



HIGH
STAKES

*An Age Gap
Secret Triplets
Romance*

TRIPLE OR
NOTHING

AJME WILLIAMS

TRIPLE OR NOTHING

AN AGE GAP SECRET TRIPLETS ROMANCE

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All characters are 18+ years of age and all sexual acts are consensual.

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ALSO BY AJME WILLIAMS

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DESCRIPTION

**The only thing Pierce Jackson hates more than losing... is surprises.
And the only thing I hate? *Him.***

He owns the rival hockey team, which makes him my archnemesis.

To be fair, it's hard to not be grumpy when you have a baby unexpectedly
left on your doorstep.

This new single dad doesn't need any more surprises in his life.

And I didn't plan on giving him any until...

We made a mistake that one night that shouldn't have been repeated.

But it did repeat... many times.

My career as a coach for my team takes a backseat when I daydream about
his electric touch.

But the storm that's coming is even more unimaginable.

It starts with the stick in my hand.

These two pink lines will bring three babies.

And that's when my hot enemy will find out that he's about to have *triplets* with me.

If one surprise shook his world... I wonder what three would do.

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PROLOGUE

Naomi

It's amazing how much of your other senses you experience when your sight is gone. It's one thing to close your eyes, but to be blindfolded is a whole new level of eroticism.

My sense of sound was heightened, my ears filled with the whispering movement of the sheets as Pierce moved on the bed. The scent of him, musky with a hint of ice, which might seem weird, but since I'd spent so much of my life in an ice rink, smelling it on Pierce created a sense of excitement and familiarity.

Of course, of all senses, the sense of touch was the one that stood out.

I felt like my entire body had been stuck in a light socket. Every neuron in my body was firing, my blood was burning, and my skin was humming as Pierce did the most pleasurable things to my body.

How did I get here, in a hotel room with the coach of the rival hockey team, letting him do sinful things to me?

I knew how I got here. I got here because I let him goad me into it. I blame my competitive nature. He bet me that I was too scared to give into desire, and I'd fallen into his trap.

Or that was what I was telling myself because the reality was that despite the fact that he was my rival and that he was so much older than me, and the billion other reasons that I should avoid him, Pierce was a sexy, irresistible man.

It was likely because of his age that he was so masterful with his hands.

I'd followed hockey all my life, and I knew he'd been a star at one time. Being a kid, I wouldn't have known the life of a hockey player off the ice, but now, grown up, I knew that women, or puck bunnies as we called them, threw themselves at players like Pierce.

I had no doubt that he'd honed his skills with many, many puck bunnies. If I were the jealous type, I might have been bothered by that. Right then, I was happy to be on the receiving end of such fantastic skill.

His hands finished exploring my body, and then he started all over using his mouth, first on my lips and then trailing down along my jaw to my neck and my collarbone, then my breasts.

The further down my body he went, the more the need coiled tight inside my body. My hips gyrated in a rhythm set by Pierce.

"You're so fucking wet for me."

I arched and groaned at his words. "Don't tease me."

"I'm not teasing. I'm savoring."

A new flood of heat washed through me. I was young, but I was no virgin. At the same time, I'd never been with a man like Pierce. Oh, sure, some of them knew what they were doing in bed, but Pierce's combination of experience, dirty talk, and sex appeal was driving me mad. That and the blindfold which put me at his mercy.

He slid his hands underneath my buttocks, settling his shoulders between my thighs, and then his mouth was on me.

Holy moly. One of my hands gripped the sheets and the other held his head to me as his mouth and tongue did obscene things to my pussy. "Oh, my God."

His tongue flicked over my clit, and I whimpered as it sent me hurtling to the edge, but not over. I had entered that moment of exquisite torture. I needed to come. So badly.

His mouth pulled away, and I increased my grip on his head. "Don't stop. Don't you dare stop."

I wasn't sure whether he chuckled or groaned, but either way, his tongue slid inside my pussy, lapping at the sensitive walls as his thumb pressed against my clit, and I went soaring.

Wave after wave of sensation rocked my body as he continued to lick and suck until finally, everything in me went slack and boneless.

My hand shook as I reached up to remove the tie he'd used to blindfold me.

"Not yet." His fingers wrapped around my wrists and brought them over my head as he spread his long, firm body over me. "Stop fighting me. Give in. Let go."

"Is this your way of trying to control me? Do you have a problem with a powerful woman?"

His impressive body settled over mine, pressing me into the mattress as his dick teased my entrance. Sparks flared over my skin again, and my pussy roared to life, needing to feel him inside me.

I did my best to hide my body's reaction. I didn't need him knowing just how much control over my body he had.

"This isn't about me trying to control you. It's about your allowing somebody else to have control. It's your choice, Naomi. Give yourself this moment. Give me the opportunity to drive you wild with pleasure. I promise you won't regret it."

Oh, how I wanted to surrender control. Ever since taking the job of coaching the Silver Nuggets' minor-league hockey team, I've had to exert the strongest control.

No one, except for my boss, the team's owner, gave me the respect I should have as a coach. And I even questioned how much he really did respect me and how much his hiring of me was just because of the publicity the team was receiving.

Not only was I young to be coaching a minor-league team at only twenty-three, but I was a woman.

Both made my job difficult, but the breasts made it even more so since many people didn't feel I was up to the task, including many on the team. It was only through control that I had gotten us this far, to the All-Star game in Toronto.

Every moment was an exercise in control. Controlling my anger so I didn't yell and give anyone the excuse to call me a bitch or get arrested for beating a player with a hockey stick.

Controlling the frustration and hurt at the team's and media's discounting me, even though few people, men included, had as many successes and accolades as I did in hockey.

Controlling the urges to quit knowing that my boss was using me because I was a woman, not because I had the skill. So much control was required to do my job. I needed to be on my game at every moment.

Pierce had a strange way of knocking me off my game, and usually, I

found it annoying. But right here, right now, with Pierce sliding inside me, making me quiver and gasp, I wanted to relinquish control. I wanted to let somebody else be in charge. I wanted to feel nothing but good.

Who cared if the man who was making me his erotic prisoner was my rival?

Who cared that he was practically old enough to be my father, had my father been nearly twenty when I was born?

I pushed all the cares and obstacles away. Tonight, for the first time that I could remember, I would surrender to temptation. I would let Pierce take me to the heights of pleasure, and I would do it without any regrets.

“That’s right, baby . . . let me make you feel so fucking good.”

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Pierce

I scowled as I surveyed my players stumbling across the ice at today's practice. They were slow and lazy, and I was getting frustrated. I shouted at them, "Get your asses in gear." Jesus, why I'd let my best buddy and ex-hockey teammate, Reed Hampton, talk me into partnering with him to buy a minor-league hockey team, I'd never know.

"They need to dig deeper," I grumbled mostly to myself.

Reed nodded beside me. "I've seen better, too."

"We need to step it up," Bo, the newest member of the coaching staff, chimed in. As one of the greatest to play the game, I thought his presence would motivate the young men on the team. They were in awe of him, but it didn't seem to improve their skills on the ice.

"We can't afford any weak links." I thought of the Silver Nuggets, our rivals down in Henderson, and how much more cohesive they were. Except for Big Ed, who clearly balked at having a woman as a coach. Inwardly, I kicked myself for thinking of Naomi Withers. Every time she entered my mind, I had dirty thoughts. This time, it was imagining her on the ice in nothing but skimpy lingerie. Fuck.

"I'd like to sell out the season. We need to prove that Las Vegas is a hub for sports and strong enough to support two minor-league hockey teams."

I nodded in agreement. When Reed and I bought the Buckaroos, they'd been in a steady decline, and there were questions about moving the team or simply disbanding it. But for the last few years, using Reed's fortune from his

online betting empire along with my coaching skills from the NHL, we'd been doing our damndest to turn this team around. So far, we looked like idiots for buying the team, and me for leaving an NHL team the year before it won the Stanley Cup.

Naomi's team, the Silver Nuggets, weren't faring much better. Business wonder-man Todd Marshall had bought the team recently. The man was often called the Midas of Business because everything he touched turned to gold. Everyone thought he was nuts to hire Naomi to coach his ragtag team, including me. But I didn't think it was a crazy move because she was a woman. Naomi knew her shit when it came to hockey. If hockey had prodigies or savants, she'd be one. But as far as society had come in treating women equally, it hadn't arrived in professional men's sports, and when it did, hockey would be the last to accept it.

Bo and I had snuck into a Silver Nuggets practice not long ago, and while some of her team was on board with her coaching, many, including Big Ed, their star player, weren't. Between Ed and angry fans who didn't think she could pull it off, Naomi had a lot working against her. Why would Marshall set himself up like that?

Then again, maybe it would give us an advantage, which we'd need if my players kept skating like they had their heads up their asses. I watched them skate, running a 3-1-3, with a mixture of frustration and determination. I knew they had what it took to be a winning team, but they needed to work harder and get their shit together as a team.

With my eyes fixed on the ice, I shouted at the players again, "Let's go, boys. Do you want to win the season or what?"

"I don't think any are even close to moving up," Bo said.

Teams like ours were feeders for the NHL. It was how Reed and Bo and I all moved up in our careers. I suppose it was vanity that I felt coming from coaching an NHL team, but I should have been able to whip these players in shape and get them promoted. But Bo was right. At the moment, none seemed to have what it took. Oh, sure, many had the potential, but so far, they were falling short.

As I continued to watch the players skate, Analyn, Reed's wife, appeared with their son on her hip.

Reed grinned like a loon at the sight of her. It was amazing to me how a woman could turn a man into sap. Okay, so maybe I was being hard on him. It was probably jealousy because the guy was happier than I'd ever seen him,

and that includes the times he was on ice during his prime hockey playing days.

He leaned over and kissed her, then took the boy. “You’re a sight for sore eyes.”

“How’s it going?” she asked.

“Like shit,” I murmured.

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “At least you’re not the coach down in Henderson. Then again, she’s a bit of a novelty. If she was hired as a marketing ploy, it’s working.” Analyn knew all about marketing. She’d first started working for Reed’s online gambling business, but once they married and had their kid, she’d moved over here to help the team. Most of her ideas were wackadoodle to me, but then she showed me a story about a baseball team in Savannah, Georgia—the Savannah Bananas, I shit you not—that were a huge success from doing unconventional things. At that point, I let her and Reed worry about marketing. My hands were full with the players.

“I wouldn’t underestimate her,” Reed said.

Analyn looked up at her husband. “Oh?” There was a look in her eyes that seemed to ask how he knew so much about her.

He must have understood that, as he grinned at her. “She’s a star in the hockey world. I’ve never met her personally, but anyone who knows hockey knows Naomi.”

I nodded. “If she were a man, she’d likely be the best ever.”

“Ouch,” Bo said, putting his hand over his heart. “I thought you always said I was the best.”

I rolled my eyes. “Only because Naomi Withers is a woman. The question is, does her team respect her? You can have the best players, but if they can’t work together, they’ll be shit.”

“Speaking of respecting your coach, I’m tired of watching these lazy asses. I’m going to crack the whip.” Bo hopped the wall and skated onto the ice, yelling at the men to get their shit together.

With Bo in charge, I followed Reed and Analyn to the team offices. I told myself that their saccharine sweet love was annoying, but deep down, I was happy for my buddy . . . and envious. As a hockey player, I’d had no interest or time for relationships beyond one-night-stands with puck bunnies. When I became a coach, I was so focused on the team’s success that I didn’t have time for a relationship. But now, watching Reed, I had to admit there was something nice about family.

Of course, I was ancient now. At forty-two, I still had a decent body as I stayed in shape, but I wasn't the young buck like the men on the ice. The fact that I'd jerked off to Naomi Withers, who was fucking two decades younger than me, made me feel like a dirty old man. That alone had to make me less than prime husband and father material.

As we reached the office, Reed's phone rang, and he excused himself to take the call.

Analyn pulled up a chair and motioned for me to sit next to her. "I want you to see this." She handed me her tablet. On the screen was a news clip of Naomi coaching her team. I couldn't deny that she was impressive or that Big Ed was a fucking moron for not listening to her.

"I feel bad for her," Analyn said.

"Why?" From what I saw, Naomi was being kick-ass.

"She's being used because she has breasts, not because she has the skills."

"Maybe that sucks, but if she succeeds, wouldn't that force people to see beyond the tits?" I winced at my choice of words.

If it bothered Analyn, she didn't show it. Then again, she'd spent enough time around male hockey players to know we could give sailors a run for their money language-wise.

"I guess. And it's really not my concern. My concern is how do we get attention too? You're great, Pierce, but—"

"I know. I don't have great tits." I grinned at her.

"Exactly. Marketing is about getting attention, and right now, Naomi and the Silver Nuggets have it. Reed really wants to pack the stands this year, so we need something to bring them in."

I thought about Bo and how for years the owners and manager of the team had encouraged his reckless behavior because it brought the fans in. Women wanted to fuck him and men wanted to be him. It had driven me nuts as his coach because he was one bad accident away from losing his career, or even his life. Now he was happily married, with a young daughter he'd recently discovered he had and a baby on the way. So I probably couldn't use him as a lure.

"What are your thoughts?" I asked her.

She pulled up some slides on her tablet and started walking me through her ideas.

Reed returned and joined us as she walked through the plan. Since I'd

decided I had enough on my plate with the team, I told them I was happy with whatever they decided. Reed had built a billion-dollar company, so I had to trust that he knew what he was doing. And Analyn was a social media market expert, so again, I needed to trust her too.

When we finished, I left the office to head back to the ice to help Bo. I needed to find a way to build up the fire these boys needed to win. But as I headed down the corridor, my mind drifted back to Reed and Analyn. Maybe it was time I put more effort into finding a mate. Naomi flashed in my mind again, and I cursed. A woman like her wouldn't want a man like me. I was too fucking old, and she was at the start of her career. Any other woman, closer to my age, wouldn't want a perverted old man who wanked off to nubile female athletes.

Pushing thoughts of love and family away, I returned to the ice. "I don't like what I'm seeing. You need to work on endurance."

A collective groan came from the ice. They knew what was coming next. Shuttle sprints.

"It will make you better in bed," Bo said to them.

I rolled my eyes.

He shrugged at me. "Sex is a motivator."

I imagined Naomi doing shuttle sprints in lingerie. It occurred to me that she had to have some spectacular stamina as well.

Jesus fuck. Would this woman ever stop haunting my libidinous mind?

Naomi

I watched from the players' box as the team scrimmaged. We were focused on an offensive that I was actually pretty happy with, except for Big Ed Sampson, who was nowhere near where he needed to be. As Max made his shot across the ice, Big Ed didn't arrive on the spot in time and the puck hit the wall, ricocheting straight to the defense, which took control of the puck and immediately took it to the other end of the rink and into the goal.

I blew my whistle. "Everyone, come over here."

I wondered if my voice was sharp as several of the players looked at each other like children on the playground about to be scolded.

The first to skate up was Max Blake. "Sorry, Coach, I should've checked where he was."

I nodded because it was true, but at the same time, Ed should've been a position. I honed my gaze on Big Ed as he took his time joining us. The guy was like a petulant child in a giant's body.

"Is there a problem with the play, Ed?" I asked, trying to keep the edge out of my voice. Ideally, I would've loved to have been a coach like Ted Lasso, but I lacked the optimism and patience. Still, I did my best to be positive with the team.

Before Ed could respond, Dylan Katz, said, "Is it your age or that beer gut catching up to you, Big Ed? You too slow to do the play?"

Big Ed scowled at Dylan. "You shut your mouth, fuck face."

"If you're not slow, Big Ed, then why weren't you in position?" I asked.

There was a snicker in the group as one player leaned over to another, insinuating that I meant slow mentally, not physically. I shot them a quick warning glare and they straightened up.

"I don't need some teenage girl telling me how to play hockey. I've been playing as long as you've been alive."

"If that were true, you'd be too old to play." I was young for a coach, but Ed was only a few years older than me. He was still in his prime and could move up to the NHL, maybe. But it wasn't like he had a lot of years left to achieve that goal. Not very many hockey players made it to their mid-thirties. Many retired before they even got to thirty, like Bo Tyler. Of course, in my opinion, he probably could've eked out another couple of seasons, but apparently, he'd decided to settle down and go into coaching.

He, along with Pierce Jackson, a hockey legend in his own right, were coaching our rival team located only about twenty miles away in Las Vegas. There were a lot of questions about whether Nevada could support two minor-league hockey teams, so it was important that the Silver Nuggets come out on top if it turned out the state wasn't interested in two minor-league teams.

"Didn't your mama teach you any manners?" Max said, shaking his head at Ed.

"Ed doesn't have a mama. He was raised by wolves," Dylan said.

Ed glared at them both but then turned his steely stare back on me.

"You can all go hit the showers. Big Ed, I'd like to have a word with you."

Big Ed earned his name. Being close to six-foot-four and the size of a linebacker, he was an intimidating force on the ice. That might've been enough to make him a great hockey player, but he also had the skills. He just wasn't using them with me as his coach.

"How old are you, Big Ed?"

He grunted at me. "None of your damn business."

He was hovering over me, trying to use his size to intimidate me, but I wasn't easily intimidated. "The reason I ask is because you're acting like a petulant child out there on the ice. Seriously. You're a grown man."

His eyes narrowed more menacingly.

"I'm just curious whether you resent me more than you wish to go up to the NHL? Or win a game? Because I'll have no problem benching you if you're going to be an asshole all the time."

He leaned over, and while my heartbeat picked up, I kept my expression passive.

"You won't bench me because you can't win without me."

"Hah." I shook my head. "I can't win if you don't actually play the game."

Realizing nothing I was going to say would make a difference, I dismissed him. Anger seethed through my whole body, so I took to the ice, skating a few laps to work off the negative energy.

Once I calmed down, I went back to the box and wrote a few notes about the day's practice and jotted down ideas for potential changes, especially if I was going to take Big Ed out of the lineup.

I packed up my bag and headed to the office area. I went directly to the team owner's office, knocking and opening the door.

The owner, Todd Marshal, was nearing fifty, but he was still a strikingly good-looking man. Not that I was interested in him romantically because I wasn't. Still, that didn't mean I didn't notice that he had a lot going for him. I appreciated that he was giving me a chance that nobody else would've ever given me as the coach of a men's minor-league hockey team.

