensitive skin from her hips to the underside of her breasts. I suck each nipple into my mouth as I circle her clit with my fingers. “John, quick fucking teasing me and fuck me already,” she grits out.

“Are you sure that’s what you want?” I ask against her skin.

“Yes!” she cries. I push up, resting the bulk of my weight on my left forearm. I grip my cock, stroking it as I slide it through her wet folds. I run my tip ever so lightly over her clit and I swear she levitates off the bed. I line myself up with her entrance, thrusting hard and fast until I’m fully seated inside her pussy. I’ve worked her up so much, I immediately feel her walls start to flutter, the telltale sign that her orgasm isn’t far off. I snap my hips, pistoning them in and out. I hike one of her legs higher on my hip, which gives me a slightly deeper angle to thrust in at. I take full advantage of the added depth, finding a rhythm that has both of us crying out with our pleasure not even two minutes later.

I collapse on the bed, sliding a hand underneath her so I can pull her with me as I roll onto my back. It takes us both a good five minutes to catch our breath and recover enough to talk.

“Now, that’s how you start a vacation,” I say, breaking the silence in the room.

“You are incorrigible.” She laughs, attempting to smack my chest with her hand, but she’s so languid and sated after her orgasm that she can’t connect with my skin.

“You won’t be saying that when you’re begging for round two,” I reply cockily.

“Maybe, maybe not,” she says, shrugging her shoulders up.

“God, I’m hungry now,” I say just as my stomach growls.

“I could go for a greasy cheeseburger. Maybe one with bacon and avocado,” she adds.

“I’m sure we could order one from room service,” I suggest.

“Yeah?” she asks as a question.

I, unfortunately, have to slip out of bed to grab the room service menu from the desk, but I do, since I’m so hungry. The appetizers we had a few hours ago now weren’t enough to satisfy me for the night. Especially if I’m going to be burning calories again before bed.

Chapter Sixteen

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JILL
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I check my reflection one last time in the hotel bathroom mirror. I don't know why I'm so nervous about meeting John's mom, Nancy, but I am. I run a hand down the dress I finally decided on for today. It's flattering, not too sexy, but makes me feel that way, which makes me feel confident. I adjust my hair one last time, looking over the small amount of makeup I applied earlier before I got dressed.

"You look beautiful," John says from the doorway. "She's going to love you, so stop your worrying."

"I'm ready," I tell him, ignoring his comments.

"Then right this way, milady," he says, grabbing my hand and pulling me from the bathroom. I grab my purse and a jean jacket I packed to wear with this dress in case it's on the cool side. I slip it on as we ride the elevator down to the ground floor.

"You sure I'm dressed appropriately for today?" I ask.

"Of course, you are," he assures as we reach the lobby level. We get off, heading for the valet stand. John had already called down to let them know we'd be leaving soon, so the rental car is pulled up and already waiting for us. The valet hands him the keys as another one comes around and opens the passenger door so I can slide in. He waits until after I'm settled to shut it for me, as well.

"So fancy," I tell him. I haven't used valet services all that often, so this is all over the top to me.

John just smirks as he puts the car into drive and pulls away from the stand.



“Are you ready?” he asks me as we pull into a parking spot that is labeled as “visitor parking” for the large complex we’re at.

“I was born ready,” I tell him as I slip off my seat belt. He comes around the car, opening my door for me, then offers me his hand as I stand from the car. I’m so used to his truck, so having a car that is so much lower than his truck is just something I have to adjust to for the next couple of days.

We head inside the lobby and straight to the elevator bank. John hits the up button. “She’s going to love you,” he says as his lips rest next to my ear. He must sense my nerves again as we ride the elevator up to her floor.

“John!” I hear his name called out as soon as we exit the elevator. “You’re finally here!” his mom exclaims as we make our way to her door. I watch as he wraps his mom in his arms. His large body engulfs her small petite frame.

“Hi, Mom,” he greets her.

“I’ve missed you so much, please don’t make me wait as long before I see you again,” she scolds him as she pulls back from his embrace. I notice his flinch from her words. He’s confided in me how hard it is to come back here sometimes.

“I’ll see what I can do, Mom,” he says before he turns back to me. He grabs my hand and tugs me into his side. “Mom, I want you to officially meet Jill.”

“It’s so nice to finally meet you in person,” I tell her as she pulls me in for a hug.

“Oh, honey, the pleasure is all mine,” she says, squeezing me tight. “You two come on in, no need to stay out in the hallway for my nosy neighbors to start poking their heads out to see who’s here.”

We follow Nancy inside her condo, it's small, tidy; perfect for just one person.

"How was your flight?" she asks, as she shows us into the living room.

"Quick and painless," John tells her.

"How was your appointment?" John asks his mom.

"Fine, just a routine yearly checkup with my arthritis doctor. They're keeping my meds at the same dosage since it appears to be working. I don't get as much pain as I was getting just six months ago."

"I'm glad they appear to finally have found the right medicine to use for you."

"Me too. I was getting pretty miserable, and it took a few doctors before I found one that would listen to me and actually try some different things to combat the pain I was in," Nancy tells us. "Oh, Jill, before I forget, I have something to show you," she says excitedly as she hops up from the chair she was sitting on. She comes back with a book. One that I quickly realize is actually a photo album.

"Mom," John moans from the cushion next to me. I smirk as I crack the book open to the front page. It starts with pictures of Cindi as a baby, then ones of John as an infant, then a toddler and finally a little boy. I laugh and cry as I make my way through his album.

"This is incredible," I say as I flip through more pages.

"I'm going to ask your mom for pictures of you when you were a kid when we get back. I need to see awkward pre-teen Jill pictures as payback," John says as he looks over my shoulder at the pictures with me.

"Aww, look at you with your medals," I say, as I take in one picture of him with a bunch of hockey medals.

"I don't like to brag, but I was pretty good at hockey from a young age."

"I'm sorry that it's been taken away from you," I tell him, squeezing his hand underneath the album. He just nods.

“So, Jill, tell me more about yourself. John has been pretty tight lipped about you these last few months, but my daughter couldn’t stop gushing about you when she returned from her trip a couple weeks ago.”

I smirk at John before turning my attention back to Nancy. “Nothing super exciting. I was born and raised in Indianapolis. My parents have been married for thirty years, and still live in the same house that I grew up in. After I came home from college, I opened my own business up and it has done really well since day one. That has kept me busy the past couple of years and held most of my attention.”

“That’s great. Having the drive and passion to do what you love is not something many people possess. What do your parents do?” she asks.

“My dad’s a pharmacist and Mom’s a housewife, for the most part. She worked a few office jobs here and there to get herself out of the house once I was older. She now volunteers her time with one of our local nursing homes.”

“That’s wonderful,” she replies. We fall into a comfortable conversation, just getting to know one another for the next hour or so. She tells me many stories from John’s childhood that he hasn’t shared with me yet, mainly because they are the embarrassing ones that mothers love to tell about their kids.

“All right, enough stories about me, Mom,” John finally interjects. “Let’s head out. Cindi has texted me three times already asking when we’d be over.”

“I’ve waited thirty-five years to have you bring a girl home to me, you can just hush and let me have my moment,” Nancy tells him.

“Okay, Mom,” he says, rolling his eyes, which causes me to break out into a fit of giggles. “Hush, you,” he says, squeezing my side as we stand from the couch.

I pull him down toward me. “I love you,” I whisper against his lips before ours lock for a sweet kiss.

He wraps me in his arms, taking my innocent kiss a little deeper until we hear a throat clearing. I can feel my face

heating with the blush that I know is covering it after being caught by his mom kissing in her living room. John rests his forehead against mine, his eyes boring into mine. “I love you, too,” he whispers, only for me to hear.

“Let’s go, you two love birds,” Nancy says, and John and I pull completely apart. He slides his hand into mine, linking our fingers as we follow his mom out of her condo and into the hallway.



“Ms. Jill!” Mason calls as he comes running out of Cindi and Stephanie’s house. “You’re here!” he yells as he launches himself into my arms.

“What about me, little man?” John pouts next to me as everyone laughs at the situation. Who would have thought John’s nephew would come running to me before him?

“Hi, Uncle John,” Mason says to him from my arms. “Hi, Grandma.”

“What am I, chopped liver?” John asks him.

Mason looks at him with a quizzical look plastered on his face. “What’s liver?” Mason asks.

“A yucky meal that some people like,” I tell him. “But what Uncle John just said is just a saying. Because you came to me and not him, he’s feeling left out, maybe you should go give him a hug,” I suggest to Mason. He squirms in my arms, attempting to get down, so I help him do so. As soon as his feet hit the ground, he launches himself at John. His head lands directly in John’s crotch, causing him to double over in pain.

“Fu-fudge,” John wheezes.

“What’s wrong?” Mason asks, not sure what is going on.

“You’ve got to be careful with that head of yours, buddy. You just head butted me in the privates,” John grits out.

“I’s sorry,” Mason tells him, a worried look on his little face.

“It’s okay, buddy, just no more launching yourself at me, okay?”

“Okay,” he agrees with him.