But he was also exasperating as the boss because while he seemed to enjoy the game of hockey, he saw the team as a business venture. He didn't care much what happened on the ice as long as the team made money.

He waved me in. "Naomi. Come on in. How'd it go today?" His hand extended out toward the chair, inviting me to take a seat. "I understand you've threatened to bench Big Ed?"

I arched a brow. "So he tattled on me?"

Todd grinned. "I think that guy has testosterone for brains."

"Did you tell him to quit complaining and shape up, play the game?"

"I told him that on the ice, you're the boss."

I wanted to reach across Todd's desk and slap the jovial smile on his face.

"If this team is going to win—and make money," I added since I remembered that profit was his focus, "Big Ed needs to shape up."

Todd sat back and studied me for a moment. "I can talk to him, Naomi, but he won't ever respect you if I have to step in and fight your battles for you."

Dammit, he was right.

"If you're going to be a coach in a men's league, you're going to have to put up with his bullshit and bring him around. I'll support you if you bench him the first game, but he needs to play, Naomi, so you're going to have to

earn his respect, or at least find a way to make him comply."

"I suppose if we lose the game because Big Ed isn't doing what he's supposed to do, the sports media will call him out for it." I couldn't be sure Ed would be motivated by negative publicity or being blamed for a loss.

Todd nodded.

"I suppose the question is, does he hate me more than he hates negative press? Because it seems he hates me more than he wants to move up to the NHL."

"I told you, that guy is as dumb as a lump. But he's good on the ice."

Realizing I wasn't going to get anywhere with Todd, I gave a quick report and then left the rink, heading home to my new apartment. When I arrived home, I warmed up the leftover take-out that I ordered last night. I sat down at my kitchen table to eat and scrolled through my phone to read the sports news.

I had always been athletic and competitive. Growing up, I played a lot of different sports, from softball, to basketball, to tennis. But hockey was the sport that I loved the most. I loved the speed, and yes, the aggressiveness. Through hockey, I got a scholarship to college and excelled so much, I was offered a chance to play in the women's professional league. I left school, finishing up my degree through online courses. I also continued to give back to the sport by volunteering with the local high school and college teams.

Then I got injured. Along with the broken collarbone, I had a pretty severe concussion. It terrified my mother, who could list all the famous people who'd died from head injuries from falls. By the time I was given the okay to play again, the season was over. Despite my mother's concerns, I headed back into training, fully intending to return to the ice as a player. But then Jasper Leads, an NHL player, was hit in the chest with a puck and went into cardiac arrest. He survived the freak accident, but it sent my mother into a tizzy. She was relentless in her worry, and I was doing my damndest to ignore it when Todd Marshall reached out to me about this job in Nevada. At first, I was surprised as I was still playing and my coaching experience had only been from volunteering. He pointed out that the team I'd been assisting won the national championships and that the coach had credited me with helping them do that.

Deciding his offer was a sign from the universe that I should give my mother some respite from her distress, plus, admittedly, the excitement of being the first female hockey coach in a male league, I accepted the offer and

moved to Nevada.

Women have come a long way in the world, but not so much so in men's sports. My goal was to prove that while women's hearts and lungs may be different from men, our strategies and skills could be just as sharp or sharper. About half of the team had finally come around to accepting that I knew what I was doing. Another quarter of them were starting to come around, but that was because of Max Blake, who, besides Todd, was my biggest supporter. Since Max had the respect of most people on the team, they were willing to give me a chance. The other quarter was undecided, but only Big Ed was acting like a brat, digging his heels in and refusing to listen to me.

I told myself that I was fortunate to have as much of the team on my side as I had. I knew this job wouldn't be easy, so I had to dig in and find my strength to lead these men. And I had to do it without losing my cool lest they call me a bitch, the go-to accusation men tossed at women they felt were too strong. I just had to hope that Big Ed didn't push me so far that I ended up beating him with his own hockey stick.

Pierce

Our first game was tomorrow against our neighbor and rival, the Silver Nuggets. I was feeling confident as the team was finally starting to coalesce. They were strong and working well together on the ice. Bringing Bo on board was a big part of that.

The Silver Nuggets' owner, Todd Marshall, and my partner, Reed Hampton, got together, deciding it would be a good idea to have a press conference the night before the game. Initially, I resisted suggesting that Reed would be the best to face the media, but he pointed out that I was the coach, at which point I pointed out that Bo was a coach as well. Then they both pointed out that I was the best of both worlds because I was both part owner and a coach. In the end, what changed my mind was learning that Naomi, not Todd, would be on the press junket with me.

I felt like an idiot that I was like a horny teenage boy, eager to sit with the pretty, popular girl. I was clearly a glutton for punishment because the best thing for me to do would be to avoid Naomi at all costs, not just in person, but also watching all the news media and past games that were available on the Internet. But there was something compelling about her that continued to draw me to her, which was how I ended up agreeing to sit at a table with Naomi as members of the press asked us questions.

When I first entered the room, she was also entering from the other side. Holy hell. She was even more stunning in person. She wore dark jeans with a white blouse and a red blazer. Her long blonde hair was pulled back into a

ponytail, and shrewd hazel eyes studied the room and then me.

She thrust out her hand, which I clasped and shook. "Good to meet you, Coach Withers," I said.

"You too, Coach Jackson." She extricated her hand from mine, at which point I realized I'd been holding it a bit too long. But why wouldn't I? It was warm and soft.

Because my mama raised me well, I pulled the chair out for her and sat only after she'd been seated.

Her demeanor was irritated, and I wondered if that was having to do with the press or something specifically with me. Did it bother her that I'd held her chair for her?

Looking around the room, most reporters were local and state, but a few were from national outlets as well. That was unusual for minor-league hockey, but it was quickly apparent that they were here because of Naomi, the first woman to coach a men's minor-league hockey team.

The moment we were settled, arms flew up and questions were tossed out.

"Naomi, have you settled into Nevada? What sort of decor have you used in your new place?"

I frowned at the male reporter asking her the question. I looked at the back of the room at Reed, who shrugged, clearly confused by the question as well.

I turned my attention to Naomi, wondering how she would respond.

"I am settled in, thank you." Her words were polite, but her tone was irked.

"Coach Jackson, is Bo Tyler really as settled down as he seems? Has his input on the team made a difference?"

"Bo has been a tremendous asset to the coaching staff. Not only does he know what he's doing, but the team looks up to him and respects him a great deal."

"Let's just hope none of them decide to jump off the roof of a motel," someone from the back quipped.

"Let's hope not."

"Naomi."

I realized at that point that they were calling her by her first name, while they were calling me Coach Jackson. I was well aware of the double-standard, but I believed I was getting an upfront and personal view of it in

action.

"Have you met anyone since you've moved to Nevada? How will it work if you want to have a family? Do you want to have a family?"

What the hell?

Next to me, Naomi tensed. "I am focused on coaching the Silver Nuggets to a winning season. I don't have time for anything else."

"Coach Jackson, after a season of coaching the minors, do you wish you were back up in the NHL?"

This was really surreal. Why were her questions about décor and dating, and mine were about hockey? "How come nobody is asking me about my home decor? Or whether I'm seeing anyone? The answer to that is no, by the way." I glanced over at Naomi, expecting her to understand that I was supporting her. But her expression was fierce, as if she thought I was playing into this nonsense.

"I'm very happy to be coaching this group of men. I see potential in them, and there's a lot of satisfaction in helping them reach their goal of moving up."

"Coach Jackson, are you preparing for tomorrow's game any differently than you might normally considering—"

I held up a hand. "Please tell me you're not about to suggest that because the Silver Nuggets coach is a woman, we would be coaching our team differently?"

The room went silent, and as I took another quick glance at Naomi, she'd arched a brow, telling me I had at least surprised her.

"Our coaching has nothing to do with Naomi's gender, but with her experience."

"But she's young. You have more experience on and off the ice."

"When I was Naomi's age, I was skating and fu—" Thank God I was able to pull the f-word back. "Let me put it this way. I wasn't so different from Bo Tyler a couple of years ago. I'd never coached, and I'd certainly never won a gold medal in the Olympics, something I hadn't achieved even by the end of my career."

"Naomi, while Coach Jackson suggests we're being misogynists, the truth of the matter is that you are the first woman to be coaching a men's minor-league hockey team. Even around town, there's speculation about why Mr. Marshall would've hired you, knowing that there was going to be pushback."

"The only difference between men and women in hockey has to do with

biology or physiology. Everything else—tenacity, commitment, mental fortitude—I might argue that women excel over men in those areas. Women have had all of humankind to deal with a society that sees them as mentally and emotionally fragile. It's in a woman's DNA to prove otherwise."

Bravo, Naomi. I'd known she was a force on the ice, but I could see she had it off the ice as well. I could see why Marshall hired her.

"From where I stand, Coach Withers has a huge advantage that none of you have pointed out." Todd Marshall, who had been leaning against the wall, stepped forward. "Naomi is young, energetic, and innovative. Coach Jackson . . . well, let's just say he's getting a little long in the tooth."

Oh, hell no. Did he just call me old?

"I'm surprised at your ageism, Marshall," Reed piped up. "I do believe you're older than Coach Jackson."

Marshall gave an affable smile. "That's probably true, but I'm not coaching the team. My young, vivacious, experienced Coach Withers is."

By now, the whole room was looking back at Reed and Todd.

Reed rolled his shoulders, and inwardly I groaned because I knew whatever was going to come next out of his mouth was going to be something I'd regret. "I tell you what, why not make a friendly wager?"

Oh, God, here it comes.

"At the end of the season, whichever team has lost the most games, that team's owner has to donate \$50,000 to the charity the winningest coach selects."

"You're on." Todd thrust his hand out toward Reed, and they shook on it.

I turned to look at Naomi, shaking my head and rolling my eyes.

She leaned closer to me, and I was able to catch her scent, a mixture of vanilla and spice. It was intoxicating.

"Are they doing this because we're Nevada, the leading center of gambling, or is this the usual thing?"

"It's Reed's thing. The guy won the love of his life by having a friendly wager with her."

She gave a short nod and straightened.

"Would you be willing to share what you were just discussing with Coach Jackson?" someone from the room called out to us.

Naomi answered for us. "No."

All eyes in the room turned to me. I stared back at them, saying nothing.

As the press conference wound down, I realized that now I was pitted in a

wager against Naomi, which the more I thought about it, the more it bugged me. The woman had been starring in a few too many fantasies of late, but seeing her in person and sitting here next to her, watching her deal with misogyny, my interest in her grew. She was smart and assertive and so strikingly sexy. The lure for me was enough that I might have wanted to pursue something, assuming she'd be interested. But now, that option was off the table. It was one thing to be on rival teams, but when \$50,000 was at stake, that put a real wrench in things.

Maybe that was just as well. She was clearly focused on doing her job and not on extracurricular activities. And the fact remained that I was still significantly older than her. I wasn't too interested in being the clichéd older man with the much younger, sexy woman.

When the conference ended, we both stood, and I extended my hand again.

"Good luck tomorrow," I said.

She shook my hand, and those shrewd hazel eyes stared into mine. "You're the one who is going to need the luck, Coach Jackson." She turned and strode out of the press room.

It was wrong, but I watched because she was so fucking sexy. I buttoned my coat to hide the evidence of my admiration for her.

Naomi

I wasn't sure which was more annoying, seeing Pierce Jackson for the first time and all my girly parts getting excited by what they saw, or all the sexist questions tossed at me. Actually, the sexist questions were probably more annoying because like any woman, I wanted to be taken seriously.

But I couldn't deny the surprise at my reaction to meeting Pierce for the first time. I guess I'd been expecting him to look like a middle-aged man with a growing potbelly. Oh, sure, I'd seen pictures of him where he'd looked handsome, but pictures were often deceiving. Most that I'd found were years old at the end of his hockey career and usually with a woman draped around him. Some were when he started coaching, but that was nearly a decade ago. Since then, he hadn't been in the media much. Interviews he did for the team didn't include pictures or video of him. It was usually Bo Tyler getting all the attention. All that to say, I wasn't expecting the epitome of a sexy, distinguished man to enter the press conference. I knew he was in his forties, but I wouldn't have guessed that by looking at him. His dark hair had a few grays, but they weren't very noticeable. His blue eyes were crystalline and friendly, and for a moment, I was mesmerized by them. But he was my rival, so I quickly tamped down the flutters of attraction.

When he started asking the reporters why they weren't tossing him questions about his home or his love life, I was initially angry at him. I thought he was making fun of me and this situation. But then he called out

the reporter who was about to ask him if his coaching style had changed because the opposing team had a female coach. I was surprised to find out that he knew my history in hockey. In a strange way, it boosted my confidence. I knew I had a lot working against me and that I had to win to prove that I knew what I was doing. Pierce's knowledge of my history meant that he had been looking into me as an expert in hockey. He hadn't been curious about my home décor or my love life but in my hockey experience. It told me that he was respecting me as a coach.

I couldn't for the life of me understand why Todd took that bet with Reed Hampton. It wasn't that I didn't think we could win the bet. It just added more pressure to the situation which was already loaded with pressure. Maybe I could ask Todd to make Big Ed pay the fifty thousand if we lost to encourage him to behave. But since that was about what Big Ed was earning as a player, Todd probably wouldn't agree to that.

I did my best to be professional, but this press conference couldn't end fast enough for me. When it was finally done, I shook hands again with Pierce, trying to ignore the way his large, warm hand enveloped mine.

I left the rink and went straight home. When I entered my apartment, I looked around, taking note of my décor. Then I chastised myself for letting stupid, sexist questions get to me.

I poured myself a glass of wine and went through my notes and plans for tomorrow's game. I felt good about our chances, but I also knew that Big Ed could make or break the game. Did he resent me enough to lose? I could see him thinking that it would be a way to get me fired. But it was a risk if he wanted to move up to the NHL.

After reviewing my game plan, I headed to bed. Normally, before games, I went to bed visualizing success. As I tucked myself in, I conjured up the rink and the team, imagining them kicking ass on the ice. Big Ed was still an asshole, but at least he was doing his job and we were grinding the Buckaroos into the dust. In my vision, I looked across the rink to the other team's box, where Pierce would be suffering a loss.

As it turned out, visualizing his loss was a mistake because once I fell asleep, Pierce entered my dream. At first, he was in hockey gear and so was I. We were facing off, flying across the ice, each determined to beat the other. I checked him into the boards, causing us both to fall. I landed on top of him, and a moment later, he'd rolled, and I was under him.

"You're on my stick."

I felt a hard length against my belly that wasn't a hockey stick.

I woke up with a start and then groaned. The last thing I needed was to have sexy dreams about my opponent.

THE NEXT DAY, I arrived at the arena early. I was excited and terrified, not unusual for the first game of the season. But this wasn't any other team that we were going up against. It was our rival in Las Vegas. Rivals who had three former professional hockey players coaching them.

For a moment, I questioned whether I was right for the job of coaching this team. I knew that Todd hired me because I was a woman and that he wanted the publicity that my coaching the team would bring. But he also wanted to make money, which required winning. If I failed, the stands would be empty, and no money would be coming in. So, while my being a novelty might bring people here initially, only wins would keep them coming back. He knew that as well, so it had to mean he'd also hired me because he believed that I could win.

I headed toward the locker room, looking in toward the rink as the stands started to fill. I was surprised to find people holding signs up with my name on them. As I looked closer, I noted that they were all women. My confidence grew and my determination rose with it. I was a role model now. I needed to prove to all these women that they, too, could coach men in hockey or any other sport.

I entered the locker room ready to coach the Silver Nuggets to victory.

"Coming in to get an eyeful, Coach?" Big Ed sneered at me and wagged his hips. Thank God he had his pants on.

"Do you always shake your dick at your coach?" I quipped.

The teammates around him laughed, one snapping him with a towel. Ed scowled at me.

"This is not just our first game, but it is a home game. Everyone is expecting you to deliver a win against the Buckaroos. And I know you're going to do it. You're going to give them everything you've got. The Buckaroos are going to leave here battered and bruised and with a loss."

Max and a few others let out a cheer and a, "Hell, yeah."

I continued the speech I'd planned to fire them up and give them the confidence to win. I ran through all the things that I expected they would come up against on the ice against Pierce's team. Having studied his past

games, but also Bo Tyler's games and how he played, I felt I had a good sense of what they'd coach their team to do.

"Who'd you sleep with over at the Buckaroos to get all that information?" Big Ed asked, smirking. His buddies snickered, while the rest of the team looked surprised by his disgusting statement.

"Did you study to be an asshole or does it just come naturally to you?" Max said to Ed.

"Are you standing in line to get some of her too?" Big Ed snapped back.

The two men rushed to the middle of the room. I stepped between them, giving them both a hard shove. "Save it for the ice." I turned to look at big Ed. "We all know that you are a crucial part of this team, and I'll go ahead and take all your juvenile, sexist comments because I want to win. But if you do not do your job on the ice tonight, I will have no problem benching you." I didn't wait for a response. I left the locker room. When the door shut behind me, I took a moment alone to gather my thoughts and push away Big Ed's comments.

As soon as we were ready, the team skated out onto the ice and the arena erupted in cheers. I made my way toward the player box hoping nobody could see the way my body was shaking with nerves.

I looked across the ice and saw Pierce standing with his hands on his hips as he watched his team warm up on the ice. He glanced over, giving me a nod. I nodded back.

This was it. It was time to prove I deserved to be a coach of a men's minor-league hockey team.

Pierce

I didn't like the way the game was going.

While Big Ed seemed to be doing his own thing on the ice, Naomi had whipped the rest of her team into shape and they were out-skating us.

"Why bother with all that practice if they're not going to use it?" Bo lamented.

I cast him a glance. "Welcome to coaching."

He looked at me. "I might have been a shit off the ice, but I always did my job on it."

I nodded because it was true. While I never knew what trouble Bo would get into when we weren't on the ice, I could always count on him to give one hundred and ten percent during practice or a game. "It's only the first game. Maybe the sting of defeat will motivate them." I imagined enough of my team were chauvinists that their loss would hurt more at the hands of a team coached by a woman.