“Well, now that that’s over, how about we all go inside. Can I get anyone anything to drink?” Cindi asks as she holds the door open for all of us to pass through.

“I’ll take something, thank you,” I tell her. I follow John as he makes his way further into the house.

“I’ve got water, lemonade, some pop, and I’m sure I could rummage up some wine.”

“Lemonade will be great,” I tell her.

“Sounds good, what about you, John?” she asks her brother.

“I’m good for now, thanks.”

I follow Cindi into the kitchen, waiting as she hands me a glass filled with ice cold lemonade.

“How was your morning?” Cindi asks as she puts the pitcher back into the fridge.

“Good, kinda lazy, and then we’ve just been at your mom’s for the last few hours.”

“Did she pull out the photo albums?” Cindi asks, taking a seat on one of the stools tucked under the counter.

“She did, I think it drove your brother nuts, but he also took it like a good sport.”

“She told me she was going to do that, and I’d told her that you would probably love it.”

“I did. It was fun to see him as he grew up.”

“How did it go with him meeting your parents last weekend?” she asks.

“Perfectly fine. John had offered to take everyone out for a nice meal, but my mom insisted on cooking for us, so we went

over to their house. My dad and John went out onto the deck to chat for a little bit, man to man. He still hasn't told me everything they discussed during that time, but he said that it was a good talk and that I didn't have anything to worry about."

"I'm sure he held his own if your dad was giving the standard fatherly talk to the boy his daughter brought home to meet the parents."

"I can only hope, but it couldn't have been too bad since they exchanged numbers and planned to have lunch together sometime soon. Enough about me, how are you feeling this week?"

"Good, had an appointment this week and the babies are right on target."

"That's great! Have you started to feel them move yet?"

"Nothing strong, but I think I've felt a flutter or two just this week."

"That's so awesome. Are you going to find out their genders?"

"Absolutely. I need time to plan and shop for necessities. We kept a lot of Mason's things, but with two, we'll obviously need to buy some extra things."

"Are you going to have a shower or register anywhere?" I ask.

"Probably not since this isn't our first. We'll just start picking things up as we go."

"You should at least put together a small registry so people who want to buy you something can get what you actually need or want," I suggest, knowing that I'd like to send a gift and I'm sure John would want to, as well.

"We'll see. Sometimes the stores will give you a coupon you can use on anything you buy yourself off the registry, so it might be worth creating one just for that discount."

"There you go," I say, laughing at the idea.

“What has the two of you giggling in here?” John asks as he joins Cindi and I in the kitchen.

“Just about shopping for baby things.”

“Ah,” he says, like that’s all he needed to hear to know this isn’t a conversation for him. “On that note, I’ll let the two of you talk your little hearts out. I’ll be outside with Mason and Mom,” he tells us.

“Sounds good, have Mason show you how good he is on his bike. He’s pretty good with going around the block, just make sure he stays on the sidewalk.”

“Will do,” John agrees and then disappears out of the kitchen.



“Are you ready for this?” John asks, the excitement he’s feeling practically vibrating from his body.

“I guess so,” I tell him. I’m afraid of heights, so the thought of going up the elevator to the observation deck in the Arch scares the bejesus out of me.

He squeezes my hand. “I’ve got you, babe,” he says, leaning down to kiss my cheek.

“You’d better,” I tell him as we approach the ticket booth.

“Two for the top, please,” he says to the booth attendant as he slides some cash through the little slot. The young man prints off our tickets, passing them to us through the slot along with Johnathan’s change. He grabs the tickets and we make our way over to the elevator doors where we’re greeted by an employee.

“Tickets, please,” she says and John hands them over. “Once to the top, please take your time looking around. The last elevator down is in about ninety minutes, so you’ve got some time to explore and see the sun set,” the employee tells us as she rips our tickets, handing one half back to John. We step onto the elevator just as my palms start to sweat.

“You okay?” he asks as we start to move. I can feel my anxiety starting to kick in. I don’t really like small places and I don’t like heights, so the two together are really throwing me for a loop. “Just breathe, babe,” he says, and I suck in a breath. He turns so he’s facing me and cups my cheeks in his hands, pulling my face up to look at him. I follow his breathing pattern, and can feel my body start to let go of some of the tension that it was holding on to. “We’re almost to the top,” he tells me then brushes his lips on mine.

The bell dings, alerting us that we’ve reached the top just before the doors slide open. We walk out and I’m surprised at how okay I am up here. I look out over the city and am just amazed at the beauty before me. We find an area that isn’t packed with people. I stand against the railing and look out the small window in front of me. John boxes me in from behind, his arms coming around me as he rests his chin on my shoulder.

“It’s so beautiful,” I tell him as we watch the sun start to slowly make its descent as it sets.

“It is,” he agrees.

“How many times have you come here before?” I ask.

“Only a couple of times. Once in probably fifth grade, I think. It’s a staple field trip, or at least it was when I was a kid. I guess I don’t really know if they still do it. I came back again once as an adult on one of my visits back home because my mom wanted to come see it as she’d never been.”

We stand in silence as we watch the sun set, it really is an experience to watch it from up here. The sky is filled with so many different shades, from pinks and oranges to some purples and blues in the distance. We couldn’t have picked a better night to come here. I’m just glad I didn’t chicken out and got on the elevator to come up.

Chapter Seventeen

JOHNATHAN

I roll over in bed, my hand finding cold sheets instead of the warm body that I've grown used to finding next to me, and that's when I remember that Jill stayed at her place last night. She wasn't feeling all that great, blamed it on cramps and said she just wanted to sleep after work, plus she had an early morning vet visit for Walter. I didn't fight it, figuring that it wasn't a bad thing that we have a little time away from one another. It feels like besides her going to work, we've been inseparable since we decided to give this relationship thing a go.

I roll back over, my head is pounding, something I haven't experienced in months. A wave of nausea hits me out of left field, and I stumble my way from bed to the bathroom. I don't have much in my stomach, so I end up dry heaving. Once I'm able to stand up, even if the room is still spinning on me, I rummage through my bathroom cabinets until I find the prescription bottle for the meds I was given for headaches when I first was diagnosed with the concussion. I toss back the meds with a small glass of water before I shuffle out to the kitchen to pop some bread into the toaster. I put a coffee pod into the Keurig for a quick cup of coffee and I'm hopeful between the meds, a little food, and the coffee that I can kick this headache that has settled in.

With my toast and coffee on hand, I plop down on the couch, kicking back into a comfortable position. I hear my cell start to ring, but it's all the way in my bedroom, and I just don't have the energy right now to get up and get it. I'll deal with calling whoever back later. It's probably Jill on her way

in to work. I finish off my toast and coffee, feeling a tad bit better with some food in my system. My head is still pounding, so I pull the blanket off the back of the couch, covering myself up and fall back to sleep.

I startle awake, my surroundings foggy as I realize where I am. I look around, the sun is in the sky, so I must have slept for hours. My head is still at a dull ache, but no longer pounding like it was this morning.

“JC, open up!” I hear pounding and a muffled voice on the other side of my door. That must be what startled me awake. I push myself up, tossing the blanket aside.

“I’m coming,” I holler at the door so that whoever’s on the other side will quit pounding on it. Each pound is like a hammer to my head. “What?” I ask, annoyed as I open the door, finding Beckett and Mark Lee on the other side.

“You look like shit,” Beckett says.

“This explains why you haven’t been answering your phone,” Mark adds.

“Are you ok?” Beckett asks as he pushes past me and into my living room.

“Woke up with a migraine,” I say, closing the door behind them.

“Where is your phone?” Mark asks.

“I think on the nightstand, why?”

“Because your girlfriend is freaking out. She’s been trying to reach you all day and you haven’t answered any calls or texts from anyone.”

“Shit,” I say, heading for the bedroom. I snag my phone from the nightstand where it is still plugged in and, sure enough, I’ve got a dozen or so missed calls from Jill, Cindi, Mark, and Beckett, along with a string of messed texts, as well. I unlock my phone, hitting Jill’s contact to call her first.

“Are you okay?” she asks as soon as she picks up.

“Yeah, sorry to scare you. I woke up with a pounding headache, took some meds, and crashed on the couch. I didn’t hear my phone at all and only woke up because Mark and Beckett showed up and were pounding on my door.”

“I’m sorry,” she says.

“No, I’m sorry for freaking you out.”

“I just got so worried when you hadn’t called or texted me back by lunch time, so I texted Julia to see if Beckett had heard from you and she said she’d get him to check on you. Sorry if I overreacted.”

“It’s all good. How are you feeling?”

“Eh, okay, things will be better again in a few days.”

“How was Walter’s appointment?”

“Oh fine, just his normal checkup.”

“Are you coming over tonight?” I ask, looking at the clock finally and seeing that it is already almost five thirty.

“Do you want me to?” she asks.

“Of course, or I can come to you. I missed having you next to me last night. Waking up to cold sheets on your side of the bed this morning sucked.”

“I was quite lonely last night; Walter didn’t want to snuggle with me like you do.”

“Okay, let me kick these guys out of my place, I’ll take a quick shower and then head to your place. Want me to pick up some takeout on my way over?”