I didn't think that, though. I knew Naomi knew her stuff. I wasn't lying when I talked about her knowledge and experience at the press conference. With that said, I'd been at this a whole lot longer. I'd played longer and I'd been coaching longer. I was also a man, which meant I didn't have the added challenge of convincing my players to do what I said.

But Naomi was proving what every coach ultimately had to learn. It didn't matter how much the coach knew. The coach wasn't on the ice. A good portion of my players could move up to the NHL, but only if they

started playing to their potential, which they definitely weren't doing right now.

"If we don't pull it together, we're going to lose this game," Bo said.

"Yep."

I was thankful when the buzzer sounded, ending the first period. Maybe we could regroup and the team would get their shit together. I decided to let Bo talk with the team to get them refocused and energized. He was closer to their age and months away from having been where they wanted to be, the NHL. They looked up to him, and I wanted to use that to our advantage.

Twenty minutes later, we were back in the rink, and much to my dismay, it looked like the second period would be a repeat of the first.

"What do you think that is about?" Bo asked, nodding across the ice toward Naomi's team box.

I glanced across the ice to see Naomi and Big Ed in a heated discussion. He towered over her, and I didn't like the threatening stance he'd taken with her. My hands fisted by my sides as I imagined charging across the ice to teach him how to respect a woman.

The goal buzzer went off, pulling my attention away.

"Yeah!" Bo shouted. The stands behind us erupted with cheers.

"Finally got one," Bo said.

I'd been at this long enough to know that we still had work ahead. As it was, one goal still put us two behind.

I looked over at Naomi's side again and realized that with Naomi distracted by big Ed, she hadn't been paying attention to the game, which turned out to be to our advantage.

The goal interrupted her argument, but then immediately, they were back at it. I imagined Big Ed was blaming her for our score. Whatever was going on, it was heated and didn't seem to be anywhere near being resolved when Big Ed gave a menacing head jerk toward her and then sat his ass down on the bench.

The goal buzzer went off again.

"Yeah, that's the way," Bo shouted.

By the time the second period ended, we'd taken the lead. During the break before the third period, I led the talk with the team.

"Listen, I know we're winning now, but you can't let up. If Coach Withers puts Sampson back in the game, they could make a comeback. We need to stay sharp."

When we returned to the ice for the third and final period, Big Ed was nowhere to be seen.

"Did she bench him the entire rest of the game?" I said out loud.

"Who?" Bo asked as he looked across the ice toward Naomi's team.

"Ed Samson."

"No shit." Bo scanned the ice and then the team box. "I don't see him. She wouldn't be dumb enough to bench him, though, would she?"

I cast a glance at him. "Are you calling her dumb?" Despite the fact that pulling Big Ed from the ice would be an idiotic thing to do, I didn't like Bo calling Naomi dumb.

Bo looked at me with a quizzical expression. "Big Ed isn't fast, but he's imposing and he's good. The only reason we're ahead at this point is because he barely played the second period."

"That may be, but you saw him. He was hot dogging it and doing his own thing. He was frustrating his own team."

"Yeah, but pull your best player?" Bo asked.

"There were times I should've pulled you."

Bo grinned up at me. "That's not true. On the ice, I was always focused on the game and always listened to my coach. It was only off the ice that I did my own thing."

He was right. As the game continued, I kept expecting Big Ed to show up but he never did. As the buzzer went off ending the third period, we had more points, which meant we won. I was happy about it but didn't feel we'd earned it. I also felt sort of bad for Naomi. She was going to get a lot of shit for not letting Big Ed play and losing the game.

I shook my head of thoughts of Naomi. Any other coach, I'd probably think like Bo did. It wasn't smart to bench Big Ed. He might not have been playing the way he should, but they'd been winning when he was on the ice. So why was I concerned with Naomi?

Back in the locker room, I gave the team time to celebrate, but at our next practice we were definitely going to discuss that our win was because Naomi had pulled her best player and had lost focus in the middle of the game. The Silver Nuggets had lost the game more than we had won it.

As the team showered and changed, I took a moment to step out of the locker room, anticipating that sports reporters would be there. Or maybe not. Naomi was the bigger story.

"How does it feel to have the first game of the season out of the way,

Coach?" one of the reporters asked.

"I'm glad that we were able to come out with a win. We still have a few things to work on, but it's nice to have a game under our belt."

"Coach Jackson, do you think your victory is the result of the inexperience of Naomi Withers?"

The correct answer was that it was possible. Not that Naomi was inexperienced in hockey, but she was inexperienced in coaching. Helping a high school or college team was very different from coaching a minor-league team. Then there was the fact that I'd been coaching for nearly ten years, most of those in the NHL. But I didn't want to say anything negative about Naomi.

"First games are like making pancakes. You test and then toss the first one away."

"Yeah, but she pulled Big Ed."

"Did you see him play?" I shook my head. "I'd have pulled him too."

"Really?"

Shit. Didn't I just decide I wasn't going to comment on Naomi's coaching?

As if on cue, Naomi rounded the corner coming toward our locker room.

She stopped short as a swarm of reporters descended on her. It was weird they hadn't been outside her locker room. Was she looking for them? Or maybe she'd been heading over to congratulate us.

"You have a lot of pressure on you for being the first female coach in minor-league hockey. Was it wise to pull the best player in the middle of the game?" a reporter asked.

Her eyes were wary, but she managed a smile. "Hockey is a team sport. It is important that all players remember that and respect their teammates."

I nodded in agreement.

"Even so, you were winning until you pulled Ed Sampson. Aren't you worried that people are going to question your ability to coach?"

"People are questioning my ability anyway. If we won, they would've thought it was a fluke."

"Even so—"

Annoyed at the way they were hammering at Naomi, I raised my voice to be heard over all the questions the reporters were shouting. "You guys were asking me about Bo Tyler at the press conference yesterday. If you want to know about hockey's bad boy turned husband and father, he's offering an

exclusive and he has some news."

As expected, everyone turned toward me.

"He's in the locker room, ready to share about his transformation."

Again, the herd of reporters hurried off toward our locker room. I followed them, pulling out my phone to text Bo about the incoming media and apologizing for tossing him to the wolves.

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Naomi

Fury rose inside me as Pierce strutted away. He'd stolen the spotlight by dangling reformed bad boy Bo Tyler in front of the media. My initial impression of Pierce being like all the other men who didn't like a woman invading their sport had been the right one. I'd been wrong in thinking that his comments supporting my gender had been a show of support. It had been a show, but only to garner points.

I clenched my fists, indignation coursing through me. Win or lose, I'd worked hard to get here and deserved a chance. It was time to make a stand. I needed to show everyone that I was just as worthy of attention as Pierce and Bo.

The sudden sound of footsteps broke me out of my resentful trance. I turned to see Todd making his way toward me.

"Naomi," Todd said.

I steeled myself for his anger at the loss. He said he'd support my benching Big Ed, but theory and reality were two different things. Todd was all about profits, and losing a game, a game we could have won had I left Big Ed in, could hurt the bottom line.

But instead of berating me, Todd surprised me. "I saw what happened out there and I want you to know that I'm proud of you."

I blinked in disbelief. "Proud of me?"

"Yes. You stood up for yourself, and that's not always easy to do, especially to someone like Big Ed, and with an arena filled with fans."

A wave of guilt washed over me at the thought of all the fans I had let down. No doubt, they'd be calling for my resignation at seeing me bench Big Ed. But Todd was on my side. I was so grateful that he understood the choice I'd made.

He looked toward the Buckaroos' locker room. "Coach Jackson may be getting the attention now, but you're the one who deserves it. You're a damn good coach, Naomi, and don't let anyone tell you otherwise."

"Thank you, but you do know we lost, right?"

He gave me a small smile. "That doesn't matter right now. What matters is the fact that the game sold out and the arena was packed. That's why I hired you. I thought that putting a female coach in charge of the team might help us sell tickets. And it worked."

I sighed. His words reminded me that while he supported me, it was only for as long as the stands were full and money was coming in.

"Yes, but that's only going to last for so long. If the team doesn't start to win, the crowd will turn against me, and I'll be the shortest-lived coach in the league. No one wants to keep hiring a loser. Not to mention that bet you have with the Buckaroos' owner."

Todd smiled reassuringly. "Now, now, don't worry about that. I have faith in you, and I have faith in my business plan. But more importantly, I have faith in this team."

Guilt stabbed my gut again. This wasn't just about me. I had what it took to be successful but only because my team did too. They were all skilled and smart. They could win. Possibly even without Big Ed. But if Big Ed could get his head out of his ass, the team could be unstoppable.

"Thank you."

He nodded. "It was just one game. Brush it off. I'll see you on Monday." I watched as Todd turned and made his way to the exit.

He was right. I needed to brush the loss off. I needed to focus on getting Big Ed's head off me and into the game.

I returned to my office to gather my things, my mind already racing with ideas and strategies for the next game. I closed up my office and trudged down the stadium corridor, eager to put my first league game behind me.

Just as I was almost at the door, Pierce stepped into my path, blocking my exit. He stood there with his arms folded, a smug smile playing on his lips. Had he been waiting for me? For a moment, warmth flared deep in my gut at the idea that he'd been waiting. Despite my resentment toward him and his

team, I couldn't deny that there was something alluring about Pierce. Dammit.

He held out his hand for shaking and said, "Good game, Coach Withers." It was nice of him to call me Coach instead of Naomi like the media had last night, but it still felt condescending coming from him, effectively dousing the momentary insanity of being attracted to him.

I forced a smile and shook his hand. "Gloating won't get you anywhere." I wanted to make sure he knew that we weren't going to go down without a fight next time we met.

Pierce laughed, and it made me want to grind my teeth in frustration. "I like friendly competition. It makes the guys play harder." Obviously, he wasn't worried about our beating him the next time around, not after Big Ed hadn't been playing his best.

Disappointment that I couldn't understand filled me. I realized that I wished Pierce were different. Oh, sure, he was saying the right words to make me feel like an equal, but I knew he didn't mean them. He had to think I was an idiot to bench Big Ed, and in doing so, I'd be fired before long, so of course he was acting nice.

"We are not friends." Having nothing more to say, I turned and left.

I was filled with a roller coaster of emotions. I'd been lifted by Todd's confidence, but now I felt the loss like a lead weight holding me down. I was second-guessing my decision to bench Big Ed. But I wouldn't win his respect if I let him bully and manipulate me. He needed to know who was boss and just how far I was willing to go to make sure he understood that. I'd made the right choice. I felt certain any other coach would have done the same had Big Ed refused to play as directed and spoken to them the way he talked to me. Of course, Big Ed probably wouldn't misbehave toward them.

As I reached my car, I realized that second-guessing my decisions and trying to anticipate the thoughts and reactions of others weren't doing me any favors. I was letting that weigh me down when I didn't have to. I could use this defeat as a motivator to push myself and the team to do better. It was time to refine our strategies and focus on the little things that could make all the difference, with or without Big Ed. In fact, perhaps the team was relying too much on Ed and not enough on their own skills.

Driving home, I mentally mapped out a plan for the next game. My mind raced with ideas and tactics. I would need to talk to each player, understand their strengths and weaknesses, and figure out how to use them to our

advantage. Their individual personalities and quirks would be crucial in shaping our gameplay.

But it wasn't just about us. It was about scrutinizing other teams, analyzing every pattern they had ever shown and every weakness they had displayed. Every detail mattered, from their warm-up routines to their locker room banter. I needed to know everything if we were going to come out on top in the league. I would show everyone—Pierce, Todd, the Silver Nugget fans, and the world—that a woman could be just as successful in this industry as any man. And I wouldn't let anyone stand in my way.

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Pierce

I watched Naomi walk away, feeling frustrated and turned on at the same time. I couldn't stop the dirty thoughts and fantasies that filled my brain as my gaze followed her retreating figure. My dick was hard as steel, and once again, I was the lusty old man wanting to get his hands on the young, strong, nubile woman. Jesus, the woman was twisting me up inside.

Just as I was about to turn away, a firm hand grabbed my shoulder and whirled me around.

Bo glared at me, clearly pissed off. "What the hell was that about?"

Shit. I had completely forgotten about the press I'd sent his way to interview him about his transformation from hockey's bad boy to a husband and father. It was an asshole move. One I made from a feeling I had to protect Naomi. I suspected that if she knew why I'd sent the media off in search of Bo to get them off her, she'd be pissed. She clearly didn't think she needed any protection from the media. To be honest, she didn't. She had the balls to stand up to Big Ed and to me. So not only did I piss her off by taking away her chance to stand up to the media, but I'd also tossed Bo under the bus. Again, what was it about her that was making me do crazy shit?

"I'm sorry." I raked my fingers through my hair, suddenly feeling tired. "I was just trying to make them stop piling on Coach Withers."

He looked at me incredulously. "Why?"

"I don't know." I sighed. "She's a good enough coach that it shouldn't matter what gender she is."

Bo narrowed his eyes and slowly shook his head. His expression morphed from pissed to suspicious. "What's your deal with her?"

I shrugged, hoping the gesture would hide the fact that there was a deal with her, at least with my libido and her. "There's no deal. It was her first game. I just wanted to ease things for her."

"She stared down Big Ed and benched him. I don't think she needs anyone looking out for her."

I'd already come to that conclusion, but only after I'd already sent the media to Bo. "I'm sorry about sending the mob your way."

"You owe me for this, Pierce." He paused, his gaze steely. "And I intend to collect."

"Not babysitting, I hope." Not that I minded his daughter, Laina. Actually, I liked the kid. She was smart and outspoken like her mother. But I never knew what to do around her. She was very girly, and I knew nothing about little girls. I didn't have experience around kids. Granted, some of the men I coached were like children, but once I stopped being a kid, I wasn't around young people. It made me wonder why I'd been thinking marriage and a family might be nice. I suppose it was because Reed, and now Bo, looked so happy.

Bo smirked. "Maybe I'll make you figure skate with Laina." Bo had taken some razzing from the team when he started learning figure skating for his daughter. But I suspect most of us deep down thought it was sweet. Plus, it was hilarious to see someone who was so strong and confident on the ice with a hockey stick look like a drunk toddler when trying to figure skate.

I knew I wouldn't fare any better. I grimaced. "I don't figure skate."

His expression was smug. "We'll see about that."

Shit. I needed to find a way to make this up to him.

Just then, Reed appeared from behind Bo, grinning like a loon. "That was a hell of a win, man." He slapped me on the shoulder. "You and Bo are quite the coaching team."

The tension in the air dissipated a bit, and I couldn't help but smile.

"Thanks." I was relieved for the reprieve.

Reed's gaze shifted to Bo. "But you know, maybe we're underestimating Coach Withers. She's better than we may be giving her credit for. Never in a million years would I think she'd bench Ed Sampson. Would you have done it?"

"If he played like he was tonight, I might have." Bo looked at me, and I

nodded in agreement.

"But he wouldn't play like that for us. It's no secret he doesn't like being told what to do by a woman," I said.

Bo snorted. "He's probably like that in bed too. The man is intense and effective on the ice, but a total dickhead otherwise."

"Still, it was risky for her to bench him. She's under a lot of pressure to win. She didn't do herself any favors by pulling him out of the game." It was strange how much I was rooting for her to succeed. She was my rival. She had a team who could beat us. Hell, they could win the league championship. At the very least, win the bet Reed had with Todd.

Reed's phone buzzed, and he pulled it out of his pocket. "Ah, that's Analyn." He smiled with complete love and contentment. It was a side I'd never seen from him until he fell in love with Analyn. Sometimes, it was annoying. Other times, I was envious.

"I gotta take this and head home." Reed left Bo and me alone again.

I turned back to Bo and gave him a wry grin. "I guess you're off too. Ruby and Laina are probably waiting." I forced a lightness into my voice, hoping he'd forgive me for sending a press mob his way.

He just shook his head and crossed his arms, a hint of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth. He was thinking of cruel and unusual ways to punish me. I was certain of it. It was unnerving.

"Yeah, well, I'm heading home myself." I turned away and headed to my car. As I drove away, however, I couldn't help but feel a deep sense of foreboding. I had a feeling Bo was going to make me pay, one way or another. God, I hoped it wasn't with figure skating.

WHEN I GOT HOME, I headed to the shower to wash off the game. I dunked my head under the spray, replaying the night in my head with special focus on how the Silver Nuggets played. Big Ed was their ace in the hole, but I had no doubt that if their confidence was built up, they wouldn't need him. Could Naomi make Big Ed obsolete? I had no reason to think she couldn't if the rest of the team supported her as their coach. As it was, it appeared she did have the team's support. Only Big Ed was being a dick.

I remembered the way she stood up to him. He'd clearly been trying to intimidate her and she wasn't having it. Her fierceness was inspiring and so fucking sexy. My dick hardened as I imagined her intense hazel eyes on

mine, refusing to feel defeated by her loss or even second-guess the choice to remove Big Ed from the game.

Was she always like that or was it a function of surviving in a traditionally man's world? What was she like outside the rink? Still strong and determined, I imagined. How about in bed? Was she a woman who liked to take control? Or would she surrender it to a man?

My dick ached to know. I gave it a stroke, closing my eyes as I imagined Naomi showing up in my bathroom, stripping down, and entering my shower.

In my fantasy, I took in her body, curve after curve, soft, luminous skin over lean, strong muscle. I groaned, my entire body lusting for this woman. My hands roamed over her, cupping sublime tits, pinching hard nipples my mouth watered to suck.

I slipped fingers through her pussy lips, finding her hot and wet. My dick pulsed with need to be inside her. I imagined pushing her against the tiles and wrapping her legs around my hips as I sank into her. My thumb and index finger stroked the tip of my dick, rubbing the rim hard and fast until my orgasm hovered on the edge. I slid my hand down to the base, holding it tight. I groaned in frustration but I wasn't ready to come yet. Not yet. I wanted to imagine her coming, screaming my name as I plunged into and out of her.

I let my fantasy take over until once again, I was careening close to orgasm. I released my cock and lathered my hands with soap. Then I pressed one hand against the tiled wall for leverage, and the other I wrapped around my cock. I kept my hand still and used my hips to fuck my hand, imagining it was Naomi's pussy.