“Sure, how about some fajitas? We could share a double order.”

“Sure, babe. Anything else?”

“You know I can’t have fajitas without a big bowl of their guacamole and chips.”

“I would never forget to order those for you.”

“Thank you. I should be done here in the next twenty or so minutes, so I’ll see you in the next hour or so.”

“Sounds good, see you then,” I tell her, as I head back out to the living room. I find Beckett and Mark on my couch watching game highlights from around the league on the *NHL Network*.

“Thanks for waking me up, guys, but I’ve got to get going. I’m picking up dinner and heading to Jill’s house.”

“How’s the head?” Mark asks, looking me over again from his position on the couch.

“Fine, and I’m sure it will be even better once I get some sustenance in me. The meds took away most of the pounding.”

“Do you see the doc again anytime soon?”

“No, unless my symptoms return with a vengeance. Otherwise, the occasional day with migraines and light sensitivity are normal. They just have a habit of hitting me out of nowhere, and like today, the meds tend to knock me out for hours.”

“Sucks that it happens that way,” Mark states.

“It does.”

“If you’re feeling up to it, stop by the rink tomorrow. We can introduce you to the new rookie who just showed up the other day. He’s still pretty wet behind the ears. Maybe you can mentor him if you’ve got nothing else going on. He could learn a lot from you.”

“I’m not babysitting your rookies, Mark. Nice try.” I laugh with my former captain.

“I didn’t say babysit, I said mentor. Maybe give him some pointers, help him with his game a bit. He’s going to get swallowed up by the bunnies if someone doesn’t help him out.”

“I can’t really help with that. Isn’t that a right of passage for most new guys?” I ask, thinking back all the years to my rookie season.

“Not when you’ve got a girlfriend back home.”

“Well, shit. He’d better learn to keep it in his pants then. What’s this kid’s name?”

“Dylan Campbell,” Mark says.

“When did he get here?” I vaguely recognize the kid’s name as he played in the AHL last season and was pretty good from what I remember, but I’ve never actually met him in person that I can recall.

“Just this week. He should be playing in tomorrow night’s game for the first time, according to Scott.”

“I’ll think about it,” I finally tell him. “I might stop by anyways. Wanted to talk to Richard about a few things and maybe even your wife,” I say.

“She should be there, although you might have to call and get on her calendar, she’s been busy with meetings lately.”

“Thanks for the heads up,” I tell him. I check the clock and fifteen minutes has already passed since I got off the phone with Jill, and here I am still standing around. “All right, guys, I’ve got to hit the showers, I’ll see you later,” I tell them as I do my best to get them to leave.

“Don’t forget to stop by tomorrow,” Beckett says as they walk out the door. “Everyone would love to see you,” he says, speaking for the team.

“I won’t,” I assure him before closing the door. I head for the shower, once inside, I let the hot water work on the tension in my muscles. Sleeping for so many hours on the couch wasn’t the greatest for my body, but it is what it is. When I laid down on the couch this morning, I never expected to sleep the day away on it.



“It’s me,” I say when Jill answers the buzzer for her building.

I head upstairs, two bags of food in my hands.

“Hey,” she greets me, already standing at her condo door. She leans up, pressing a kiss to my lips. “God, I’m starving

and that smells amazing,” she says when she pulls back.

We both step into her place, and I head for the kitchen to set the bags down. I get to work pulling out two plates, along with silverware, before setting the food out on the bar for us to both dig in to.

“Would you like anything to drink?” she asks from behind me.

“I’ll just take some water. My head is still a little foggy from earlier,” I tell her.

She grabs two glasses, filling them both with ice and water before joining me at the bar.

“So, besides worrying about me, how was your day?” I ask, filling a tortilla with the fajita mix.

“Busy, I had a full patient load. Worked right through lunch with coming in a little late because of Walter’s appointment.”

“Makes sense why you’re so hungry tonight,” I tease her.

“Hey now. I only had time for a granola bar and some coffee, so excuse me if I eat my weight in these amazing fajitas,” she says as she takes a huge bite.

We fall into a comfortable silence as we both eat our way through the food in front of us. Once we’ve both polished off everything, I grab the dishes and start cleaning up.

“You want to curl up and watch something on the couch?” Jill asks once we’ve got everything loaded into the dishwasher.

“Whatever you want to do, babe,” I tell her. We take a seat on the couch, and she flips on the TV.

“I’ve heard good things about the show *Yellowstone*, want to give that a try?”

“Sure,” I agree as we get situated on the couch together, her back to my front as we lay down along the entire length. I slide my left hand along her torso, resting it on her abdomen. “Mark and Beckett want me to stop by the rink tomorrow and see the guys,” I tell her as she pulls up the show on demand.

“Oh yeah?” she asks.

“Mark asked if I’d mentor some new rookie that just got called up. Said he’s pretty green and needs some guidance from someone who’s got experience.”

“Ah, are you going to do it?”

“I don’t know, I guess it doesn’t hurt to stop by and meet the kid. I don’t know why one of the guys in the locker room isn’t taking him under their wing and showing him the ropes. I can only do so much from the sidelines. It’s not like I can travel with them when they hit the road, or be there every practice to give him pointers.”

“No, but having someone he can call or text and confide in that isn’t fully connected to the coaching staff anymore might be a good thing for him, and I’m sure that someone will help him out when you aren’t there. It’s not like they’re going to let the wolves eat him alive.”

“No, but they also won’t keep the bunnies from seducing him.” I chuckle as I bury my nose in Jill’s neck.

“Eww.” She shudders. “I really hate that term and the thought of them.”

“Just a part of every sport, babe. Some women are desperate.”

“And the men are more than willing to partake,” she states.

“That we are, well, some of us are.”

“I’m so glad that you weren’t really into that scene,” she says as she sets the remote on the side table and rolls in my arms so she’s facing me now. “I love you,” Jill says as she presses her lips to mine.

“I love you, too,” I tell her as I push a lock of hair out of her face and behind her ear. “I’m sorry about today. It wasn’t my intention to scare you like I did. My meds just tend to knock me out, which apparently, my body needed.”

“It’s okay. As soon as your name popped up on my screen, I let out a huge breath. I just didn’t know what was going on and was worried that something had happened to you. I’m

sorry if I overreacted by calling your friends to go check on you.”

“It’s okay, babe, I would have done the same if our positions were reversed.” Jill slides an arm around my torso, as she rests her head on my chest. I tighten my own arms around her as we both just lay here together, breathing one another in.

“Are you sleeping?” I ask about twenty minutes later. We’ve been still, just holding one another.

“No, just enjoying your warmth and the sound of your heart beating in my ear,” she says before shifting to look up at me.

I press my lips against hers, the kiss starting slow and innocent. We both hold on to one another as we lazily deepen the kiss until we’re fully making out on the couch like two teenagers. I know she hasn’t been feeling well the last day or two with it being her time of the month, so I don’t press to move things any further than they already are.

“Shall we watch the show or go to bed?” she asks once we finally break apart.

“I’m open to either,” I tell her, resting my forehead against hers. I press a quick kiss to her lips before she rolls again, pressing her back against my front. We adjust ourselves until we’re both back into the comfortable position we started out in.



“You actually made it,” Mark greets me as I enter the players area of the practice facility. It didn’t take much to get in, seeing as I played for the Eagles for over ten years.

“I did. I wasn’t going to leave you hanging,” I tell him, accepting his handshake.

“Let me introduce you to the new kid,” he says, leading the way into the locker room.

Most teams are very protective of their locker rooms, the Eagles being no different, so knowing that I'm still welcome past the doors means a lot to me. Not everyone who's played for this team would get the same reception walking through the doors.

"Hey, rookie!" Mark calls out once we're past the doors.

"Yes, captain," the kid calls back as he walks over to us. His eyes widen slightly when he sees me. Damn, this kid is green.

"Dylan, I'd like to introduce you to Johnathan Camps. You might have heard of him before," Mark introduces us.

"Mr. Camps, it is so nice to meet you," he excitedly greets me.

"Call me JC or John, none of that Mr. Camps shit," I tell him. "I might be retired, but I'm not that damn old," I tease him.

"Of course, mister—I mean, JC." He almost lets it slip again.

"What's your nickname, kid? I know it isn't rookie, even if all these assholes insist on calling you that this season," I tell him, pointing around at everyone in the locker room.

"Soupy," he tells me.

"Soupy? How the hell did you get that one?"

"Last name is Campbell; you know, like the soup company. Campbell's Soup, so soupy it was," he tells me.

"Got it. I played with a kid in my youth days with the same last name and he got called the same thing now that you say that."

"I've met a few others and the same with all of us. Just comes with the last name, I guess." He chuckles.

"What position do you play?" I ask.

"Left wing, sir."

“Same as I did. No wonder Mark asked me to come in,” I muse. “How are you at face offs?” I ask.

“Okay, I could always be better at them, but I’m not horrible,” he admits, and I’m impressed that he isn’t trying to up-play his abilities like many rookies would.

“Hearing you say that tells me you’ll go far in this league. How old are you, Soupy?” I ask, using his actual nickname and not the rookie one the guys have taken to calling him.