God, it felt so fucking good. I rocked in and out, in and out, imagining her breathing picking up.

"Fuck me, Pierce. Harder . . ."

I grunted as erotic electricity shot through me. I was so close. Too close. "Come on, baby."

"Yes. God, yes." At her imaginary cry of orgasm, I squeezed my dick harder as I thrust. Her pussy swallowed my dick, and with it, I came all over the tile, spurt after spurt.

Finally, I pressed both hands against the wall as I worked to catch my breath. As usual, I felt dirty at fantasizing about a woman so much younger than me. But Jesus fuck, I couldn't remember having orgasms as strong as I'd been having since she began staring in my fantasies. I wondered what the real

thing would be like. I probably wouldn't survive it, but holy hell, what a way to go.

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Naomi

I stood on the sidelines, watching the team as they ran through their drills with varying degrees of enthusiasm. I'd been concerned and defeated by the loss of our first game, but with my new strategies, we should be back on track if I could get the team on board.

But it wasn't easy. I pushed them hard during practice, and some of them weren't too happy about it, grumbling or groaning with each drill. Even so, most of them had worked hard and given their full effort. It was no surprise that Big Ed was the loudest of the grumblers, and he wasn't shy about voicing his displeasure.

"We've been running drills all week, and I'm getting tired of it," he complained. "We're good enough as it is. It's like Coach is overcompensating for something." At the start of the week, Ed was more compliant. I think it hit him that Todd was going to support my decisions, and he realized if he wanted to play, he'd need to do what I said. But as the week wore on, he continued to work, but his attitude and mouth left something to be desired.

The other players muttered in agreement, and I was annoyed that they believed I was trying to overcompensate for being the first female coach of a hockey team. Not that it wasn't true. There wasn't a woman in history who busted through the glass ceiling by doing as well as a man. Women had to work harder, be more committed, and generate bigger results to be given any recognition. Along the way, the men fussed and called them bitches.

I was about to respond, but before I could, I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"What's the problem, Big Ed? Afraid you can't keep up?" Max said.

The team laughed, and Ed's face reddened. "Fuck you, Blake. Or have you been fucking Coach Tits?"

Max made a move toward Ed, who grinned knowing he'd gotten to Max. Several teammates held Max back as I stepped between them.

"Are you done acting like a child?"

Big Ed looked at me with heat in his eyes. "It won't be long before this whole town hates you for making us lose and Mr. Marshall will get a new coach."

I shrugged like his words didn't impact me, but they did. He spoke to my fears. Fears I fought so that I could prove Big Ed and everyone else who doubted me wrong.

"Maybe you're right. But do you think another coach won't notice that you're not practicing? That you're huffing and puffing to keep pace because you're losing fitness by whining about having a woman as a coach?"

"Maybe I'll transfer. I bet the Buckaroos would take me," Big Ed sneered.

"Do you think they didn't notice how you played against them? Do you doubt they would have benched you for playing the way you did?"

He shrugged like he didn't have a care in the world. "I wouldn't play like that for them."

"Maybe, but they saw how you weren't a team player. Why would Coach Jackson and Coach Tyler want you knowing if you got your boxers in a bunch, you'd pout and let the team down?"

Some of the team snickered while others nodded as if it was the first time they recognized that being difficult with me could impact their future on another team.

Big Ed grumbled something unintelligible, apparently realizing he'd lost the momentum of his argument. After that, we were able to move on and they resumed their drills.

"Thank you for your support, Max." I appreciated that Max accepted me as his coach, although I wasn't thrilled by his stepping in to defend me. Todd was right in that I needed to earn the respect of all the players. If they felt I was weak or couldn't handle them, there was no way I'd be able to lead them to victory.

"No problem." Max started to skate off, but then he turned back to me. "You're a good coach. Trust your instincts." With that, he returned to the

team to run drills.

I was determined to prove myself as a coach, but I needed this group of men to achieve that. I'd been able to plan how we could win, but I hadn't figured out how to get them to believe in me enough to lead them.

AFTER PRACTICE, I returned home and then decided to go for a run to clear my head and think about my next move. I needed to show the team that I was capable and that my gender didn't define my ability to coach. I couldn't let Big Ed or anyone else undermine my confidence. I had worked hard to get to where I was, and I deserved to be there just as much as anyone else.

As I jogged along the path, I felt a sense of peace wash over me. I was a capable woman. I was a kickass coach. I couldn't expect miracles right away. I needed to stay the course to earn the team's respect and win games.

Feeling renewed, I returned to my apartment, grabbing a glass of water before heading to the shower. As I drank, my phone rang with Todd's ringtone.

"Hey, Boss." I wondered if he'd been watching practice and if so, what he thought? Had Max's stepping in undermined my authority? Or had he been impressed at how I challenged Big Ed? I hated that I was constantly second-guessing not just myself, but Todd as well.

"I didn't catch you before you left the rink. I want to remind you of the children's charity event coming up. It's a big deal, a fancy shindig. You need to dress to the nines. The media will see you as both the beauty and the beast."

I was annoyed at his comment, viewing it as another double-standard for a woman. But that was why I was hired, right? I realized that this could be my chance to prove that I was more than just a pretty-faced coach. I could show everyone that I was a strong, capable woman who could excel in any situation.

I also knew how important this event was for the team's image, and ultimately, for my own credibility as a coach.

"Thanks for the reminder, Todd. I'll make sure to dress my best and represent the team well."

"Good. I'll have a limo pick you up on Saturday."

"I'll be ready."

"I know it's not easy being the first female coach, but I believe in you."

You have what it takes to lead this team to victory. So don't let Big Ed or any of the other players get to you. You're the coach, and they need to respect you if they want to play on this team."

His words were like a balm to my soul, and my heart swelled with gratitude. "Thank you, Todd. You have no idea how much that means to me." It was one thing to give myself a pep talk and another to have my boss tell me he believed in me.

"I do. Now go get 'em, Coach."

I hung up the phone and smiled to myself. This was my chance to show everyone what I was made of. I was determined to make a statement, both on and off the ice.

ON SATURDAY, as I got ready for the event, I took my time picking out the perfect outfit. I owned a fantastic red dress that looked painted on, had a slit up my left thigh, and dipped low in the back, but if I wanted to be viewed as a professional coach, I couldn't distract people with a dress sewn for sin. I settled on a deep green, off the shoulder dress that accentuated my assets without looking like I was trying too hard to be sexy. I added a pair of strappy heels and a little bit of makeup, feeling confident and strong.

When I arrived at the event, I stood outside in the lobby as I psyched myself up to smile and schmooze and deal with misogyny around my being a female coach in a male hockey league. If I was lucky, I'd get through the night without smacking some jerk.

"Hey, Coach." Max stepped up to me. At first, I almost didn't recognize him. I'd only seen him in his hockey gear and jeans. He cleaned up nicely wearing a tux. "Everything alright?"

"Right as rain."

He smiled and held out his arm. "I'm a country kid, not used to glitz and glamor. Maybe walking in with you will settle my nerves."

Maybe he was telling the truth, or maybe he noticed my nerves. Either way, I figured it would be nice not to have to walk in alone.

I threaded my arm through his. "Let's do this."

We stepped into the ballroom, and it felt like all eyes turned to me. I pushed away the feeling of self-consciousness and held my head high, smiling to those who looked my way. I saw the curiosity in their eyes about the young woman coaching a men's hockey team.

I recognized a few of the players from the team, their eyes widening as they saw me. Perhaps like my seeing Max, they were surprised I could clean up well.

"There's the team." Max led me over to the group.

I smiled. "Hey, guys. Nice to see you all here."

They shuffled their feet, awkwardly nodding their heads in greeting. Big Ed was there, looking uncomfortable as he shifted from foot to foot.

"Uh, hey, Coach. Nice dress," he muttered.

"Thank you, Big Ed. You look nice too."

The other players chuckled, and Big Ed glared at them. It was odd to see the blush on his cheeks.

The snap of a camera made me flinch. "Sorry. Just getting a photo of the beauty and her beasts."

Jeez, Todd had nearly called it right. I wanted to make the photographer recognize me as a coach, not a pretty woman, but I plastered on a smile and prepared to play my part.

Pierce

Jesus fuck. I was sure I swallowed my tongue. Naomi entered the ballroom looking confident, beautiful, and sexy as hell. And she wasn't trying nearly half as hard as most of the other women in this room. Her dress was a lovely shade of green, exposing creamy, yet strong looking shoulders. The dress was fitted, but it also had soft, flowy fabric belying the hard edge she frequently showed as a coach. Her hair was pulled back, but not in the tight ponytail she normally wore. Like her dress, it was soft. Her makeup wasn't slathered on, but instead, it gave her face a glow. She was a bright light, and like a moth, I was mesmerized by it. I didn't even give a shit that if I flew too close to her, I would get burned up.

Until Naomi entered the room, I was counting down the seconds before I could leave. I was not a man built for fancy balls and charity events. I would rather be in jeans than this penguin suit I was wearing now. I wasn't an antisocial person, but neither was I one to schmooze and blow smoke up people's asses to make him feel good so that they would donate money. All that was Reed's domain, and I was pretty pissed off that he insisted I had to come to this charity event. I could support kids' causes without having to be here.

I'd been watching how Reed and even Bo seemed right at home with the elite of Las Vegas. Even Bo's wife Ruby, who I knew was like me and more at home in jeans, looked like a million bucks as she stood next to Bo, rubbing the small swell of her belly. I was still amazed how a messed up playboy like

Bo found a great woman and was now a father with a second child on the way.

They didn't need me, and as I tugged on the collar of my shirt that felt like a noose and planned my escape, Naomi walked in and everything else in the world vanished. That is until I realized she had her arm threaded through Max Blake's as they entered the room.

My first thought was I wanted to go over and rip his arms out of their sockets. My second thought was, could she possibly be dating him? She was his coach. Surely, there were rules against that. Then again, why would there be rules in men's hockey about dating your coach?

Did we have any rules around fraternizing? Whether there were official rules or not, it was a well-known standard societal belief that relationships between bosses and their employees was frowned upon. That had to include coaches and their players.

This wasn't the first time I'd seen them together. Local sports bloggers had caught them exiting the rink together. And by together, I didn't mean like a coach and player leaving the building. He had his arm strung over her shoulder. I suppose this frustration was deserved if I was going to spend more time than I should on blogging and sports news sites researching her.

I suppose one might argue that I was reading more into the two of them being together, but I wouldn't be alone in my thoughts. Even the bloggers were questioning their relationship. And they did it in a way that was on the one hand gossip, but on the other hand, almost as if they were hoping it was true. Like it'd be some sort of fairy tale. I couldn't deny that they looked good together. It highlighted the fact that I was so much older than her, and it made me a dirty old man to lust after her the way I did.

"Coach Jackson. Coach Withers. Let's get some pictures of the two of you together," a photographer said, approaching me.

I gave a shake of my head. "No, thanks." The last thing I needed was to be standing next to Naomi and despite my current irritation, end up with a hard-on.

Like lemmings, other photographers gathered around. "Oh, come on."

Naomi moved toward us. "I'm game. Maybe we're rivals on the ice, but clearly, we both support children's charities."

God damn her. Now I was going to look like I hated children if I didn't take photos with her. Then again, while she was smiling, there was a wariness in her eyes that I suspected meant she didn't want to take pictures

any more than I did. She was hoping that I'd stand firm on no pictures and come out looking like the bad guy.

I decided to call her bluff. I gave the photographer an affable smile and a shrug. "Well, of course, I'll do it for the kids. I just wasn't sure whether Mr. Blake would be all right with his date taking photos with another man. And not just any other man, but a man with much more experience." I let the comment hang for a moment, knowing anyone around us listening would turn it into sexual innuendo. "On the ice, of course," I finished.

Naomi's eyes narrowed, either not liking what I said or that I had agreed to the photos. Probably both.

"How about we have one with a friendly handshake?" a photographer called out.

I slid one hand into my pocket, hoping to create bulk in my pants on the chance that my dick was going to respond to being so close to her. I extended my other hand out toward her to shake.

She took my hand and plastered a smile on her face, but anyone looking close into her eyes would know she was not happy or friendly.

"Okay, how about one where you're back-to-back?"

Obliging, I turned away from her, crossing my arms feeling safe that my dick would stay flaccid.

"Lean back against each other."

I did my best to hide my scowl behind a smile as I leaned back until my shoulders were against hers.

"That's great." The photographers' cameras went off, and several other people had pulled out their phones to take pictures.

"Okay, how about facing each other, like a face-off on the ice?"

When I turned around, neither of us had taken a step back, putting us in very close proximity. Her scent filled my nostrils, heading straight down to my groin. I shoved my hand back into my pocket.

"How does it feel to be coaching against one of the great legends on and off the ice, Coach Withers?" a photographer asked.

"Oh, will I be taking photos with Bo Tyler too?" she quipped, her smirk suggesting that she was pleased with the barb.

I gave a humorless laugh, hoping no one saw how deeply her remark cut through me. I considered making a snarky comment about her lack of knowledge in the history of hockey, but I anticipated she would respond with something that suggested that I was old or sexist.

"How about you, Coach Jackson? Most people believe you won your game against the Silver Nuggets only because Naomi pulled Ed Sampson from the game."

A few days ago, I gave a supporting comment about that move, saying I didn't blame her considering how he'd been playing. But after her comment, I wasn't feeling particularly supportive or generous.

"Well, I suppose if Coach Withers and the Silver Nuggets would have beaten us if she left Ed Sampson in the game, then it wasn't a very good move to pull him, was it?" While my comment didn't come right out and say her move was a bad bit of coaching, my comment definitely suggested it.

It was clear that was how she took it, as she glowered up at me.

"How has it been, Coach Withers, being a woman in a predominantly male-run world?"

She smirked up at me. "Well, I can tell you that women aren't necessarily better than men, but men are definitely worse than women."

So this was how we were going to play this?

"Do you have a response to that, Coach Jackson?"

I hesitated for a moment because while I felt like being a jerk, I didn't necessarily have to act it out.

Then again, Naomi was the one who was continuing this game of snark, so I decided I would keep playing. "Well, it seems to me that Coach Withers has adapted into the quote-unquote man's world really well. After all, she's become the clichéd boss dating one of her players."

I lifted a brow, indicating it was a checkmate. I knew I had won our little spar when her eyes glowed with fury. Her fists bunched by her side, and I imagined that if a photographer weren't there, she might've taken her best shot at clobbering me.

"So it's true, then, Coach Withers, that you're dating Max Blake?"

Everyone around us went silent.

For a moment, she looked vulnerable. At that moment, I hated being the one to make her feel like that.

She swallowed. "That's not exactly—"

Right then, Max stepped into the frame. "Don't you all have better things to do? Are you all a bunch of gossip rags now? I thought you were interested in sports."

The area erupted with questions tossed out for Max and Naomi. She looked up at me. The vulnerability was gone, replaced by hate. If her eyes

could shoot lasers, I'd be a pile of dust.

I gave her a smug smile, but deep down, I felt ashamed of my behavior.

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Naomi

Pierce Jackson was the biggest asshole in the world. He just announced to the press that I was sleeping with one of my players. Maybe he didn't say it in so many words, but based on the reaction of the press, I knew that's what they were thinking.

I wasn't too happy with Max either. He had the worst timing in the world to step in to defend me like that. But also, the fact that he felt the need to defend me only made Pierce's comments seem true.

I didn't need Max to defend me, but as I made an attempt to defend myself, it was clear the damage was already done. The photographers barked out questions asking about our first date . . . what happens if I fail as a coach . . . will Max dump me if I bench him . . . and on and on.

I gathered all my strength and smiled at the photographers. I even managed a condescending laugh. "Oh, my God, and they say women are terrible gossips. You want to know one of the things I've learned most about being in your so-called man's world? You love scandal over truth as much as everybody else."

Feeling that was the best I was going to get for a last line, I excused myself. Max started to follow me, but I held my hand up. "If you're smart, you won't come anywhere near me for the rest of the night."

Why hadn't it occurred to me to refuse his friendly gesture to walk in with me? I should have guessed that people might have read more into it than my needing a little support from a teammate as I walked into a charity event

filled with rich people in an area where I didn't know anybody except my team.

He gave me a nod, and I continued on, making a beeline toward the bar. The glare of camera flashes still danced behind my eyes as I shoved through the crowd at the charity gala, their incessant clicking triggering a headache that hammered against my skull.

I wanted to leave, but I knew Todd would be angry if I did. Worse, he'd probably like what just happened with me and Pierce and the press. If he found me now and said so, I'd slug him. I was willing to play his publicity games a little bit, but I had my limit. My limit was having the press think I was sleeping with one of my players.

I suppose the only thing that would be worse was them thinking I was sleeping with Todd. I wondered how long before they'd jump to that assumption even though there was no evidence of that.

Before I could reach the bar, two women stepped in front of me, both with suspiciously perky smiles.

"Bravo, Coach Withers. I love the way you handled yourself against Pierce," the pretty, curvaceous brunette said. She looked familiar, but I couldn't place her.

The woman next to her with the strawberry-blonde hair was nodding. "What you did to the press wasn't too shabby, either. I wish I could think of comebacks like that."

The brunette looked at her friend. "Your tongue is very sharp, Ruby."

She shrugged. "Yeah, but not when the press is around. I'm like a deer caught in headlights when the press is staring at me."

The brunette thrust out her hand toward me. "I'm Analyn Hampton, and this is my good friend, Ruby Tyler."

It took a second for all the gears to click in place, and when they did, my eyes narrowed and I took a step back. "You're Reed Hampton and Bo Tylor's wives. I'm not sure why the wives of the rival team's coach and owner would be congratulating me. Unless this is some sort of stunt?" I glanced around for Todd.

Both their expressions dropped. Analyn shook her head. "This is no stunt. This is two women recognizing another woman with great feminine power."

"I'm just a fan. I have followed your career," Ruby said.

They both looked at me. I didn't trust them, but at the same time, they appeared sincere. "I'm heading to the bar if you want to join me."

They smiled. "Sounds perfect."

We exited the ballroom and made our way to the hotel bar. I made my order for a vodka tonic before dropping onto a stool with a heavy sigh.

"Seltzer for me," Ruby said, sitting to my left. She rubbed her belly. "Baby doesn't get booze."

"Congratulations."

"I'll have wine. I just finished nursing, so booze is back on for me," Analyn said, taking the stool to the left of Ruby.

The bartender set my drink in front of me. The cool glass was a relief as I took a long sip, letting the alcohol burn away the anger simmering in my veins.

It was a miracle I'd managed to keep my cool with the photographers. All those invasive questions, their blatant disregard for my accomplishments, and then having to deal with Pierce's stupid comments . . . it was infuriating. But now, sitting at the bar nursing my vodka tonic, I felt a small measure of peace.

"Please don't think of us as rivals," Analyn said. "What you're doing as a female coach in this industry is incredible. We're fans."

"Thanks," I said. It wasn't often that I received compliments. Mostly, I was an oddity.

"Seriously," Ruby chimed in. "You've got nerves of steel going up against men like Pierce."

It felt a little dangerous to trust these women, and yet, I couldn't help but feel a sense of camaraderie with them.

Our conversation flowed easily as we talked about hockey. They didn't ask dumb questions about my being a woman. They said they admired my guts in benching Big Ed. Ruby said she'd once wanted to play pro hockey, but she'd ended up pregnant.

"I'm not complaining. I love my daughter and I couldn't ask for a happier life," she said.

"Tell her how you beat Bo in hockey," Analyn said.

I arched a brow. I wasn't certain I could beat him. If she had, the women's pro hockey league had missed out on an incredible player.

Ruby laughed. "We were twelve. I grew up with Bo."

"He's also the one who knocked her up . . . not just this time but last time too."

"Oh." I wasn't sure what to say about that.

We continued to chat, and while I tried to relax, Pierce's presence still loomed large in my mind. Why couldn't I stop thinking about that dumb old oaf?

Ruby was telling a story about Bo when she went silent for a moment. "Hi, Pierce."

I stiffened.

"Ruby. Analyn." He stepped up to the bar on my right. "Coach Withers." He waved to the bartender. "Vodka tonic." He turned his body toward me. "I see you're enjoying yourself."

"More than when I was surrounded by vultures," I replied, not bothering to hide my irritation.

His lips quirked upward, and I hated how sexy it looked. "Does Todd know you're cavorting with the enemy?"

"You only just arrived. Unless he's watching me, no."

Pierce glanced at the women.

"They're not the enemy. They're fierce, powerful women."

"That they are." His smile was genuine, and my pulse quickened for reasons I couldn't understand. What was it about this irritating man that made my insides go haywire?

"I notice you're drinking the same drink as Naomi," Analyn said.

"I've been drinking this longer than she's been alive," he said, his tone teasing but with an underlying edge that dared me to challenge him.

"Is that so?" I raised my glass and downed the contents in a single gulp, feeling the fiery liquid burn its way down my throat.

Pierce's eyes widened momentarily before his lips curled into a wicked grin. Cripes, he was sexy.

He followed suit, tipping back his own drink and downing it. The act drew worried glances between Analyn and Ruby.

"Care for a friendly wager?" I suggested, ignoring the warning bells clanging in my head. But we were in Vegas, right? The city of bets and recklessness. Besides, Reed Hampton was big on betting. Pierce was his business partner and friend, so surely he liked bets, as well.

His eyes stared at me with something I couldn't name. "Why not?"

"I can think of a few reasons," Analyn murmured.

I held up my hand to the bartender, letting him know I wanted another drink. "Then you shouldn't have any trouble keeping up with me." With that, I downed the entire glass in one gulp.

He held a smirk as he took his drink, downed it, and set the glass on the bar.

"Let's make this interesting," I said. "Let's see who can handle their liquor better?"

Pierce's blue eyes locked onto mine, the corners of his mouth twitching in amusement. He didn't hesitate, holding up his hand to order another drink.

"Alright, sweetheart, let's see who can handle their liquor better."

Sweetheart? Asshole was trying to dismiss me as some little lightweight girl. But worse than his using the term was the way my heart fluttered as if it was happy about it.

"Naomi, are you sure about this?" Analyn asked, her voice laced with concern. "It seems like a risky bet."

"Or a dangerous one," Ruby added.

I ignored the knot of anxiety that tightened in my stomach and focused on the challenge at hand. "Are you sure you can handle it, old man?"

Pierce smirked. "I think I can handle . . . it." The way he said "it" made me think he meant me and not the booze. "Besides, I never back down from a challenge, especially not one as enticing as this."

I'd noted the weird attraction that sometimes popped up around him, but at this moment, it was sizzling. The snap, crackle of sexual tension was palpable. It had to be the booze, right?

"Alright then," I said, taking a deep breath.

"May the best drinker win," Pierce agreed, raising his glass in a mock toast before downing it in one go.

As the bartender lined up more drinks for us, I knew I was probably making a mistake, and yet, I continued, strangely excited by what was happening.

I raised my glass, my gaze locked onto Pierce's striking blue eyes. "Ready?"

Pierce's lips curved into a half-smirk, showcasing his confidence. His broad shoulders flexed beneath his suit jacket as he leaned closer, the scent of his cologne filling my senses. Was he doing that on purpose to distract me?

"Always," he replied, his voice deep and smooth.

A shiver ran down my spine as our glasses clinked together. It was ridiculous how much this man affected me, even in the heat of competition.

"Cheers." I threw back the drink in one swift motion. The liquid burned its way down my throat, but my gaze never wavered from Pierce's face as he

did the same.

"Maybe that's enough." Analyn looked concerned.

"Round one, Jackson," I taunted playfully. This wager, while seemingly innocent, had taken on an entirely different meaning for me. It wasn't just about proving myself anymore. It was about getting under Pierce's skin, pushing his buttons, and seeing how far I could take things before they reached a boiling point.

"Bring it on, Withers." His tone was playful yet laced with an underlying intensity.

Our eyes remained locked, each daring the other to back down first. A battle of wills had begun. The room faded into the background, leaving only Pierce and me in our own little world.

As the bartender lined up more drinks for us, my pulse raced with anticipation, unsure of what would happen next. This night was proving to be anything but predictable, and as the alcohol blurred the lines between rivalry and attraction, one thing I knew for sure was that I wasn't going to back down from this challenge.

Pierce

The booze burned down my throat, warmth spreading through my chest as I slammed the glass onto the table. Naomi stared me down, eyes gleaming with determination and challenge as she knocked back her own drink. Two could play this game, and there was no way in hell I was letting her win. The world around me faded to just me and her as we clinked glasses for the next round.

Let the real games begin.

My eyes stayed locked on Naomi's, refusing to blink or flinch as I tossed back another drink. The clear liquid scorched my throat, but I barely noticed. All that mattered was the intensity burning in her hazel eyes and the magnetic pull drawing me closer to her.

Was she trying to prove something to me? To herself? The thought made me hesitate as the bartender set another round of drinks on the bar. Was I being a dick to go through with this? Was I letting my pride get the best of me and in the end, I'd feel like shit for goading her?

"Slow down there, you two," Analyn warned. I'd nearly forgotten she was there.

Next to her, Ruby nodded. Both women eyed us with concern, clearly sensing the tension rising between us.

"This isn't a good idea," Analyn said. "Reed and Todd won't be happy if they find out about this."

"Maybe they're right," Naomi admitted reluctantly, breaking eye contact

for the first time since we started. "We shouldn't make trouble for ourselves."

"Trouble?" I scoffed, unable to resist the urge to push her. "You don't strike me as the type to shy away from a challenge, Withers." I downed my drink and then waited expectantly for her to follow suit, even as my conscience told me I was being a dick.

"Fine." Her jaw tightened, and those captivating eyes blazed with renewed defiance. "You want a challenge, Jackson? You've got one." She gulped down her drink.

We ordered two more, ignoring the disapproving looks from Analyn and Ruby. Something inside me needed to push the boundaries that separated us—coach from coach, man from woman. I needed to know if Naomi felt it too or if I was alone in my madness.

As she lifted her glass, determination etched across her beautiful face, I knew I had my answer. I smiled at the fire that burned in her eyes. It was as if she was daring me to keep up with her, and I'd be damned if I backed down now.

"Two more," she called out to the bartender, completely disregarding the warnings.

I hesitated again, torn between my desire to prove myself to her and the rational part of me that knew we were playing with fire. My job wasn't on the line if I made an ass of myself. I was a co-owner of the team. But Todd, for all his publicity seeking, probably wouldn't appreciate his coach getting drunk off her ass, especially with the enemy.

I was about to put the kibosh on this crazy competition when I caught sight of Reed and Todd making their way through the bar toward us, their expressions anything but amused. The stools next to Naomi had been vacated, and I was certain Analyn and Ruby had tattled on us.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath. I wasn't so much worried that they'd be pissed at our drinking game, although I think the way they glared suggested they didn't like it. What I worried about most was that they'd notice how much I wanted this woman.

"Naomi," I said, grabbing her arm as the bartender slid two fresh glasses toward us. "We need to go. Now."

"Hey. What are you doing?" She looked confused and irritated at my sudden change in demeanor.

"Incoming." I took her hand and started dragging her away from Todd and Reed as I searched for an escape route.

Her hand was warm and soft, and even in the chaos of the moment, it sent shivers down my spine. An image of her hand wrapped around my dick flashed in my head, making me groan.

"I didn't back down from the challenge. I won." She sounded defiant, and it was odd that she hadn't pulled her hand away from me. She wasn't necessarily eager to come with me, but neither was she putting up a fight as I dragged her out of the bar and down the hall. "You're the one who chickened out."

"Believe me, there's nothing I'd like more than to continue our little competition, but I'm not interested in a lecture from Reed and Todd. How about you?" If we got through this without Todd and Reed finding us, I'd be shocked.

The hall was lit but void of people. It was likely the section of the hotel that hosted conferences. I tried a door, and when it opened, I tugged her into the room, dark except for the moonlight shining in the windows. It wasn't ideal, but it would have to do for now.

My heart beat wildly as I pressed her against the wall and held my finger up to my lips to shush her. Her eyes flared with defiance, but at least she didn't say anything.

I did my damndest to avoid noticing how well our bodies fit together. Like two puzzle pieces that had been waiting to find their match. Between that, the fire in her eyes, and her scent filling my nostrils, I was a goner. My dick thickened. I tried to shift so she wouldn't notice.

"Can you hear them?" she asked, her breath warm on my cheek.

I strained my ears, trying to pick up any sign of Reed and Todd over the muffled noise from the hotel. "Nothing yet." What the fuck was I doing? My mind was racing with possibilities of how this could all go so very wrong. What if they found us like this, cowering in a dark room, our bodies pressed together? What would they think? What would she think?

Her chest rose and fell against mine, distracting me from listening for Todd and Reed. I looked at her, partly wanting to make sure she wasn't afraid or so angry she was about to knee me in my fully engorged cock, and partly hoping she felt the palpable energy radiating between us. Was it just one-sided on my part?

And as Naomi's eyes locked onto mine in the darkness, I knew that whatever happened next could change everything. For a moment, I felt connected to her. So much so that I intended to kiss her.

“What are you doing?” She didn’t sound disgusted, but it was clear she didn’t like the snap-crackle between us.

Outside the door, Reed said, “What the fuck are they doing?”

I pressed a finger over my lips to let her know to be quiet. Again, her eyes flared with heat.

“Letting off steam?” Todd responded.

“It’s not a good look.”

“I don’t know. They’re consenting adults.”

“Who are the heads of hockey teams, drinking their asses off in public,” Reed said. I knew I would be hearing about this when I saw him again.

“You’re uptight for the man who hired Mr.-wiggle-his-dick-on-the-roof-of-a-motel Tyler to coach.”

Naomi snickered. I tried to give her a warning look, but ultimately, I winked. Winked. What the hell was up with me?

“You have more at risk here, Marshall. Withers needs to prove herself, and that won’t happen if she’s sloppy drunk in public.”

I felt a pang of guilt at Reed’s words. I’d let things get out of hand in my quest to prove something. I’d let my pride ruin my judgment.

As their voices faded away, I slowly removed my hand from Naomi’s mouth. “I think we’re safe.”

She gave me a small push. “You didn’t have to manhandle me.”

“I was just saving us both from lectures from Reed and Todd.” I kept my voice low to make sure they wouldn’t hear.

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have challenged me to a drinking competition.”

I arched a brow. “The bet was your doing.”

She huffed out a breath. “You didn’t have to take it.”

I stared at her, wondering what the fuck was going on in her head. “So this is my fault for accepting your challenge? You know how immature that sounds?” If I had any hope of touching this woman, that statement ruined it.

She glared at me. “You don’t understand.” There was heat in her voice, but in her face I saw vulnerability.

“So enlighten me.” I leaned against the table and crossed my arms.

“You wouldn’t understand.”

“Try me.”

“Reed is right. I have something to prove. I’m trying to show everyone that I can keep up with the boys, that I’m strong and resilient too.”

My heart squeezed in my chest. I wanted to gather her close and hold her, support her. I was smart enough to know that was the wrong move.

I wanted to contradict her but knew that was wrong too. “Drinking me under the table wouldn’t prove anything.” My voice was softer now.

SHE SHRUGGED. “Maybe that wasn’t the best way, but I’m sick and tired of people thinking I need protection. I saw that interview you did after we lost to you. You said you’d have pulled Big Ed too . . . like you wanted to help me not look bad.”

She wasn’t wrong about my intentions.

“I said I’d have pulled him too if he’d been playing like that.”

“We both know he wouldn’t have played like that for you.” She glanced at the door. I wondered if she was going to make her escape.

I hoped not. Right now, with just me and her in this room, I wondered if this was exactly what I needed. A moment away from prying eyes, where the lines between coaching rivals blurred.

“Even right now, you’re trying to protect me.”

I laughed. “I was protecting us both. Next time, I’ll leave you in the bar.”

“There won’t be a next time.”

I sighed, feeling disappointed by that.

“And if there is a next time, don’t manhandle me and treat me like an object you can drag around. I don’t need anyone’s help. I’m a good coach who knows what they’re doing.”

I didn’t like being called a caveman, and I went with my gut reaction to be defensive. “Hah. So much you know. Good coaches don’t sleep with their players.”

Her reaction was immediate. I was sure she was going to claw my eyes out. “You don’t know anything about me or my life. It’s none of your business.” She looked at me like I was lower than pond scum. “It’s pathetic how an old man like you is interested in my love life.”

It was pathetic. “It’s hard to avoid, sweetheart. It’s all over the news. There was a time when sports news was sports, not which coaches are hooking up with their players.”

I liked the anger in her. It stirred me up. It was the vulnerability that gutted me. She tried to stare at me in defiance, but there was no missing how much my words hurt her. I was a fucking asshole.

I shook my head, feeling ashamed. "I'm sorry, Naomi." I hoped she could hear the sincerity in my voice. "Your life is none of my business. And as far as manhandling you, I didn't think it through. I just wanted to keep us both out of trouble."

She sucked in a shuddering breath. "Next time, maybe try talking to me first instead of taking matters into your own hands."

"Fair enough."

We stood there for a moment, the silence between us heavy. I hadn't said enough to atone for my remarks about her and Max, but I didn't know what else I could say. I got the feeling she didn't want it mentioned again.

"Why do you care what I do, anyway?"

I didn't expect that. "I admire you. I might be a caveman, but I think you're a great coach. A little green, maybe, but with a great deal of potential."

Her expression softened, and while I knew she wouldn't admit it, I think my words meant something to her.

"You say that, but like everyone else, you only care about my love life."

I shook my head. "That's not true. That came out in the heat of the moment. Blame it on the booze." I smiled, hoping she'd smile back and relieve the guilt weighing heavily in my chest.

Her gaze drifted down, and at first, I thought she was just trying to break the tension by avoiding eye contact. But then her gaze settled on my groin area, telling me she'd felt my reaction to her. I scanned her face, worried I'd see repulsion.

She bit her lip and sighed, her gaze returning to mine.

My heartbeat sped up. I stepped closer to her. "Are we good?"

She uncrossed her arms. "We're good, Pierce. Or at least, as good as we can be under the circumstances."

We should leave. We should break this crazy, erotic tension and go our own ways.

"What circumstances?" I stepped closer to her, close enough that I could feel the heat of her body.

Her breath hitched, and I knew for sure then that this crazy attraction wasn't one-sided.

"We're coaches of rival teams. By definition, we're enemies."

"Only on the ice." Taking a chance, I pushed back a tendril of blonde hair that had escaped from its confines.

She looked up at me, and I expected her to push me away. But she didn't. The moment hung heavily. I needed to go. I needed to suffer this desire alone. But heaven help me, I couldn't.

A wave of unadulterated need washed through me, propelled me forward until my mouth was on hers. She didn't pull away or slap me, so I tasted her. She was sweet and spicy and more intoxicating than the drinks we'd had at the bar.

She hadn't stopped me, but I wasn't sure she was with me, either. I started to pull away, working on my apology, but her fingers gripped my shirt and pulled me back. Her lips fused to mine. Holy hell. An inferno erupted, consuming my body in fire.

I wrapped my arm around her, maneuvering her to the table. I lifted her dress and hoisted her on the table. All the while, my lips were on hers, our tongues hot as they danced together. I unzipped her dress, tugging it down to expose her pert tits.

I stood back to look at them. I groaned at their perfection, immediately taking one in my mouth as I pinched the nipple of the other.

She moaned, her fingers lacing through my hair as she held me to her.

Yes, yes, yes . . . She was my fantasy come true.

I continued to suck her tits as I slid my fingers between her thighs. Her panties were wet. Sopping wet. The scent of her sex made me nearly come in my pants.

I dropped to my knees, wanting to worship this magnificent pussy. I ran my tongue through her pussy lips, her taste like the sweetest nectar I'd ever tasted.

"Oh, God." Her hips rocked as I licked and sucked her clit. God, how I wanted to drink her cum, but my dick was ready to burst, and more than wanting to taste her pleasure, I wanted to feel it around my cock.

I continued to lick her pussy as I undid my belt and pants. I shot up, shoving my pants and boxers down. "Tell me you want me to fuck you."

"Yes."