“Nineteen, I’ll be twenty next month.”

“Damn, you are a young one.”

“Yes, sir,” he agrees with me.

“We can’t even take you out and get you drunk legally yet,” I muse. “So, tell me your story, Soupy.”

“Not much to tell, started playing at five, excelled quickly. Played juniors, drafted last year, was invited to camp for the AHL and made the team, got the call up last week to come play here in Indy,” he tells me quickly.

“Where are you from, kid?” I ask.

“Western Massachusetts,” he replies.

“What do you want out of this?” I ask, circling my finger around the room.

“To play hockey for as long as possible. It has always been my dream to play at this level. I’m willing to put in the work, keep out of trouble, and make my mom proud.”

“That’s good to hear, kid. You keep your head held high, keep out of trouble and keep yourself healthy, you should go far in this league and this is one fine team to do it with. I don’t regret signing with them one bit when I did. We took a mutual chance on each other and it paid off well for all involved. Look, Soupy, I’m not going to tell you that this is an easy job. It has its ups and downs, but if you want some pointers from an old man, I’ll give you my number and we can catch up when you’re in town.”

“Thank you so much, JC. I grew up idolizing your style of play, so getting to stand here and talk to you is really throwing me for a loop.”

“I’m just like you, kid. I put my pants on one leg at a time. Just promise me you won’t let these assholes corrupt you. You’ve got a girl back home?” I ask.

“Yes, we’ve been together since our freshman year of high school, she’s away in California for college.”

“If she means anything to you, and I’m sure she does if you’ve been together for so long, don’t fall for the bunnies’ attention. They can smell rookies out a mile away. They’ll try and dig their claws in and won’t let go. The temptation can be real, but it isn’t worth it.”

“I’ve already dealt with some of that last season down in the AHL, but thanks for the words of advice.”

“Anytime, kid,” I tell him as I clap him on the back. “Here’s my number, text me anytime. When you guys get back from your road trip, we can grab some lunch.”

“Yes, thank you,” he says, punching my number into his phone. “I’ll send you a text now so that you have my number, as well.”

I hear my phone chime in my pocket, and I pull it out just to verify that it was a text from him and not Jill randomly at the same time. “Got it, Soupy. Don’t let these guys give you too much shit,” I remind him, slapping his back one more time. The kid is a little scrappy. He still needs to grow into his body, which will come with time. Mark and Beckett weren’t joking when they said he was still wet behind the ears.

“I’ll see y’all later!” I call out to the locker room.

“You headed up to talk to Murph?” Mark asks.

“Yep, I wanted to run some ideas past him.”

“Sounds good, you coming to the game tonight?”

“Maybe. I’ll see how Jill feels after she’s off work. She’s had a rough week, we might just call it an early night again.”

“Sounds good, man, see you when we see you,” he says as I exit the room.

I make my way up to the team’s offices. I’ve walked these halls countless times and walking them now is bittersweet.

I reach Richard’s office and rap my knuckles along the open door frame. He looks up from his desk, giving me a big smile as he realizes I’m standing at his open door.

“Hey, man, come on in. What dragged you in today?” he asks.

“Mark asked me to stop by, talk to the new kid, maybe mentor him some.”

“Ah, yeah, Soupy. He’s pretty young.”

“Yeah he is, he must be good to get called up though.”

“He is. Led the team last year in goals, he’s got one hell of a shot and can skate faster than I’ve seen guys skate in a long-ass time. He’s a little small still, but if he hits the gym, he’ll fill out and be more lethal out there on the ice. I’m just glad he’s on our team.” Mark chuckles.

“I guess so,” I muse. “Hey, I wanted to talk to you a bit about possibly helping me with starting a program. I don’t know that I’m ready to fully start a foundation or anything, but I’d like to do something to help guys in the league who have already suffered from one, maybe two, minor concussions, maybe target those that have minor symptoms but that could easily become major ones with one wrong hit.”

“Of course, anything that I can do to help, I’m right here at your beck and call.”

“Thanks, my thought was to put together some kind of video with some interviews with myself and maybe a couple other guys who’ve suffered like I have. Maybe interview a couple top doctors from around the country explaining what is happening and how we can avoid it. What side effects we deal with and how debilitating they can be to some of us. Explain how we can be triggered or hit out of the blue by some of these things and they can completely dominate our lives when they do. Just yesterday I woke up with a migraine. It took me

out for the entire day. I slept through my phone going off multiple times during the day. Mark and Beckett had to come bang on my door to wake me up.”

“I can make some calls to some guys I know that have retired over the last couple of years that might be able to help. Do you have a camera crew or producer on board to help with that side of things?” he asks.

“Nope, do you have any suggestions?”

“I can give you the contact information of our crew that does the game coverage. They might be able to help, or point you in the direction of someone who can.”

“That’d be great,” I tell him. “I was going to call my doc, plus reach out to a few others who have worked with other athletes around the country.”

“Sounds like you’ve got a good idea. I hope that it all plays out and can help guys.”

“Me too. I’m willing to share my experience if it will help just one person not have to go through what I’ve been going through.”

Chapter Eighteen

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JILL
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“Are you ready for today?” I ask Julia as I watch as she finishes her makeup for our first outing to look at dresses for both of us for her wedding.

“I’m so ready!” she exclaims excitedly. Beckett is out of town for a few days on a road trip. The team plays tonight in LA, so we’ve got hours before she’ll want to be home in time to watch his game.

“What are you thinking?” I ask. I know she’s been looking at bridal magazines lately, trying to get a feel for what the current trends are.

“I want something simple, not too frilly. Especially since we’re flying to Sweden, it will need to fit into a suitcase without being ruined.”

“And you still want the bridal party in a wine color?” I ask, just to make sure none of her plans have changed.

“That’s correct. I figured we could find a dress line that offered multiple styles with the color I liked and then each of you can pick the dress style that you feel the best in.”

“I like that idea,” I comment.

“Shall we head out?” she asks, grabbing her purse from the counter. “We’re meeting my mom at the dress shop in,” she pauses to look at her watch, “ten minutes.”

“I’m ready.” I pop up from where I was perched, following her out of the place she shares with Beckett. I’m so happy my bestie found Beckett. They’re perfect for one another and he

treats her like a princess, without the attitude of entitlement that would come with that from most women.

“There you girls are!” Bridget, Julia’s mom, greets us as we enter the dress store.

“Sorry, I was late getting ready this morning,” Julia admits.

“Well, you’re here now, and that’s all that matters,” Bridget says as she hugs both of us.

“Welcome, you must be the bride to be,” a lady says as she approaches the three of us, but speaking directly to Julia.

“I’m the bride!” Julia exclaims. “I’m Julia,” she introduces herself, “and this is my maid of honor, Jill.”

“It is so nice to meet both of you, I’m Sara and I’ll be helping you today. After speaking with your mom, I understand you wanted to look at dresses for both the bride and bridal party, is that correct?”

“That’s correct. I was hoping to find a line with a color I liked and then I can have the rest of my bridal party look at the dress styles and pick the one they’d feel the most comfortable in. Two of my bridal party members won’t be able to come in to pick, as they live in Sweden where the wedding will take place, so I’ll have to get their measurements so we can order, then send the dresses to them for any alterations that might need done.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. Depending on the line, we can also sometimes drop ship the dresses directly to them,” Sara explains.

“Oh, that’s even better.”

“Shall we get started?” Sara asks.

“Sure!” Julia says, clapping her hands excitedly.

“I like to have my brides take a look through some of the racks and displays, point out things you like and don’t like. That will help give me an idea of your tastes and I can suggest some others based on that. Sometimes it’s the first dress a bride tries on that is *the one*, and sometimes it’s the fiftieth, so

don't feel bad saying that you want to try something else on, or knowing when you've found the one," she explains as she leads us to some racks.

"I'll give you fifteen or twenty minutes to browse and then I'll get you set up in a dressing room. In the meantime, can I get any of you something to drink? A glass of champagne, water, soda?" she offers.

"Oh, champagne sounds yummy and seems appropriate for the occasion," Julia answers for all of us.

"Coming right up," Sara says before she leaves us to browse.

"There are so many beautiful dresses here! I don't know how I'm going to choose one," Julia whispers to me.

"You'll know, or at least that's what I've been told." I giggle as we look at dress after dress. Some get heart eye reactions while others can't be pushed back on the rack fast enough.

"How's it going?" Sara asks a few minutes later, three glasses of champagne in her hands. She hands them out to Julia, Bridget, and me.

"Good! So many dresses to choose from!" Julia tells her.

"Let's set you up with a room and start trying on a few dresses," Sara suggests. She pulls a few and leads us to a sitting area that has a couch facing a huge mirror with a platform in the center. "The two of you can have a seat," she says to Bridget and me, "and you can come with me," she says to Julia. Bridget and I take a seat and watch as Julia heads down a hall after Sara.

"Are you excited?" I ask Bridget, she's like a second mom to me, seeing as how Julia and I have been friends for so long.

"I am, I can't believe this is happening already. It feels like just yesterday the two of you were entering high school, and now look at her, she's about to get married! And what about you, I hear you've got yourself a man these days."