I gripped her hips and thrust in, and sweet mother of God, she was perfection. Wet. Warm. Tight. Her pussy pulsed around my cock, and I was totally and completely gone.

Naomi

I knew it. I knew a man like Pierce, sexy, strong, and yes, older, had to know his way around a woman's body. It wasn't that he took his time because he didn't, thank God. My insides had been burning up since the moment he took my hand and unceremoniously led me out of the bar and into this room. Some of that heat was anger, but a good portion of it was lust. His hand was warm and strong. His body was strong and hard as he pressed me against the wall. And his dick . . . when I felt that against my belly, I nearly swooned. Goddammit.

But I didn't know what to make of him. Yes, he was hot. But he could be mean too. His comments about my hooking up hurt more than I would have thought. Then he said I was a good coach, and I realized how much I'd needed that. Not from just anyone, but from him. How dumb was that?

I think he was sincere in his apology. That was what I told myself when I didn't back away from his touch. When I let him kiss me. For a moment, I considered pushing him away. This was wrong on so many levels. For one, it confirmed his belief that I would hook up with anyone. But he made a move to end the kiss, and I wasn't ready. Not by a long shot.

And now I was on the conference room table with my bodice and my skirt around my waist and Pierce thrusting inside me. It was so, so, so good. He was thick, filling me up until my pussy could feel every pulsing ridge of him.

"Fuck, you're so tight." He groaned against my neck.

I would have responded saying he was so big, but I could barely get enough air in my lungs to breathe. I couldn't waste it on words.

He let out a growl, levering up over me as he quickened his pace. A new shot of electricity streaked through me. I bowed off the table, my fingers clutching his forearms to keep from flying away.

"Fuck . . . I'm there . . . come on, Naomi. Come on my cock."

His words were like fuel to an already raging fire. Pleasure blasted through me. I cried out from the intensity of it.

"Yes!" he yelled as he plunged in. We rocked and bucked, my orgasm drawing out long and longer. It was so amazingly good. Why did it have to end so quickly?

My pulse raced as Pierce traced a line of kisses down the curve of my neck. Our bodies were still tangled together on the conference table, his dick throbbing inside me even as it deflated. This was supposed to be a quick hookup, so why was he kissing me again?

I drew in a shuddering breath, wondering if this tender moment meant something more to him. But I couldn't let myself hope. Not when we'd be back to butting heads and making remarks to regain the upper hand. The fantasy of us could only last as long as we remained in this room, hidden from the real world outside.

I looked into Pierce's blue eyes and momentarily drowned in them. His fingers traced a gentle path along my collarbone, sending shivers down my spine. Did he feel the same magnetic pull between us that was threatening to consume me?

"Naomi," he whispered. "Are you okay?" His hand cupped my cheek, and I leaned into the touch instinctively, unsettled at how quickly the barriers between us dropped away when I desperately needed them to stay in place.

"Yeah." I worked to sort out my tangled thoughts and emotions. Fear rose to the top. Fear of what could happen if anyone found out about us. Fear of how it would affect my career. How it would impact what people thought of me. Most of all, fear of letting myself fall for him.

Panicked, I jerked away from his touch, quickly scrambling off the conference table.

Pierce's expression shifted from surprise to hurt before settling on confusion. "What's wrong?" He reached out for me again, but I couldn't bear the thought of letting him any closer. I'd already crossed the line physically.

"Nothing." My voice came out sharper than I intended. "We need to clean

up and get out of here before someone finds us.”

“Should we talk—”

I cut him off, pulling my dress back in order. “Talk about what? This was a mistake, Pierce. It can’t happen again.” I didn’t look at him, telling myself this was just another hookup for him even as my heart ached at the thought of denying myself the connection we had just shared.

“Naomi—”

“I’ve got to go.” Still too cowardly to look at him, I rushed out of the room, my chest heaving with a mix of regret and longing. The door slammed shut behind me, the sound echoing through the empty hallway. The potential consequences of being caught with Pierce weighed heavily on me. This wasn’t just about our conflicting careers. No doubt, the media would have a field day if they found out about me and Pierce. He’d be a hero for seducing and fucking me, and I’d be a skank, sleeping her way to success.

As I entered the dimly lit ballroom, I spotted Max scanning the crowd, his eyes searching for someone. He looked worried, even anxious. When his gaze met mine, his face broke into a relieved smile.

He hurried to me. “There you are. I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” His gaze scanned my body, and I worried something was still out of place. Then I remembered my hair. Did it look like I’d just had sex on a conference table with Coach Jackson?

“I know you said we should avoid—”

“Max.” I tried to pull myself together, but I knew my disheveled appearance would be hard to hide.

“Are you okay?” Max asked, stepping closer. “You look like you’ve been . . . through something.”

“Uh, yeah, I’m fine.” I avoided his eyes. I was doing a lot of that lately. “I just needed some air. It’s so stuffy in here.”

“Sure,” he said, but I didn’t think he bought my explanation. “But maybe we should get you out of here. You seem out of sorts, and with all the press around, it might be best to avoid any negative coverage. There’s a diner around the corner. We could get coffee.”

Did I look drunk? Perhaps that was better than the truth—looking thoroughly fucked. Either way, the last thing I wanted was to draw attention to myself after what had just transpired between Pierce and me.

I nodded in agreement. “Alright, let’s go.”

Max escorted me through the crowded ballroom, a protective hand on my

lower back as we made our way outside to the car Todd had arranged for me. I settled into the backseat of the sedan, feeling an overwhelming sense of confusion and frustration.

Why had I allowed myself to get involved with Pierce? He was older than me, and while he was kind and gentle at times, he could also be petty and rude. Had I set myself up for more trouble?

Max climbed in the car next to me, glancing over at me with concern as he took in my messy hair and wrinkled dress. "Naomi, are you okay? What happened?"

I tried to put on a brave face, but I knew I wasn't fooling him. "I'm fine, Max. Just . . . a little overwhelmed by everything." My voice quavered, and I hated myself for letting him see me so vulnerable. I was his coach. A female coach who needed to show strength.

"I think it's best if I take you home. You don't seem like yourself, and the last thing either of us needs is negative press coverage."

"Max, I can handle myself." I hated that he felt the need to step in and play the knight in shining armor. But deep down, I knew he was right. The situation with Pierce had left me feeling exposed, and I didn't trust myself to navigate the rest of the evening without revealing something that could never see the light of day.

"I know you're strong and capable. But I'd feel a lot better knowing you got home safely." He gave me a sheepish grin. "Chivalry is alive and well. At least that's how my mama raised me."

And as much as I wanted to resist, or at least take myself home, I nodded in agreement. I didn't have the strength to fight, and the sooner I gave in, the sooner I'd be home alone in my own bed.

As the car pulled away from the hotel, I wrestled with the decision I'd made to have sex with Pierce. A deep sense of regret twisted my insides, and I was suddenly acutely aware of just how vulnerable I was in this situation.

"Do you want to talk?" Max asked. Max was a good friend. Supportive. But I was his coach, and confiding in him would be as inappropriate as sleeping with him. Neither of which I planned to do.

"Thank you, Max. I appreciate your support, but I'm fine."

As the sedan drove me home, I worried that I'd just complicated my life even more. My dreams of making a difference for women in the world of hockey seemed to be slipping through my fingers, replaced by a tangled web of personal and emotional entanglements that threatened to consume me.

I couldn't shake the nagging feeling that I had made a colossal mistake as the memory of Pierce's hands on my body still lingered. His touch had ignited a fire inside me. A fire that had been dormant until our passionate encounter on the conference table. How could I have let myself lose control like that? He'd accused me of sleeping with Max and then had sex with me. That could only mean that he thought I was promiscuous.

A wave of self-loathing and nausea crashed through me. I'd been such an idiot to let myself get caught up in the heat of the moment. I had willingly given in to temptation, and now I had to deal with the consequences. My professional reputation was on the line, and the last thing I needed was to be associated with scandal, especially with a rival coach. Inside, I groaned, thinking about Todd and how he wanted publicity, but probably not that type.

I arrived home, leaving Max in the car, assuring him that I was fine. The last thing I needed was some photographer somewhere in the bushes snapping pictures of Max coming into my apartment. I showered to wash away the night and then climbed into bed. As I lay in the dark, I made a silent vow to myself—no more distractions, no more reckless decisions. It was time for Naomi Withers to show the world what she was made of.

Pierce

I gripped my aching head as the noise of hockey practice drilled into my skull like a thousand tiny ice picks. Even the fluorescent lights of the arena felt like miniature suns searing my eyeballs.

It had been a mistake to drink with and fuck Naomi. It had been a bigger mistake to think that finishing the bottle of bourbon I had at home would make it all go away.

As one of the players slammed into the boards in front of me, the sound of it rattled my brain. "Jesus fuck, it's a practice. Could we keep it down in here?"

"Tie one on last night, Coach?" one of them called back.

"Fucker," I grumbled. I was sure they saw me as an old man who couldn't hold his liquor. Not unlike Naomi. Fuck. I needed to stop thinking about the fire in her eyes, or the way her dress made her look like a goddess, or how her body was warm and wet, or how perfect she felt around my dick.

"Coach." Bo snapped me back to reality. "Where the fuck are you?"

I scowled at him, rubbing my temples in an attempt to alleviate some of the pain. "I'm just having an off day."

"Off day, huh?" He raised a skeptical eyebrow. "More like hungover. You and Naomi sure seemed to be enjoying yourselves at the auction last night."

Fuck. Did he know? "You don't know what you're talking about."

He didn't need to know about the whirlwind of emotions and sexual tension I'd experienced with Naomi last night, and how I'd acted on them. It

was bad enough that I couldn't stop thinking about her.

"Fine, fine." Bo held up his hands defensively. "Just try to keep up, will you? We need you focused if we're going to win this thing."

He was right. I took a deep breath and forced myself to concentrate on the practice. I couldn't let my personal life affect my coaching. But as the players scrimmaged, their shouts echoing through the arena, I found my mind drifting back to last night. Guilt and confusion blended. What the hell was I doing? Sure, I'd been fantasizing about Naomi like a perverted old man, but to really act on it? That was nuts. Worse, the experience was unlike anything I'd ever had. It was more than just scratching a sexual itch. But even thinking that, how could it have been more? Naomi and I rarely said nice things to each other. How could I be feeling something more than lust?

An even bigger question was why she'd let me fuck her. She was seeing Max. She was clear that she thought I was an old man. Past my prime.

God, I hope I proved that last part wrong.

Jesus fuck, get a grip, Pierce.

I'd made a promise to myself when I became a coach that I would be professional. And I was. Oh, sure, I took a few of the players under my wings at times. For a few years, Bo was like a son to me. I was the only one looking out for his best interests.

But when I became a coach, I no longer indulged with puck bunnies, the women who liked to hook up with hockey players. I'd never been tempted by another coach, but a few teams had sexy female owners. One had shown an interest in me, but I'd resisted. It didn't seem wise to fuck someone from a rival team.

I watched Bo skate past me as he barked out commands to the player.

Gritting my teeth, I called out to Bo. "Hey, do me a favor and take over practice for a bit. I need to find some pain reliever."

"Sure thing."

With each step I took toward the locker room, the weight of my mistake bore down on me. As I entered the locker room, the harsh fluorescent lights overhead did nothing to soothe my throbbing headache.

I made a beeline for the first aid supplies, rummaging through the plastic bins until I found a bottle of pain reliever.

Just as I was about to pop a couple of pills into my mouth, the door swung open, and Reed walked in. His brow furrowed when he saw me, and I could tell he was itching to give me a piece of his mind.

"Looking for something?" he asked.

"Headache," I mumbled, emptying two pills from the bottle. "Had a bit too much to drink last night."

"Ah, yes," Reed said, folding his arms across his chest as he leaned against a locker. "The charity auction. How could I forget?"

I didn't want a lecture. I didn't need one. I was punishing myself just fine. "Look, Reed—"

"Save it, Pierce. I know what happened between you and Naomi. And I've got to say, I'm pretty disappointed."

Oh, shit. Did he know we were in the conference room? I couldn't let him see my worry. "Disappointed?" I scoffed, feeling a flare of anger despite my pounding head. "What are you, my father?"

Reed's eyes narrowed. "No, but I am your partner and your friend. And I care about this team. So when I see you getting caught up in some ridiculous drinking game with some woman half your age, it makes me question your priorities."

"Naomi's not just some woman," I snapped, only later realizing I might be revealing too much. "My life is none of your business."

"Isn't it?" Reed challenged. "We're in this together, remember? We bought this team to make something great, not to indulge in our own personal fantasies."

"Fantasies?" I repeated, my blood boiling at the insinuation which was stupid because he was right.

He sighed. "Look, it's been clear that there's something between you two. Analyn calls it chemistry. Bo sees it too. But unlike Todd Marshall, we don't like drama and angst. We certainly don't want gossip. Jesus, don't you remember how fucking annoying it was when the only thing that seemed to matter was what crazy thing Bo was going to do off the ice?"

"It's not the same."

"She's practically a kid."

"She's not much younger than Analyn."

He stared at me. "What's going on?"

"Nothing. We're good friends, Reed. I love you like a brother, but some things aren't any of your business."

His jaw tightened. "If it affects the team, it's my business."

"It won't affect the team."

"How can you be sure?"

The only way I could be sure was to make certain I got Naomi out of my system and no one learned the truth of last night. "I promise it won't."

"We need your head in the game, Pierce. The team isn't looking as good as we hoped."

I nodded. "I won't let us down."

He watched me for a moment and then sat on a bench. "Pierce, what the fuck is going on?"

I shrugged. I felt like I had an anvil on my chest.

"Remember when I first fell for Analyn? Not only was I older, but I was her boss. You were the only person I felt I could trust to talk to about it."

I glanced at him. "You just walked in here and accused me of letting my dick fail the team and you want me to trust you?"

He looked down. "I'm sorry." He turned his attention back to me. "Right now, I'm not your business partner. I'm your friend. What's going on?"

I hesitated for a moment, debating whether I should lay it all out. But Reed deserved the truth. "We . . . hooked up after we ditched you and Todd in the bar."

He tried to keep his expression impassive, but I saw the disappointment. "Hooked up?"

I nodded, running a hand through my hair in frustration. "It wasn't planned. We got caught up in the heat of the moment."

"Jesus, Pierce." Reed rose and paced the locker room. "Do you realize the implications of what you've done? This could jeopardize everything we've worked for—our team, our reputations . . ."

"Look, I know it was a mistake," I said defensively. "But it's not like we set out to make a spectacle of ourselves. It just . . . happened." I wanted to remind him again of Analyn and how his relationship with her had been forbidden. It was fucked up of him to now be happily married with a child and judge me after all that.

"Things don't just 'happen', Pierce." Reed's voice was tight. "You made a choice, and now you have to face the consequences. I just hope that whatever was between you two doesn't come back to bite us in the ass."

"Neither of us wanted this, Reed. It happened. It's done. Over with. Now we move on."

"How do you know this won't blow up in your face . . . in all our faces?"

"Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence. I seem to remember saying the same thing to you about Analyn—"

"Which is why this is all the more shocking. Your saying that makes me wonder if it's really done and over with."

"Fucking hell, Reed. It's done." The way Naomi had run out, regret leaving a wake, made me sure there was no future between us.

"Hey." Reed softened his tone. "I'm not saying this to be an asshole. I just want you to understand the gravity of what you've done. We've worked too damn hard to have it all fall apart because of one night of recklessness."

"You're overreacting here, but you have my word. It won't happen again."

"Overreacting. Why do you think she let you fuck her, eh?"

I flinched, not liking his insinuation. "You don't think a woman would be attracted to me?"

He gave me his don't-be-an-idiot expression. "I know full well you have no issue with the ladies. She's a good-looking woman, no doubt, but she's a lot younger, has shown disdain toward you, and is said to be seeing one of her players."

Fuck. Put like that, I was being an idiot.

"How do you know she's not using that to manipulate you?"

"Naomi wouldn't do that." I said the words even though I wasn't sure they were true. She was passionate, driven, and fierce, but was she also deceitful?

"Maybe not intentionally," Reed conceded, "but you know as well as I do how high the stakes are for her. She's desperate to prove herself in this male-dominated world—"

"And fucking me to manipulate me would work against that."

"Can you honestly say you're sure she hasn't let the lines blur between business and pleasure as a way to get to you?"

I opened my mouth to protest but hesitated. Could I really be certain? I wanted to believe that what happened between us had been real, genuine, even if just in the moment. But the more I considered it, the more doubt began to gnaw at me.

Fuck. I hated the fact that Reed had planted that seed of doubt in my mind. But even worse, I hated myself for entertaining it. The anger simmered within me, threatening to boil over, and I couldn't tell whether I was angrier at Naomi, Reed, or myself.

"Look, I'm sorry." Reed laid a hand on my shoulder. "I don't want to cause trouble between you two. But you need to be careful. We're all here to win, and sometimes that means doing whatever it takes."

"Even if it means fucking the rival?" I asked bitterly. The hurt and betrayal were hard to swallow. If Naomi had just been playing me, then everything I thought I knew about her was a lie. She was a tremendous actress. If the hockey coaching didn't work out, she'd find a successful career in Hollywood.

"Especially if it means fucking a rival," Reed confirmed, his eyes filled with a mixture of sympathy and regret. "I've seen it happen before. And I don't want to see you get hurt."

"Too late for that," I muttered darkly, the weight of Reed's words settling heavily on my chest. I downed the two pills without water.

Silence fell between us, punctuated only by the distant sounds of hockey practice continuing without me.

"Thanks for the warning," I finally said, my voice tight with restrained emotion. "I'll keep it in mind."

"Good." Reed gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze before turning to leave. "Just remember—in this game, sometimes you have to guard your heart as much as you guard the net."

As he walked away, I resolved to do just that. I had to protect myself from Naomi. I didn't want to be seen as the clichéd older man fucking a younger woman. I didn't want to be depicted as being a cuckold, although if she were with Max, I suppose he'd be the cuckold.

More than anything, I didn't want whatever the fuck emotion was swirling around in my chest to become something that would break me.

I resolved to put my feelings for Naomi aside and focus solely on winning. Winning our games. Winning the championship. No matter how hard it might be, I couldn't let anything—or anyone—stand in my way.

Naomi

A week later, I dragged my feet into my apartment after arriving home from a game in Milwaukee. The weight of another disappointing loss hung heavy on my shoulders.

My team's performance had been less than stellar. I'd kept Big Ed in the game, even though he wasn't playing up to his potential. Despite his antics, I couldn't help but feel responsible for the loss. As the coach, their failures were my own, and it was a crushing burden to bear.

Oh, sure, teams lost. But as a woman, our loss would be blamed on me, and probably rightly so. But it would be the fact that I was a woman that was at issue, not my coaching ability. Instead of moving women forward, I'd be setting them back.

As soon as the door clicked shut behind me at home, I slumped onto my couch. I sighed and pulled out my phone, hoping to distract myself from the nagging self-doubt bringing me down.

My thumb navigated the screen, searching for anything to take my mind off the game. Anything but reminders of how I hadn't been able to lead my team to victory. I skipped much of the news feed until I saw:

COACH WITHERS CANOODLES with Max Blake in Hotel

“WHAT THE HELL?” I groaned as I continued to read the clickbait article. There was no truth to the story, but that didn't stop it from spreading like wildfire across social media. Of course, it wasn't the first time the media had seen Max and me together and decided there was something to it. Just walking out of the rink with him made everyone assume there was something going on. It wasn't fair, but I knew there was nothing I could do about it now.

A blurry photo of the two of us laughing together at the bar accompanied the article. How had the paparazzi managed to spin an innocent conversation into something so scandalous?

As I scrolled through the comments, the heat rose in my cheeks, fueled by both anger and embarrassment. Why were people so obsessed with my private life? They should be focusing on our team's performance, not our nonexistent love lives.

I tried to remind myself that these rumors were just a distraction, but it was hard to let it go. With a deep breath, I forced myself to put my phone away and refocus on what truly mattered. My team, my career, and proving that I deserved my job. If I could win, I'd be giving them something else to talk about. So, with renewed determination, I got up from the couch and began planning my next move to coach the team to a winning season.

But first, wine.

I made my way to the kitchen when my phone suddenly rang. I looked at the caller ID noting that it was Todd. Nope, I didn't want to talk to him. He'd either be upset at the loss or the gossip making the rounds, or both. But he was my boss, and it was cowardly not to face up to him.

"Hello?"

"Naomi, It's Todd." His voice was excited. Not at all upset. "Have you seen the news?"

I groaned inwardly. "Yeah, Todd. I've seen it."

"This kind of publicity is exactly what we need right now."

What? My jaw clenched as I fought to keep my temper in check. How could he be so excited about this? Didn't he realize how invasive and humiliating it was for me?

"Fantastic?" I was unable to hide the bitterness in my voice. "Todd, that story is a lie. Max and I just had one beer together, and then I went to my room. Alone. Nothing happened."

"Of course." His tone belied any concern that the story wasn't true. I hated how cavalier he was about my personal life. "But you have to admit, it's

got people talking. And that's not a bad thing, right?"

"They should be focusing on our team's performance, not some made-up scandal."

"Ah, but that's where the magic of the media comes in. They'll focus on whatever sells and gets clicks. And right now, that's you and Max."

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that Todd was my boss and I couldn't afford to lose my cool. "But selling and clicks help the media, not us."

"It does if it means people come to the games. I know as an owner and coach, we're both new to the team and are still gelling, but with the losses, we need something to bring in fans."

Ugh. "I want to set the record straight." I worked to sound calm and collected. "There's no truth to those rumors."

"Of course not. But if it brings in fans, no harm, no foul, right?"

"Todd, this is my reputation we're talking about. My career." My voice cracked in frustration.

There was a brief silence on the other end of the line, and for a moment, I thought maybe he finally understood how serious this was for me.

"Naomi, you have to look at the bigger picture." Todd's voice suddenly became serious. "With the team's losses piling up, we need something to lure fans to the games. And this type of gossip? It's titillating. It could do just that."

"Titillating?" I scoffed. "You really think people will come to watch us play because they might catch a glimpse of me and Max in some sort of . . . romantic tryst?"

"Yes. Ticket sales are up since the story broke. And just wait until you hear this—there are even fans rooting for the relationship between you and Max. They're speculating on when you two will get married."

My jaw dropped as I processed what he was saying. It was one thing to be caught up in a whirlwind of rumors and gossip, but to have strangers actually invested in my love life? That was a level of scrutiny I'd never experienced before. It was creepy.

"Marriage?" My mind raced with the absurdity of it. "Todd, none of this is even real. Max and I had one beer together, and now people are planning our wedding? This is insane."

"Maybe so. But it's also the world we live in. Like it or not, your personal life has become intertwined with your professional one. And sometimes, that

can work in our favor."

I took a deep breath. As much as the swirling rumors and unwanted attention made me uncomfortable, I couldn't let them distract me from what really mattered. My players were depending on me, and I owed it to them—and myself—to give this job everything I had.

"Alright."

"Remember, you're a trailblazer in this industry, and that comes with its own set of challenges. But I have no doubt that you're up for it."

Hanging up the phone, I was grateful to have someone like Todd in my corner, believing I was a capable coach. But I realized that Todd didn't understand how it was for me to be constantly scrutinized and judged, both for my gender and for my personal life. If I was going to survive in this world, I had to learn to navigate these storms on my own.

Then again, I suppose he had his own issues to deal with. He was a businessman, after all. He was looking at the bottom line. He'd hired me and the team to do a job, which in my mind was to coach hockey, but in his, it was to make money. If hockey didn't bring the fans in and instead gossip did, so be it. It was up to me to change things.

Why didn't the other coaches have to go through this? When I scrolled through my sports news feed, I didn't see anything except hockey-related content about them.

Thinking of other coaches brought the image of Pierce into my head. After our hookup, I'd been angry with him, but also mortified by the way my body had responded to him. It was like a betrayal, as though my own flesh had turned against me in the heat of the moment. Every touch, every kiss, every whispered dirty word had sent shivers down my spine, leaving me breathless and desperate for more.

"Damn alcohol," I muttered to myself, trying to convince myself that it was the only reason I'd let my guard down that night. But deep down, I knew it wasn't the booze that had made me lose control. If I was drunk, it wasn't on vodka. It was on Pierce. There was something else at play, some hidden force that drew me to him. Despite my best efforts to keep my mind on my work, I couldn't stop thinking about Pierce Jackson and the things he did to me on that conference table.

The man was an enigma, infuriating and intoxicating all at once, and yet, there was some magnetic pull that left me unable to resist. I wouldn't go as far as to say he was endearing, but he'd somehow managed to worm his way

into my thoughts, occupying space I shouldn't let him move into. If I wasn't careful, he'd become another obstacle I'd have to overcome.

I remembered I'd wanted wine and again headed to the kitchen, trying to shake off the memory of that night. I shouldn't be thinking about Pierce. I made my way to the fridge, deciding to add ice cream to the list of items I would consume to comfort myself. Just as I reached for the freezer door, the buzzer to my apartment rang, startling me.

Ugh. Reluctantly, I abandoned the ice cream and wine quest and walked over to the door, opening it to find Analyn and Ruby standing there, both smiling brightly. In Analyn's hands was a beautifully wrapped box adorned with a shiny bow.

"Hey, Naomi," Analyn said, her smile faltering slightly. "We just wanted to come by and apologize for . . . well, you know."

"Apologize for what?" Had she planted the story about me and Max?

Ruby chimed in, her eyes wide and sincere. "We're really sorry about tattling on you at the charity event. We didn't mean to get you into trouble."

"Here." Analyn thrust the wrapped box toward me. "This is our peace offering. We hope you like it."

So they were the reason Pierce had ushered me out of the bar. If they hadn't done that, I wouldn't have ended up having sex on a conference room table with Pierce. It was strange how I was both annoyed and thankful to them. Damn Pierce.

I wanted to go with the annoyance, but I was in a world all by myself, and despite what they'd done, they seemed to genuinely want to be my friends. I definitely could use a friend or two.

"Thanks." I accepted the gift and opened the door to let them in. "I appreciate it."

"Great." Analyn beamed, her eyes lighting up with relief. "We're really sorry, Naomi. We just want you to know how much we support you and everything you're doing."

"Thank you. Please, make yourselves comfortable," I said, leading them into the living room.

"Naomi, I can only imagine how stressed out you must be with everything going on," Analyn said, sitting on the couch. "We thought maybe this gift could help you relax a bit."

"Actually, we were hoping that even though our teams are rivals, we could still be friends." Ruby sat next to Analyn.

"Of course. I'd like that."

"Whew. Now go ahead and open your gift," Ruby said.

Feeling a mix of excitement and curiosity, I sat in a chair across from them and unwrapped the box to reveal an expensive bottle of wine, fine chocolates, and luxury bath products.

"This is great. Thank you so much." Their thoughtfulness warmed me. It was just what I needed after the relentless criticism I'd been facing lately.

"We all need some pampering now and then, especially when dealing with stress. Normally, I have wine and ice cream, but we were afraid it would melt."

I laughed. "I was just about to have some wine and ice cream to deal with the day."

Analyn and Ruby laughed too.

"Let me get some wine glasses." I went to the kitchen for glasses and a wine opener. I also grabbed some juice, remembering that Ruby wasn't drinking wine due to her pregnancy. When I returned, I opened the wine and filled two glasses and put juice in the third, handing Analyn and Ruby one.

Ruby raised her glass in a toast. "To friendship."

"Cheers." I clinked my glass against theirs before taking a sip of the wine.

As the evening continued, we poured more wine and sampled the delicious chocolates. Our conversation flowed easily, and I opened up to Ruby and Analyn about the recent challenges I'd been facing with the press and my nonexistent love life.

"The media has been absolutely relentless in reporting things about me that aren't true."

Ruby nodded sympathetically, her eyes filled with understanding. "I know exactly what you mean. It's like they're always on the lookout for something juicy, regardless of whether it's true or not."

"Exactly." For once, someone seemed to understand. "Sometimes, I wish I could just focus on coaching without having to worry about all this extraneous drama."

"I've had my share of run-ins with them too," Analyn shared, sipping her wine.

Ruby pursed her lips at her. "Yeah, when you were fake dating my husband."

What? My eyes widened in shock.

Analyn laughed. "First, he wasn't your husband then. Bo and I were

always only friends. My heart was with Reed even if my head was fighting it." She turned her attention to me. "The point is, you can't control what they say about you, but you can control how you react to it. It's best to treat them like bullies and ignore them. It's not easy, but I try to focus on my life, my goals. The rest is just noise."

I nodded. "Easier said than done."

"Absolutely," Ruby chimed in. "I definitely still find it hard. I was blindsided when I was first thrust in the spotlight. Bo's mother had arranged for him to announce his engagement." She shook her head, and her expression suggested it still unsettled her.

"That was fake then too, wasn't it?" Analyn asked her.

"Yes. Like you said, the heart, and I suppose my libido, were with him, but my head was fighting it. But through it all, I leaned on Bo for support. We knew that no matter how crazy things got, he had my back and I had his. And that made all the difference."

"Thank you for sharing your experiences with me. It means so much to know that I'm not alone in this."

"Of course, Naomi," Analyn said. "We're here for you, no matter what."

As the evening began to wind down, I felt less alone having Analyn and Ruby's support. I was grateful to them because I knew that as the season wore on, I'd need them.

Pierce

"Come on, guys. Pick up the pace," I yelled from the bench, frustrated as the team struggled to keep up with Naomi's. I couldn't believe what I was witnessing. My team, the one Reed and I had worked so hard to build, was falling apart right before my eyes.

"Stay focused." I tried to rally them, but they were off their game tonight. I knew that we were better than this, and it made me furious to see us losing like this. As much as it pained me to admit it, Naomi's team was playing phenomenally.

And no, not because she was a woman. There was no denying her talent. Man or woman, she was an incredible coach.

But watching her succeed at my expense was a bitter pill to swallow. Big Ed was still playing like an asshole, but he wasn't rogue like he'd been before. Perhaps he was starting to recognize that Naomi knew her shit and was listening. Then again, knowing Ed, Todd or the team had probably pressured him. Either way, the team was kicking our ass.

Even worse, the sight of her standing confidently across the rink, coaching her players with skill and precision, fueled my irritation further, and not at our impending loss.

The woman drew me in like a fucking moth to a flame. I couldn't help but steal glances at her throughout the game, admiring the way she held herself and the fierce determination in her eyes.

It didn't help that every time our eyes met, there was an undeniable

current of tension between us, and for me, it wasn't all just about competitive hockey. I felt the sparks in my blood, straight to my dick. Fucking traitor.

Why was I tied up in a woman who could be using the obvious attraction I had toward her against me? I didn't want to believe it, but Reed was right. Todd had hired her specifically because she was a woman. And while she was capable, she had to know Todd wanted her to use her assets to bring the crowd and win.

On the one hand, it didn't make sense that she'd buy into that, but neither could I dismiss it. She knew I was attracted to her. Was she using that to gain an advantage over me? To distract me from the game at hand? The thought made me feel sick, and also like the biggest dope in the world.

"Fuck," I muttered under my breath as the Silver Nuggets scored another goal. But I wasn't just mad at my team, I was mad at myself for letting my mind dwell on Naomi. I had to focus, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't shake the image of her from my mind. She'd been so soft, so responsive in my arms. She was a drug and I needed another hit.

"Coach. Where are you?" Bo barked at me, snapping me out of my thoughts.

"Right." I forced my attention back to the ice. I had to put my feelings for Naomi aside. I had a game to win.

As the game continued, my frustration grew. Every time the team gained an advantage, it was quickly snuffed out by her players' skillful maneuvers. It was like watching a well-oiled machine in action. It was admirable even as it pissed me off.

Jesus fuck, she was in my head again. I pushed away any thoughts of Naomi that threatened to distract me from my duty as a coach. The buzzer sounded for the end of the second period. Relief washed through me. We had twenty minutes for me to get my and the team's shit together.

"Coach Jackson?" one of my players called out when we reached the locker room. "What's the plan?"

Shaking off thoughts of Naomi, I focused on the task at hand. "We need to tighten our defense. You need to communicate on the ice. Pay attention. You're all skating around like five-year-olds on your first day of hockey lessons, chasing the puck like a dog chases a ball. Work together."

The men nodded. At least they agreed.

I let Bo give the rest of the talk. When we returned for the final period, the team's faces were etched with determination. My hopes rose as I watched

them play with renewed vigor, doing their best to close the gap between us and Naomi's team.

As the game progressed, I found myself glancing over at her more frequently, wondering what it would be like to work alongside her instead of against her.

The game continued, and try as I might, I couldn't keep my focus where it needed to be. My thoughts were consumed by Naomi—her skill, her courage, her kickass body, and the nagging suspicion that she might be manipulating me.

"Come on, guys," I shouted from the bench, trying to motivate my team for one last push.

The team was determined, but also tired. The final buzzer sounded, sealing our defeat.

"Damn it."

Naomi's team celebrated their victory, and she stood there, the epitome of grace and success. It was infuriating to watch, but I couldn't tear my eyes away from her.

As much as I wanted to feel anger and resentment toward her, instead, I found myself filled with admiration and longing. She had coached her team to their first victory, proving herself against all odds, and I couldn't help but be impressed.

As the teams left the ice, our eyes met for a brief moment. Naomi's hazel eyes sparkled with victory, while I tried to hide my frustration and disappointment.

"Good game, Jackson," she called out casually, a smug grin on her face.

I forced a tight smile in response, trying to maintain some semblance of sportsmanship. "Congrats, Withers. Your team played well today." And with that, I turned away from her, unable to handle the potent mix of emotions coursing through me.

In the locker room, I didn't have much to say that the men didn't already know or that Bo hadn't already drilled into them. There was nothing to do but let them clean up and leave. We had a lot to work on at our next practice.

Since we were playing on our turf, I retreated to the sanctuary of my office, closing the door behind me and sinking into my chair. My thoughts raced as I tried to process what had just happened. It wasn't just the loss, although that stung too. It was this unsettling, uncontrollable longing I had for the woman nearly half my age. Was I losing it?

"Damn it."

My mind wandered back to the conference room and the passion and desire that had burned between us. It seemed like a lifetime ago now, and yet the memory of her touch still haunted me. Could we have been something more, if not for our careers standing in our way? Or was I too old for her? Was this some cruel joke meant to test the limits of my sanity?

Bo poked his head into my office. "Okay, Coach?"

"Losses suck, Bo."

"Yeah, they do. The Nuggets got themselves more organized. Big Ed looked like he was listening to Coach Withers, at least sometimes."

I nodded.

"But it helped show where we're weak. I think we can fix that. This is a good group. They're just raw."

I was pleased that Bo saw their potential.

"We'll start first thing at the next practice. I'm heading out. Are you coming?"

"Soon."

Bo left, and I waited until the locker room was quiet to gather my things and head out. I made my way down the corridor to the exit. As I turned the corner, the last thing I expected was to find Naomi engaged in a heated argument with Max.

"Max, just drop it," she snapped. "I don't want to talk about it."

Max's eyes shone with annoyance. "Fine." He stormed off, shoving the door open as he exited.

Naomi's gaze shifted to me, and it took all my strength not to let my emotions betray me. Jesus fuck, she was stunning, even when she was angry.

"Congrats on ending your team's losing streak," I said, trying to sound as casual as possible even though I was irritated by our loss and her hold over me. "But why the lover's quarrel with Max? Shouldn't you two be celebrating?" It was a shit thing to say, but then, I felt like shit.

Her eyes narrowed and her jaw clenched. As usual, tension snapped, crackled, and popped between us. Not all of it was anger.

"Your sense of humor is seriously lacking, Pierce." She crossed her arms defensively. "That wasn't funny."

"Who said I was trying to be funny? I'm seriously concerned. It seems like the whole world is watching your little saga with Max. Did he find out about what you did on a conference room table? With a rival coach, no less."

Fuck, I was still being a dick. I regretted the words, not just because her eyes widened and shone with an emotion that looked like hurt, but also because it showed my hand. She was clear on where I stood. I was a glutton for punishment if I let her know I was still interested in her.