“Yeah,” I say a little dreamily. “John and I have been dating for a few months now.”

“JC, yes?” she asks.

“Yeah,” I say on a giggle. “It’s so weird to hear him called that,” I tell her.

“How is he doing?” she asks. “Is retirement treating him okay?”

“He’s got his good and bad days,” I tell her honestly. Having been a hockey wife for all the years her husband, Matt, played and is now the goalie coach for the Eagles organization, she understands what it’s like to be with someone just going through retirement.

“I can only imagine. I know firsthand what it’s like when they retire after a long career. It’s a huge transition, and I experienced it when it was on Matt’s terms. Experiencing it when it wasn’t when they wanted to retire is an entirely different game. There’s that resentment of things being taken away from them, not to mention what he must be going through with the concussion side effects.”

“I can’t attest to what it was like before his retirement and during his playing years since we didn’t start dating until around the time he had to make that decision. It’s been hard on him, but I also think that he’s come to terms with it.”

“Does he have any plans for work of any kind?” she asks, just as Sara and Julia reappear. “Oh my goodness,” Bridget gasps, seeing her daughter in a wedding dress. We watch as she steps up on the platform in front of us, facing the mirror. We can see around her, to see her reflection, as well as the back of the dress. The first one she’s tried on is form fitting. It has a halter style neckline, with open arms. It is fitted from top to bottom, where it stops just before the floor.

“You look amazing!” Bridget gushes as Julia turns to face us.

“Thanks, Mom,” she says, looking down at the dress she has on. “What do you both think?” she asks.

“What do you think?” I ask. I like it, but don’t love it, but want to know her thoughts first.

“I’m not sure. It’s gorgeous, I just don’t think that it’s the one,” she says, biting her bottom lip.

“Then it’s not the one,” Bridget states.

“Let’s try the next one,” Sara suggests, leading Julia back down the hall and into the dressing room.

“Back to our conversation,” Bridget says to me.

“Of course, I think you’d asked about John and his plans.”

“Yes,” she confirms.

“He’s working on a campaign to help other players hopefully avoid going through what he’s gone through. I know he was trying to get some other former players on board to tell their stories, along with some leading medical professionals to be a part of the documentary. I think once he gets that done, he wants to start a foundation that helps aid in the research into making helmets better at absorbing the impact they take when hit into the boards or the ice. He wants to make the game safer for everyone else.”

“That sounds great. I’m sure he’ll do an amazing job bringing awareness to the issue. Lord knows that more needs to be done to protect all the players, from the peewee kids just starting out at four and five years old, all the way up to our professional athletes in their twenties and thirties.”

“I’m really hopeful it brings him clarity and peace after retiring, not that he didn’t have a long successful career, but he definitely feels like he was cut short by not getting to play for a few more years.”

“I’m glad that the two of you found one another. Have your parents met him yet?”

“They have. They loved him, even if my dad had to have the ‘what are your intentions with my daughter’ talk that dads like to pull with their daughter’s boyfriends. I was a little worried that my dad would have an issue with our age difference, but he didn’t.”

“Nothing wrong with an older man.” She smirks.

“He can be my sugar daddy,” I joke.

“Whatever floats your boat.” She laughs right along with me, our giggle fest interrupted when Sara and Julia return to show us another dress.

“Oh, honey!” Bridget gasps as Julia steps up on the platform. “I love it.”

Julia looks at me via the reflection of the mirror. I have a feeling she might have found her dress by the look on her face. It fits her perfectly, has a sweetheart neckline, is fitted through the bodice and then flowy to the floor. It only pools on the floor by a few inches in the front and a couple more in the back.

“What do you think?” I ask as I watch my best friend in the entire world’s face light up even more.

“I love it!” she exclaims. “I think this might be *the one!*” she tells us as tears stream down her cheeks.

“Oh, honey!” Bridget jumps up from her spot on the couch and wraps her daughter in a huge hug. “You’re going to make the most beautiful bride. I can’t believe we just found your dress! Beckett is going to love you in it.”

“Do you like it?” Julia turns and asks me.

“I do! It is perfect for you!” I tell her confidently. As her mother said, she’s going to make a beautiful bride.

“Now, are you thinking of a veil or no veil?” Sara asks.

“I’m going to wear my mom’s veil,” Julia tells her.

“I actually brought it, it’s just out in the car. Should I go get it?” Bridget asks.

“Yes, we can make sure that it will match the dress before you finalize your decision,” Sara replies.

Bridget lets go of Julia and heads off for her car. “Beckett is going to lose his shit when he sees you in this,” I say. “He’s going to be pawing at you all night, wanting to get you out of this.”

“He will.” She giggles in agreement with me. “Probably just as much as I’ll be doing the same when I see him in his tux.”

“Y’all better get to making some cute babies ASAP for me to spoil,” I tell her while we wait for Bridget to return.

“I think we want to wait a few years, enjoy being married and young together before we add in the responsibility of parenthood.”

“Do you think when that happens, you’ll quit your job?” I ask.

“Probably. I obviously won’t have to work for us to survive, but for now, I love my job. But we’ll cross that bridge when we get there. Like I said, we just want to be young and in love and the two of us, for now. Maybe start a family closer to thirty,” she tells me, just as Bridget enters the room again, veil in hand. Sara takes it from her and slides the hair combs into Julia’s hair.

“That’s a perfect fit,” Sara exclaims.

“I’m so happy,” Bridget cries, looking at her daughter standing there with her dress on and the veil that Julia has chosen to use as her something old for the good old wives’ tale, something new, old, borrowed and blue.

“Now, let’s get you out of this and we can start looking at bridal party dresses!” Sara suggests.

“Sounds great,” Julia agrees with her.

“Come with me and I’ll show you to those dresses while Julia changes,” Sara offers. I follow her into a separate room, once again filled with racks of dresses.

“Almost every designer offers these dresses in a full color wheel of options, so it’s a matter of finding the exact shade she wants and then a line of dresses that will work for everyone in the party.”

“Sounds good, do you have a color chart I can start looking at for each of them?” I ask, since I know what their colors are.

“Of course,” Sara says, handing me a binder with all the color charts. “Each rack is a different designer’s dresses and they’re in order with the book, starting with the rack over here,” she explains, pointing to a rack on the far left. “Let me go check on the bride and I’ll be back.”

Bridget joins me and we start flipping through the binder of designers’ color and dress options. I find two that I think would work perfectly. I get up and walk over to check out the dresses on the rack, finding one I absolutely love.

“How’s it going?” Julia asks as she joins me.

“Good, I think this line will work perfectly, what do you think?” I ask, showing her the color option and holding up the one dress that I love.

“Oh, that’s perfect!” she exclaims, her excitement palpable.

“Well, that was almost too easy!” Sara joins in on our excitement.

We sit down and Sara pulls out a booklet that is just on the line we like, giving us all the details on the available options. Julia is able to send a link to the collection online to Beckett’s sisters in Sweden so that they can choose the ones they like best.

“Thank you so much for your help today! I’m so excited for our dresses to come in,” Julia thanks Sara before we head out of the dress store.

“How about a lunch celebration?” Bridget suggests as we all head for the parking lot.

“Sounds good to me!” Julia states. “You good with that?” she asks, turning to me.

“Of course! Want me to text my mom and see if she can meet us?”

“Yes!” Julia agrees, so I pull my phone out and text my mom. She had something going on this morning and couldn’t make it to the dress appointment, but I think she was supposed to be free by lunchtime.

“She’s in for lunch, where should I have her meet us?” I ask Julia and Bridget.

“How about The Mud House,” Bridget suggests.

“Sounds good to me,” I say, typing out the information to my mom.

“We’ll meet you there,” Julia tells her mom as we reach her car.

“Sounds good, girls,” Bridget says before she slides into her own car.

“I can’t believe we found the dresses in one shot!” Julia exclaims once we’re in her car.

“I know, and Beckett is going to die when he sees you in yours.”

“Just like John is going to swallow his tongue when he sees you in yours,” she retorts.

“Maybe,” I say, not able to hold back the smile that tugs at my lips.

“I predict that we’re back at a dress shop in less than a year looking at dresses for you, mark my words,” Julia insists.

I shrug my shoulders, secretly hoping that she’s right, but only time will tell.

Chapter Nineteen

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JOHNATHAN
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Eight months later

“Mr. Camps,” a reporter calls out my name as I sit at a press table. I never enjoyed this as a player, but it’s something I’ve been forced to get used to the last couple of weeks, now that my project has been made public.

“Yes,” I answer, acknowledging the guy.

“What kind of response have you had from players around the league after you’ve shown them your video?”

“The response has been amazing. I think that anyone who plays professional sports wants to do it as safely as possible. No one wants to have their career taken away from them due to an injury. We put in too much time, energy, blood, sweat, and tears to get ourselves to this level to want anything other than the safest playing conditions possible. That isn’t to say that guys aren’t going to get hurt, because they are, we can’t stop every injury. But, we can stop some of them. Some of that needs to come with stricter rules put in place by the league on hits to the head, stricter punishments when those rules are broken, continued improvements in the gear, specifically the helmets that players wear to absorb the impact when you collide with the boards and glass.”

“What are your next steps with your campaign?” another reporter calls out.

“I’ll officially be starting *The Camps Foundation*, which will support a few important endeavors that are personal in one way or another, one being the improvement of safety gear for players.”

“And the others?” the reporter asks as a follow-up question.

“It’s no secret that my family wasn’t well off while I was a child. My mother did everything she could to make ends meet, and sometimes that meant we had to live in shelters. Since I signed my first professional contract, I’ve donated to many shelters, both here in the Indianapolis area, as well as in my hometown of St. Louis. Through the foundation, we hope to increase those donations. Any reputable shelter can go to our website and fill out an application to be on our list of supported organizations. We have a board ready to start processing applications immediately,” I tell the crowd of reporters. I look off the side of the stage, seeing my mom, sister, sister-in-law, nephew, two nieces, and Jill all standing there, proud as can be, and it hits me just how lucky I am to have all these amazing people in my corner. The last eight months haven’t been easy at times, but they’ve also been some of the best months of my life. “If anyone has any further questions, you can direct them to the foundation offices, thank you all for your time.”

I stand, making my way off the stage, and pull Jill into my arms as I hug her tightly to my body. “I love you,” I whisper into her ear for just her to hear.

“Love you, too,” she muffles into my chest. “You did amazing,” she says, looking up at me, our arms still wrapped tightly around one another.

“Uncle John!” Mason starts calling my name. I look over at him as Stephanie tries to keep him in her arms.

“You can let him go,” I tell her and he practically jumps from her arms, running for me. I let go of Jill and catch him just as he launches himself at me.

“How ya doing, buddy?” I ask.

“Good, can we go eat now?” he asks, causing everyone to laugh.

“I guess so. Were you a good boy? Did you earn yourself some ice cream for dessert?”

“Yes, I’s the bestest ever!” he exclaims.

“That’s what I like to hear,” I tell him.

“Shall we?” I turn to my family, holding out a hand for all of them to go in front of me. I slip my open hand into Jill’s, linking our fingers together. I’ve got my girlfriend on one side of me and my nephew in my other arm, and the other important people in my life in front of me. Life couldn’t get much better than this.

Chapter Twenty

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JILL
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“Anything else I can get you?” I ask Julia as I hand her a glass of water while we wait in the brides’ room that was set up for her to get ready in.

“I don’t think so. I’m just ready to get this done and over with!” she says, the excitement that her wedding day has finally arrived has kept us going for the last week. We’ve packed so much into the week we’ve already been here in Sweden. She wanted to arrive that early to, one, help adjust to the time difference, and then to have time to get all the last-minute details ironed out. Planning a wedding from halfway across the world wasn’t the easiest thing to do. She had many stressful nights over the last year, but it’s all come together, and things are just so beautiful. I now know why she wanted to get married here.

“Well then, let’s go get you married!” I tell her, just as excited for her and Beckett.

“Is my little girl ready to walk down the aisle?” Matt, Julia’s dad, asks as he enters the room.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” she tells him as he walks over and presses a kiss to her cheek.

“You’re a beautiful bride, baby girl,” he tells her.

“Thank you. Have you seen Beckett? Is he doing okay?” she questions her dad.

“He’s fine, antsy but just fine.”

“I wish we would have done a first look,” Julia states.

“Too late for that now.” Her dad chuckles. “It’s go time.”

“Then let’s get this show on the road!” she exclaims. I follow them out of the room, meeting up with Bridget in the hallway. We watch from the wings as the guys approach the front, then as grandparents and mothers are escorted down the aisle. Beckett’s two sisters are bridesmaids and paired up with their respective spouses as groomsmen, leaving me to be paired with, who else, but John. I think it shocked him when Beckett asked if he’d be his best man. I know they became pretty good friends the one season they played together, but I still think it surprised John when the question was posed. I finish fixing the back of Julia’s dress as Bea and Alice start their processional, then take my place in front of her for my turn. As soon as I can, I lock eyes with John. The look on his face as he sees me appear makes my heart skip a beat. He looks so good in his tux, but I’d like to see him out of it just as much.

I make it to my place, thankfully not face-planting or making a fool of myself during my best friend’s wedding. Once I make it to my spot and turn to face the back, the music changes and Matt and Julia appear in the doorway. The guests all stand, causing the two of them to be blocked for the first half of the length of the aisleway. I look over, watching Beckett’s face as he waits to see his bride as she comes into view. I know the exact moment that it happens, as he sucks in a breath and his eyes start to water. He must sway on his feet, as John’s hand comes up and lands on his shoulder to steady him. I can read John’s lips as he tells Beckett to just breathe, followed by him doing just that.

I turn my attention back to the aisle, checking to see how close Matt and Julia are. Once they are within a couple feet of the podium, Beckett steps down, accepting Julia’s hand as Matt hands it over after he lifts her veil and plants a kiss on her cheek. I miss whatever it is he tells Beckett, but it has both him and Julia chuckling lightly while they get settled.

I watch as my best friend looks up at her soon to be husband. The love these two have is serious couple goals.

“Welcome,” the minister starts the wedding, moving us quickly through the ceremony. Before I know it, Beckett is bending Julia over in a kiss not meant for minor viewing. “It is my pleasure to introduce to you for the first time, Mr. and Mrs. Beckett Karlson,” the minister announces as the guests all stand in applause. They finally make their way out, followed by the wedding party.

“Have I told you how beautiful you look today?” John asks as I link my arm with his as we follow Beckett and Julia.

“Only a time or ten,” I say under my breath.

“How much longer until I can peel that dress off of you?” he asks once we’ve exited the sanctuary part of the venue.

“You’re incorrigible,” I tell him, smacking his chest lightly as I laugh at him.

“Can’t blame a man for wanting what he knows is his,” he says, a little cocky as he raises an eyebrow in question.

“Later.” I giggle as he captures my lips in a toe-curling kiss. “First, we have to do the reception thing,” I tell him between kisses. “The dancing, and cake, and some more dancing,” I remind him.

“As long as I’m dancing with you,” he practically growls into my neck.

“All right, caveman,” I chuckle as he attempts to suck on my neck. “Let’s go before you get carried away.”

“I’ll carry you away,” he quips back.

“Hmmmhmm,” I hum at him as I pull him down the hall to where we’re expected next.



“Can I take you back to the hotel yet?” John asks a few hours later as we’re slow dancing around the dance floor. All of our bridal party duties are finally done, we’ve just been enjoying the evening and time celebrating our friends.

“I suppose,” I tell him as I link my fingers behind his neck.

“About damn time!” he says, shocking me as he swoops me up into his arms.

“John,” I laugh. “Put me down before you hurt one of us.”

“Sorry, babe, no can do. We need to get out of here and now,” he says.

“First, we have to say goodbye,” I remind him.

“If you insist,” he says as he beelines it for where Julia and Beckett are swaying together on the dance floor, only setting me down once we’ve reached them.

“Congratulations on the nuptials, thanks for the party, but we’re out of here,” John announces when we’ve reached Julia and Beckett’s side. I smack his chest once again for interrupting them like that. Julia laughs at us, not able to hide her reaction.

“Thank you both for everything,” she is finally able to get out with a straight face. “This day wouldn’t have been what it was without both of you. Now go, get out of here. Enjoy the rest of your time, don’t do anything I wouldn’t do,” Julia says as she winks at me.

“Have an amazing honeymoon! Call me as soon as you get back to the States. We’ll have to have lunch or dinner and catch up. I want all the details once you get back,” I tell my best friend as I squeeze her tightly in a hug. I can’t believe my bestie is a married woman.

“Of course!” she tells me as she squeezes back. “Have fun of your own, you’re here for, what, another week?”

“Yep, but we’re going to Stockholm tomorrow for most of it. We wanted to visit the larger city and see what it has to offer.”

“I don’t think you’re going to see much except the bed, if the way John’s looking at you has any indication.”

“We’ll see,” I sing song as we finally let go of one another.

John escorts me out and into the waiting car that will take us back to the hotel. Beckett and Julia arranged for the transportation so that no one who drank had to risk it and drive.

“Come here.” John pulls me behind him once we enter our suite. I follow him out onto a private little balcony that overlooks the city. It is so beautiful up here, even if it is nighttime and dark out. The glow of the city lights up some of our view, but we can also see the sky full of stars. I stand against the railing, John behind me as he boxes me in against the cool metal. “Did you have a good time tonight?” he asks, dropping a few kisses to my exposed shoulder. My hair is still pulled up into the updo that the hair stylist came up with this morning, giving him full access.

“I did. It was the perfect day for them.”

“They sure know how to pull off one hell of a party,” he muses.

“That they do,” I agree.

“What do you envision when you think of your wedding?” he asks quietly.

“Something small and intimate. Not a ton of people, just my closest friends and family. Maybe a hundred people, max. On the beach somewhere warm, where we can stand in the sand and pledge our lives to one another for the rest of eternity,” I tell him honestly, thinking about that with him.

“That sounds pretty perfect, let’s do it,” he says, surprising me as he turns me and drops to one knee all at the same time. I gasp, my free hand going to cover my mouth as he slips the most beautiful ring onto my finger.

“Are you serious?” is all I can think to say, shock still holding tightly to my vocal cords.

“Completely. Jill, you came into my life when everything I’d known was falling apart. You helped me navigate the mess I’d found myself in without ever blinking an eye. You’ve been there at some of my worst moments, I want you there for the

best ones. Please do me the honor of becoming my wife.” He lays it all out there on the line.

“Yes!” I cry out and he immediately picks me up in his arms, swinging me around as our lips collide. “I can’t believe you just proposed!” I tell him once we break the kiss. “Have you had this in your pocket all day?” I ask, holding my hand out to admire the rock.

“Yep. Now does it make sense why I kept trying to get you out of there?” he asks.

“I guess so, but you had to know that I wouldn’t have left early.” I half chuckle at the idea.

“I know,” he admits, “but, you can’t blame a man for trying.”

“No, I guess you can’t,” I agree with him as I pull him in for another kiss.

“Can I take you to bed now?” he asks against my lips. “I need to make love to my fiancée.” He quirks a brow at me.

“Yes, please,” I tell him, and he pivots, taking me straight back into the suite and not stopping until he deposits me on the floor at the foot of the king-size bed.

“Turn around,” he commands. I do as he says, my body already on fire for him.

I feel as his fingertips ghost across the exposed skin of my shoulders as he searches for the zipper. It feels like he takes forever to lower the thing, exposing my skin inch by inch. His lips cover the skin as each portion is exposed, until finally he reaches the bottom of the zipper. The dress is loose enough now to fall from my body, pooling at my feet. I step out of it, leaving me in the matching bra and thong I bought special to wear under the dress. Besides those two items of clothing, I only have my sandals still on, which I easily kick off. John turns me in his arms, his eyes raking up and down my body, and I can feel them like a brand. Like he’s taking his fill and making sure I know I’m his.

“You are so fucking beautiful,” he says, almost as if my beauty pains him. He flicks the clasp on my bra, watching as it

hits the floor. As soon as it does, his lips are circling around one nipple while his fingers roll the other one. I feel every flick of his tongue against my sensitive tip, as if he's lapping at my clit. My pussy throbs for him as he makes me wait.

I do my best to tug at his clothes, he's only lost the tux jacket and tie a few hours ago. I manage to get his belt open, then start working on the buttons of his shirt. It doesn't help me that he's dropped to his knees in front of me as he continues to suck and play with my nipples. The man is definitely a breast man, or at least, he's always loved mine.

"Sit," he instructs a few minutes later as he turns me once again, the bed now hitting me against the back of my legs. I do as he asks, sitting just on the edge of the bed. I watch as he stands back up to his full height, shucking all of his clothes and kicking them to the side so they're out of the way. He places a hand on my breastbone, pushing me back until I'm lying back, my legs wrapped around his torso, holding him tightly against my body.

"Now what?" I ask, watching him, trying to determine what his next move is.

"Now, I'm going to make you come on my tongue," he says, pausing long enough to kiss me deeply. "Then, I'm going to slide my cock inside of you while you're still pulsing from your first orgasm and make you come all over my cock while I fuck you hard and fast, just how I know you like it. Once we've both recovered from that, I'm going to fuck you slow and sweetly all night, until the sun comes up. We're not missing a moment of the rest of this night," he says before he kisses me one last time before dropping to his knees again, he slips my thong off before diving between my legs and lapping at my clit. He slides two fingers inside me, and my body clenches at the intrusion. He quickly works my body over, his fingers sliding in and out, hitting the perfect spot with just the right pressure as he sucks hard on my clit. I explode on his tongue. Inaudible words of praise falling from my lips as my body convulses on the bed as my orgasm washes over me.

He slides his fingers from me and I whimper at the loss of him, only to crack my eyes open a sliver and watch as he gives

his cock a few strokes before lining up with my entrance, thrusting until he's fully seated. His thumb circles my clit as he finds a punishing pace as his hips piston forward and back. His cock fills me so fully that I can feel every damn vein that he has, especially with how hard he is at the moment. His thumb presses down on my clit and I explode for the second time, squeezing his cock in a vise grip. "Fuck!" he shouts as he snaps his hips once more, then spilling inside of me. He collapses forward, his head coming to rest on my shoulder. I feel as his lips make contact, raining small kisses along the skin there.

"I love you," I tell him as I cup his cheeks, pulling his head up so I can kiss him. As our tongues connect, I can feel his cock twitch inside me. I break the kiss, falling into a fit of giggles because of the feeling of him twitching inside me as I do so.

"I love you," he finally tells me. "Thank you for saying yes. Thank you for being my game changer when I least expected it."

EPILOGUE

John

Six months later

I sit on a piece of driftwood lying on the beach, looking out at the ocean. A glass of bourbon on the rocks in my hand as the moon rises in the otherwise dark night sky. As I sit here, I can't help but think back over the last year, five, ten—hell, the last thirty years of my life—and how far I've come. I've accomplished so many amazing things. Not a lot of people can claim the wins that I've had in my life, just as not many people have been faced with the challenges that I've faced in my thirty-six years.

I dig my toes into the warm sand as I watch the waves rolling in and out twenty or so feet from where I'm sitting. Noise behind me grabs my attention, so I turn my head to see what or who is coming out here. I notice my sister-in-law walking out, what looks like a glass of wine in her hand.

"You want some company?" Stephanie asks as she comes around the piece of wood.

"Sure, have a seat," I tell her.

"Nice night," she says, and I can tell she's testing the waters to see if everything is okay.

"It is, just enjoying the fresh ocean air before I call it a night. We've got a few busy days ahead of us."

"You do," she agrees with me. "Everything okay?"

"Yep, I promise. I'm just enjoying the calm before the crazy."

“Where did your bride to be get off to?”

“She’s back in the suite with Julia, working on last-minute items. I offered to help, but it quickly became apparent that my help was not really helpful, so she shooed me out of the room for a few hours,” I admit.

Stephanie chuckles as she sits next to me, sipping on her wine. “I’ll give you a small token of advice,” she muses. “A happy wife, means a happy life.”

“I’ve been told that a few times already.” I chuckle before taking another sip of my bourbon. The liquid burning as it goes down, but damn does this taste good. “I don’t think I’ll have any issues with remembering that motto. All I want is for Jill to be my wife, hopefully the mother of our future children, but most importantly, my partner in life. I want to stand beside her in this crazy life, just as much as I want her to stand beside me.”

“You really are one of the good ones,” Stephanie says as she squeezes my shoulder. “I’d like to think that if I wasn’t in love with your sister, and you know, not a lesbian, I’d have fallen for someone like you. You both are lucky to have found one another. Don’t let that love die. I’m here to tell you that marriage is hard. You’ll have fights, sometimes over stupid crap, like who loaded the dishwasher wrong or who moved the remote and now no one can find it. But, then it might be something bigger, like major purchases—another tip, don’t make any without at least talking to her about it first. Even if you make the majority of the money that comprise your finances, she needs to be seen as an equal in your marriage.”

“Sounds simple enough.”

“Simple isn’t the word I’d use, but it can sometimes feel that way, and then the next it is the complete opposite. Another tip, since apparently I’m full of them tonight,” she says on a light laugh. “Don’t ever go to bed mad at one another. Talk things out in a civil manner. Listen, and I mean listen to each other, even when she isn’t using actual words. Women are strange creatures sometimes and will give you clues other ways. Be spontaneous. Come home and whisk her away for a

long weekend in another city or dinner out at some fancy restaurant she's been wanting to try, or the hole in the wall place you heard about from one of the guys or on a tv show. But most of all, love each other through it all. Be each other's strength during the easy, but more importantly, be each other's strength during the hard times."

"I think we've got that part figured out. She's already seen me at my worst with some of the mood swings I've encountered and side effects from the TBI. Not many women would jump in feet first to a relationship with someone who was recovering from that kind of injury and the unknown as to how it was going to affect the future like she did."

"I know, and I knew that when she was willing to help you through all that, she was one of the good ones. Just remember that she needs you just as much as you need her. That's how this all works. She might be the backbone, but eventually something is going to happen and she's going to need you to be *her* backbone."

"Is that how it is with you and Cindi?" I ask.

"Obviously our situation is different than yours, but it is. We've worked through our share of issues. It isn't easy being in a same-sex marriage. Many people out there don't think that we're fit to be parents just because we're two women. It took a lot of blood, sweat, and tears for us to get to the point that we could have our kids, but we persisted, leaned on each other and made it happen. I'd go through all of it again if it meant we'd be where we are at today; even if I am sleep deprived lately," Stephanie says, laughing.

"I'm glad the two of you persisted. You've got some great kids out of the deal."

"They are pretty great, if I do say so myself."

"What are the two of you talking about out here?" Cindi asks as she comes up behind Stephanie and me.

"Just life, giving John all my married life wisdom," Stephanie answers.

“Ooh,” Cindi says as she rounds the driftwood and plops down in the sand so she’s facing us.

“Who’s with the kids?” I ask.

“Kids? I’m supposed to leave someone with them?” she deadpans and rolls her eyes. Stephanie snickers next to me as if I just asked the stupidest question. “Mom’s in the room, but all three are asleep,” she says as she reaches for Stephanie’s glass of wine and finishes it off.

“How’d they do on the flight?” I ask of my nephew and twin nieces.

“Pretty good, the girls had a few moments during takeoff and landing that their ears bothered them, but nothing horrible.”

“Good to hear. I can’t wait to take Mason out on the water tomorrow, think he’ll want to try water skiing or surfing?”

“I’m sure he will. You know how much of a daredevil he is, and if Uncle John is taking him, he doesn’t often back down,” Cindi says.

“Good, I’ve got some free time in the morning that I can spend with him. How about I come get him after breakfast and bring him back before lunch?”

“That’s fine with me,” Cindi says, looking at Stephanie for her approval, as well.

“Fine with me. What time do we need to be at the rehearsal tomorrow?” she asks.

“Not until late afternoon,” Cindi answers for me. “I think the email that Jill sent said three thirty.”

“That sounds right to me,” I confirm.

“Jill doesn’t need you in the morning for anything?” Cindi asks.

“Not that she’s told me,” I tell my sister before taking another sip of my bourbon.



“Just breathe, man,” Beckett murmurs under his breath. “This feels all too familiar,” he tells me quietly. “I could have sworn that you told me the exact same thing when it was me in your position.”

“Yeah, I think I did. You were about to pass out,” I tell him as we wait for the wedding planner to finish giving instructions to the women in the wedding party. We’ve only been practicing for the actual service that takes place tomorrow evening at sunset for about ten minutes and I’m already ready for the real thing to be here.

I watch as my sister, nephew, and then Julia make it down the short aisle before finally my bride and her dad make their way toward me. The moment our eyes connect, I swear everything around me disappears. All I can hear is the waves crashing behind us, or is that the sound of my blood pulsing in my own ears? I swear, every step that Jill and her dad take get slower and slower as they make their way to the arch I’m standing at.

I step forward, meeting Jill and Beau a few feet from where the two of us will stand to exchange vows, pledging our lives to one another for the rest of time.

“Hi,” Jill greets me quietly as I reach out to take her hands in mine.

“I’m entrusting you with my only baby girl, you break her heart and I’ll find a way to make you pay,” Beau tells me, his words serious but loving at the same time. He knows I’d do anything for Jill, and the last thing I’d ever purposely do is break her heart.

“Of course,” I tell my soon to be father-in-law. Our relationship has blossomed over the past year as we’ve gotten to know one another better. I’d never have guessed that I’d have a standing golf date with my father-in-law, but we’ve done just that since this past summer, when he invited me out

for a charity golf game. I shake his outstretched hand; his grip is firm as he pumps my hand twice before dropping it.

“Love you, Daddy,” Jill whispers to him as he places a kiss on her cheek then steps back and joins Diane in the first row of chairs set up in the sand a few feet away from where we stand.

I escort Jill the few feet until we’re under the archway that she wanted for us to stand under. It is beautifully covered in flowers that perfectly complement the beach setting that Jill dreamed of having for our wedding day. “I love you.” I mouth the words to her as we listen to the minister explain to us how things will go tomorrow.

Once we’ve walked through the ten-minute ceremony, I don’t care that this isn’t the real thing, I pull Jill until we’re flush against each other. I cup her face and bring my lips to hers. I dip her back as I deepen the kiss, realizing that our wedding party is all hooting around us as I kiss the fuck out of my fiancée.

“Wow,” she says when we break apart a moment later. I stand us both back up, rubbing my thumb along her kiss-swollen lips.

“You think that was impressive, just wait until I kiss you tomorrow,” I say only for her to hear.

“Please don’t make a spectacle out of it?” she pleads.

“I’ll keep it from spectacle level, but I will be kissing the fuck out of you. Then I’ll take you somewhere private so I can actually fuck you,” I whisper into her ear. I feel the slight tremor that slides down her body. My sign that she’s turned on just as much as I am.

“Let’s go eat,” she suggests with a smirk and I lead her down the sand aisle.

We join our guests at the rehearsal dinner. We mingle amongst everyone, the atmosphere very casual and laid back as the time passes.

“Remind me why you can’t just come to bed with me now?” I ask Jill as I pull her in for one last good-night kiss at the suite’s door.

“Because we’re keeping with tradition that you can’t see me before our ceremony,” she tells me as she presses her lips to mine.

“I don’t like that plan,” I pout. “How do you expect me to sleep tonight if you aren’t pressed up against me? How are *you* going to sleep without me making you come first?”

“I’m sure we’ll manage just fine,” she laughs, and pats my chest. “Just think of how much it will build up the anticipation for tomorrow night.”

I grumble at her words. “Why did I agree to a sunset wedding time? Can we change that to a sunrise?”

“No, and no peeking tomorrow. If you try to sneak in and see me early I will withhold wedding night sex from you, mister,” she says as sternly as she can, but cracks into a fit of giggles at the last minute.

“All right, so tomorrow night, sunset, you and me and the rest of our lives,” I tell her, pressing my forehead against hers as my hands find their way to her hips, holding her close to me.

“I’ll be there, the one in the white dress, just in case you needed help picking me out,” she teases.

“I love you,” I say, pressing my lips against her forehead.

“Love you, too, Mr. Camps.”

“Less than twenty-four hours and you’ll be Mrs. Camps,” I remind her.

“Jill Camps,” she says. “It has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

“It does,” I tell her, kissing her once more.

“Jill, are you coming?” Julia calls from down the hall.

“I’ll be there in just a minute,” she tells her best friend.

“See you soon, husband to be,” Jill says as her hands find mine as she links our fingers. With one quick squeeze she’s pulling away from me and heading down the hall to the suite she’s staying in tonight. I watch as she goes, forcing myself to stay put in this exact spot so that I don’t go pick her up, toss

her over my shoulders and bring her back to our room, traditions be damned. But I don't, I know this is important to her, so I turn and open the suite door, taking myself inside. I shuck off the shorts and polo I wore for the rehearsal and dinner tonight, then hit the showers before I spread out on the king-size bed. I flip on the TV, finding some tattoo shop show to watch until sleep claims me for a fitful night's sleep.



“We’ve got a slight problem,” Diane says to me just after lunch.

“What’s that?” I ask, dread filling my belly at the thought of Jill having second thoughts about marrying me today.

“There is a storm brewing out at sea and the wedding planner is suggesting we move the ceremony up by a few hours rather than risk the storm hitting by then.”

“And that’s a problem?” I ask, relieved that it isn’t Jill having second thoughts. I wasn’t loving the idea of having to wait hours more until I got to see her, but I also know that she really wanted a perfect setting for our pictures.

“It shouldn’t be. As long as you can inform the guys to go get ready, Jill is already doing so and should be ready in an hour. I’ve already taken care of informing the guests.”

“I’ll take care of the guys,” I assure my soon to be mother-in-law.

“Thanks. Jill was starting to panic when I left the room where she’s at,” she tells me.

“Can you take her something for me, please?” I ask, knowing that I have a gift for my bride back in our room.

“Of course,” Diane says.

“Come with me and I’ll give it to you,” I tell her, leading the way.

“She asked that I give you this,” Diane says, handing me an envelope as I hand her the small bag, which holds a

necklace with matching tennis bracelet, along with a short note.

“Thanks,” I tell her. “I’ll get the guys moving. Just text me a specific time everyone needs to be ready and outside and I’ll make sure they are present and accounted for.”

“Will do, see you soon!” she says as she makes her way out of the room and down the hall.

I head down the hall to my mom’s room, letting her know what is going on so that she can start to get ready. Cindi already knows since she’s in the bridal party with Jill. I head for Beckett’s room and let him know to start to get ready, too.

An hour later, I’m dressed and waiting. I pull out Jill’s envelope, carefully breaking the seal the glue created.

Johnathan,

Today I pledge to be your wife. To love, honor, and cherish you through the good times and bad. Through sickness and health. I pledge to always be by your side, to be your light when yours is dimmed. I’m honored you chose me to spend the rest of your life with. You make me the happiest I’ve ever been, and I can’t wait to see where this life takes us. I love you with all that I am, and to the moon and back.

Love your one and only,

Jill

I read her words over multiple times, letting them soak in until they’ve reached my soul. I’d never expected to find a woman as incredible as Jill, but I did. Fate has a way of working out sometimes. It takes a playmaker on the ice to take control and set his team up to win, but it’s the game changer that steals the show and brings it all together.

She’s my game changer, and my forever.

~

More Indianapolis Eagles books are coming in 2021!
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with [The Perfect Pitch!](#)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To everyone who has supported me, thank you! Thank You for the impact you have made on my life and my writing. Please know that I appreciate you all!

xoxo,

Samantha

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Samantha Lind is a contemporary romance author. Having spent the first 27 years of her life in Alaska, she now calls Iowa home, where she lives with her husband and two sons. She enjoys spending time with her family, traveling, reading, watching hockey (Go Knights Go!), and listening to country music.

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