She stared at me for a moment. Was she searching for a scorching remark? Or was she looking into my soul and seeing the truth I was trying to hide there?

"There's no truth to those rumors," she finally said, her voice low and firm. "You shouldn't believe everything you hear."

I couldn't help it—I laughed. The sound was bitter, devoid of any real amusement. "Liar. If that's true, you would have denied it to the press."

My comment seemed to catch her off guard, and for a moment, she hesitated. Her eyes flicked away from mine.

Her silence spoke volumes, and I felt a pang of disappointment in my chest. Why did it bother me so much? We'd just hooked up, nothing more. But deep down, it was more than that. The chemistry between us was undeniable. Why was she fighting it? Why wasn't she fighting the press if the gossip wasn't true?

"Naomi, if there's something going on between you and Max, just tell me. I deserve to know." My voice was softer now, tinged with vulnerability I cursed myself for showing.

She looked back at me, her hazel eyes filled with a storm of emotions—frustration, confusion, and something else I couldn't quite place. Her lips parted as if she wanted to say something, but no words came out.

Dammit. Why was she being so elusive?

"Cat got your tongue?" I asked, my frustration rising once more.

She didn't respond.

I laughed derisively. "That's the game, isn't it? You say you want to be treated with respect like other coaches while you and Todd strut your sexuality around for profit."

Her eyes widened.

"Does Max know he's being used too? And where do I fit in? Is your ploy to distract me or should I be expecting an extortion package from Todd?"

I think if I'd hit her, I wouldn't have caused the hurt and shock I saw on her face from my words. Doubt niggled in my gut, but I ignored it.

"Congrats again, Coach Withers. Goodnight." I turned around and was halfway back to the locker room when I realized I should have just walked

out the door. Damn that woman.

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Naomi

I clenched my fists at my sides, nails digging into my palms. The sting was nothing compared to the burn of indignation that seared through my veins. Pierce had no right to call me out like that.

It wasn't any of his business who I might or might not be dating.

But as much as I wanted to dismiss his words, I couldn't deny that he had a point. How could I be taken seriously when everyone was focused on my sex life? Todd thought the rumors about me and Max were good for business, and I went along with it.

"Damn him," I muttered under my breath. I should just leave, but it really bothered me that he thought I was using sex to make my way in the world. Not just by this fake dating with Max, but by sleeping with him.

Did he really think I had sex with him to manipulate or distract him? That couldn't stand. I needed to confront Pierce to make him understand that I wasn't a skank or a plaything for the press. And if he still refused to see reason? Well, then he could go to hell.

I stormed down the hallway toward the locker room. As I pushed open the door to the locker room, I second-guessed myself. What good would confronting him do? He was clear in his opinion of me.

But that was what rankled. For some reason, his opinion mattered. I couldn't control the media or fans, but surely, I could make Pierce understand.

I made my way through the locker room, wondering if he'd even come

back here. Why would he? Hadn't he been leaving when we ran into each other?

I saw him sitting in his office, looking at something on his phone. I barged in uninvited.

"Naomi." Surprise flickered across his chiseled features before he schooled his expression into one of cool indifference. "Here to gloat about your win?"

"Hardly. We need to set something straight." I marched up to his desk, hoping I looked fierce as I stared down at him.

He sat back, crossing his arms over his broad chest. His blue eyes were unreadable, but I felt the tension radiating between us.

"About this stupid rumor and your accusing me of being a whore," I spat, my voice shaking with emotion that I wished I'd been able to hide. "You think I enjoy being the subject of gossip? You think I want people to care more about who I'm sleeping with than how well I can coach?"

He shrugged with indifference. "Then do something about it. Tell the press the truth. If you don't like the attention, then stop feeding into it."

My breath hitched, and for a moment, I didn't know how to respond. The words stung, probably because he was right.

"Maybe I will. But first, I wanted you to know the truth. I'm not dating Max, and I would never date a player. So you can keep your self-righteous judgments to yourself."

"Alright," he said finally. "I appreciate your coming here and telling me that."

He was patronizing me.

"But why do you care about my opinion? You should tell the press, not me." Pierce's voice was cold and distant.

I hesitated, my fingers gripping the edge of his desk as I considered my next words. I did care about his opinion, but did I let him know that? Especially now as he regarded me with such derision?

"I want to," I admitted, forcing myself to meet his eyes. "But Todd is too happy to have the press coverage. He thinks it's good for business." I'd never intended to share this part of myself with Pierce. And yet, here I was—vulnerable, exposed, and utterly terrified of what he might say next.

Pierce let out a low, humorless laugh, shaking his head slightly. "Of course, he does. He'd pimp out his own mother if he thought it would turn a profit."

"Hey." I recoiled at his words. Todd might be overly focused on money, but he wasn't without any moral compass. What was worse was the use of the word *pimp*, which confirmed my suspicion that he saw me as a woman willing to sell her sexuality to achieve success. Anger boiled over. "It's easy for you to judge from your high horse, but you don't know what it's like to struggle, to fight tooth and nail just for a chance to prove yourself."

"Maybe not," Pierce conceded. "But at least I'm honest about my intentions. Can you say the same?"

I wondered if maybe we were talking about something else. Not hockey but this weird connection between us that was both exciting and infuriating.

"My intentions? Yes. I may not like the way things are right now, but I'm doing what I have to do to survive."

"Even if it means compromising your integrity?" He rose from his chair and came around the desk. I was put off guard, not sure what he was doing, but I wasn't going to let him scare me off, either. He came close until we were almost nose-to-nose.

"Integrity doesn't pay the bills." I worked to stay cool, calm, and defiant, which was hard because this close, the air shifted, morphing into something different.

He shook his head, his blue eyes narrowing with a mixture of frustration and disappointment. "Integrity and money don't always mix, do they?" His words were like tiny daggers of judgment.

I couldn't stand his judgment any longer. "You have the luxury of judging me, Mr. Entitled Guy. Maybe you could try to see it from my perspective for once."

Pierce studied me, and for a moment, I wondered if he was going to actually try to understand.

"Every day, I deal with at least one team player asking who I slept with to get my job. Every day, people are more interested in who I'm sleeping with than my abilities as a hockey coach. Even when I win, I get no recognition for it, just more questions about my sex life."

"And you let them." This time, his voice was softer.

"I wonder if there isn't a woman in history who had to compromise her integrity to fight against misogyny before breaking the glass ceiling. You act like I'm doing something terrible, but all I'm trying to do is survive in a world that doesn't want me here."

His jaw clenched and unclenched as if he were struggling to find the right

words. "Maybe you're right. But that doesn't mean I have to like it."

That was an odd way to frame it. It was as if he didn't like what I had to endure. But if that was the case, wouldn't he have been more sympathetic from the start?

"Nobody's asking you to like it. All I want is for you to try to understand."

He didn't respond, and an uneasy silence settled between us.

"Look," he said finally. "I get it. This whole situation is unfair. But you don't do yourself any favors by indulging the press."

I narrowed my eyes, feeling the familiar sting of indignation rise within me. "Oh, so now I'm self-indulgent? You're being self-righteous, Pierce. You have no idea what it's like to be constantly scrutinized and dismissed just because I have breasts."

"Fine," he bit out, running a hand through his dark hair. "I'll admit, I haven't walked in your shoes. But that doesn't mean I can't see when someone's making things harder for themselves."

"Are you saying I should just roll over and let them walk all over me?" I demanded. "Is that what you'd do if you were in my position?"

He rolled his eyes. "You've already rolled over, Naomi. That's the point." He leaned closer, his tall frame looming over me, but I held my ground. "There's a difference between fighting for what's right and playing into their hands."

His hands settled against my arms, and for a moment, I was too stunned by the proximity of his body to form a coherent thought. The heat radiated from him. The solid strength of his chest seemed to promise comfort.

"Maybe I'm not handling this exactly the way you would," I whispered, struggling to maintain control over my hormones which were starting to fire haphazardly. "But that doesn't mean I'm wrong. It just means I'm doing the best I can with the hand I've been dealt."

Conflict played out across his face. I wondered if maybe, beneath all that anger and resentment, there was something else. Something more.

He released me, and I felt the loss acutely. "It's your life, Naomi. I'm not telling you how to live it."

"Aren't you?"

"You're the one who came into my office demanding to tell me the truth. Frankly, I don't know why you bothered. My opinion doesn't matter."

But it did matter. That was why I was here. "You've accused me of being

a whore.”

He shook his head. “I never used that word. You did.”

“You said I had sex with you to distract you.”

His blue eyes watched me. “Maybe I was wrong. You said it was a mistake. Then again . . .” Pierce’s voice took on a bitter edge as he crossed his arms over his chest. “I’m sure Todd would love to use our hookup as a tidbit for publicity, right? It fits right in with the narrative he’s selling.”

I flinched. Todd would do a lot to fill seats, but my being with a rival coach wouldn’t do that. Would it? More likely, our fans would be pissed that I was canoodling with the enemy.

Frustration boiled over as I berated myself for opening up to Pierce. He was a jerk, plain and simple, and I should have known better than to expect understanding or compassion from him.

“God, I’m such an idiot. Why did I think you’d care?”

His brows furrowed in confusion. “You want me to care?”

Yes. Yes, I did. But clearly, he didn’t, and I wasn’t about to continue down this humiliating path.

I shook my head. “It doesn’t matter. I suppose you’re right. It’s wrong of me to let the media tell stories about me and Max that aren’t true. But until I’ve proven my muster, no one will take me seriously. The only way to stay in the game long enough to prove myself is to lure fans to the rink with scandal. Sex sells, right?”

“Stop it,” he commanded, taking a step closer to me. “Just stop.”

“Stop what? Stop trying to make you see reason? Stop trying to convince you that I’m not just some pawn in a publicity game?”

“What you’re doing right now is cruel,” Pierce growled, his jaw clenched so tight the tendons strained against his skin. “Teasing me about your sex life when you know damn well how much it affects me.”

What? What did it do to him? “Look, Pierce, I didn’t mean . . .” I couldn’t find the right words. I wasn’t even sure what I wanted to say. The tension between us crackled like a live wire.

“Didn’t mean what?” he demanded, his voice hoarse with frustration. “Didn’t mean to remind me of how much I want you? Didn’t mean to make me feel like shit for not being able to have you because of some stupid rumor?”

Again, I could only stare at him wide-eyed. “I just wanted you to understand that this isn’t easy for me either.”

"Then stop playing games, Naomi." His voice was raw as he once again placed his hands on my arms. I thought he might give me a shake. "Stop teasing me."

"Pierce, I'm not teasing you."

"Then why are you here?" His eyes searched mine as if trying to determine whether I was being genuine or not. The raw vulnerability in his gaze tugged at something deep within me, and I felt a sudden urge to comfort him.

"I wanted to tell you the truth about me and Max. I didn't mean to hurt you."

Pierce stared at me intently, our faces mere inches apart. The heat radiating from his body made my skin tingle, and that familiar desire stirred stronger within me. Go. Leave. The words chanted in my brain. Instead, I closed the gap between us, pressing my lips against his in a searing kiss.

He groaned and responded immediately, his arms encircling my waist and pulling me tight against his hard body.

Our mouths moved together while my heart pounded wildly in my chest, each beat echoing a growing need for him. I tangled my fingers in his dark hair, savoring the feel of his hands roaming over my body.

"Naomi."

I wasn't sure if he was worried this was wrong or just saying my name. But I didn't want words now. I just wanted to feel. I wanted to escape the moment. I wanted sensations that I knew only he could give me.

I tugged at the hem of his shirt, desperate to feel the warmth of his skin against mine. Pierce seemed to understand my urgency, and together we undressed enough to feel our bodies flesh to flesh. His hands and lips spent a lot of time on my breasts until I was begging for more.

He fell to his knees and parted my thighs, using his tongue on me. I leaned against the desk, gripping the edge as pleasure grew. *More, more, more* was all I could think.

He groaned as he stood. He grabbed a chair and thrust his pants down. His dick sprang free, and I desperately wanted to taste it. I reached out, but he brushed my hand away.

"No time for that." He sat and tugged me until my legs straddled his thighs. "Fuck me, Naomi. Fuck me hard."

I sank down over him, savoring the way he filled me. I felt it in every cell in my body. I knew this was a mistake, but in this moment, I allowed myself

to be swept away by the intensity of our connection. For a few blissful moments, all thoughts of rumors, expectations, and consequences were pushed aside. All that existed were me and Pierce.

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Pierce

Her soft moans echoed in my dimly lit office. My hands gripped Naomi's hips as I helped her move over me, our bodies connecting in a way that felt like we were meant to be together. Her hazel eyes locked onto mine, sending electric shocks down my spine. As I leaned in to kiss her, I knew I couldn't get enough of this woman.

"Oh, God," she whispered against my lips just before I claimed them once more, swallowing her sweet sighs. The taste of her was intoxicating, making me forget everything else but the feel of her skin under my fingertips, the way her body trembled in response to my touch.

I never wanted this moment to end, so I did my damndest to prolong it. When I got close to coming, I'd grip her hips and hold her still. I sucked her nipples, fascinated at how each tug echoed in her pussy gripping my cock.

She groaned with frustration. "Make me come."

How could I refuse? I released her, and her body rocked against me. My head dropped back as pleasure coiled tightly, threatening to take my breath, my reason.

Her breaths grew quick and harsh. Her body bounced on my lap, and each time she came down, her body swallowed me.

"Yes," she cried out. Her pussy tightened around my cock. Electricity shot out. I bucked up as my orgasm slammed into me. I held her, wanting to draw out every last bit of pleasure as I released into her.

She collapsed against me. I wrapped my arms around her, intending to

keep her close. Not just in this moment, but from now on.

"Naomi . . ."

"Don't say anything."

My stomach clenched at her words. I opened my eyes, seeking to know what she was thinking, fearing she was going to say this was another mistake. My heart fell as I looked at the unmistakable expression of regret etched on her face. It twisted like a knife in my gut.

"Hey." I pressed my hands to her cheeks, hoping to salvage the moment. "What's going on?"

"We shouldn't be doing this." She moved off me, and I felt it like a slap in the face.

"One time might be a mistake, but two?" I worked to keep my anger under wraps. "There's something more going on here, Naomi."

She quickly righted her clothes. "There can't be. I can't afford for there to be."

Her words stung, but I refused to let her just walk away from what we had without a fight. "We can figure this out."

"How?" she snapped, her hazel eyes flashing with frustration and something else I couldn't quite place. "You really think anyone would understand if they found out about us? If our teams found out? I've worked too damn hard to get where I am, Pierce. I won't let one moment of weakness ruin everything I've built."

Something inside me shut down. "Is that all this was? A moment of weakness?"

She hesitated, her gaze flickering between my eyes, and for a second, I thought I saw regret in her eyes. "Maybe not. But it doesn't matter. We can't let it happen again. It's too risky."

Why was she fighting this? Why was she more interested in appeasing the press with something fake with Max than in having something real with me? How did she not see that the undeniable attraction between us wasn't a mistake, nor should it be ignored?

Determined not to let her slip away without a fight, I said, "Look, I know you're worried, but can't we just take a step back and acknowledge that there's something real here?"

"I don't deny that there's an attraction between us, but you have to understand the position we're in. We're rival coaches."

So the fuck what? "Lots of people have to navigate complicated

relationships. I think we owe it to ourselves to explore this further, even if that means taking a risk."

"Easily said for someone who has nothing to risk," she said, shaking her head.

"That's not exactly true." I remembered Reed's comments about my hookup with Naomi. I was sure the team and fans would question my loyalty by being with our rival team's coach. But fuck 'em.

I had to concede that Naomi had more to risk. I wasn't so clueless as to not know that my having sex would be considered normal . . . boys will be boys . . . whereas for her, she'd be seen as promiscuous or using sex for gain. Fucking hell, that was exactly what I'd accused her of earlier.

"I get that you have more to lose here, Naomi. I get it. But can't you feel it? The pull between us is too strong to ignore."

Her cheeks flushed, and for a moment, I thought she might give in. But then she sighed and looked away, her voice barely audible as she said, "I can't, Pierce. I just . . . can't."

I reached out, holding her arms, desperately wanting to keep her close. She flinched slightly but didn't pull away, and I could see the conflict in her eyes. "Give it a chance."

"I don't want to hurt you." She lifted her gaze to meet mine. "But you have to understand that my career . . . my reputation . . . is on the line. Not to mention the potential fallout for our teams if this became public knowledge."

"Are we really going to let fear dictate our lives?" I said with more curtness than I intended. "We're in control of our lives."

"Sometimes, it's not that simple. I wish it were, but it's not."

In that moment, I realized that she did feel what I felt but was going to ignore it, push it away. For some reason, that was worse than if she just didn't care.

"So we find a way to make it simple. We can keep this a secret. No one has to know."

She shook her head. "Secrets have a way of coming out. And even if we could keep it hidden, what about my *relationship* with Max?"

Did she really just say that? "Your relationship with Max? The one that you told me wasn't real? Fucking hell, Naomi. You're saying you want to be taken seriously as a coach, but you're more interested in playing games with some fake relationship that compromises your integrity than in having a real connection with me?"

Her cheeks flushed with anger. I had struck a nerve. "You don't understand. After all this, you still don't understand. Sometimes, we have to make sacrifices in order to get where we want to be."

"But at what cost, Naomi? How far are you willing to go before you lose sight of who you really are?"

"Who am I to you, Pierce?" she challenged, her eyes narrowing as she stared me down. "Just another conquest? A way to feel young again, maybe? Or perhaps I'm just a distraction from the fact that you can't have what you really want."

Wow. "Don't you project your situation onto me. I've been clear. You're not a distraction. You're what I want. Or I suppose you think I'm too old? That was a low blow about my trying to feel young again." Holy hell, I hoped she wasn't right. I didn't feel like I was having a midlife crisis and desiring a younger woman.

"I'm sorry. But you don't get to judge me for my choices. You have no idea what it's like to be a woman in this industry, trying to prove herself every damn day."

"Then let me help you. Let me be the one you lean on when things get tough. Let me show you that you're worth so much more than some fake relationship with Max."

"I can't." Her words felt like a punch to the gut, but I couldn't—or wouldn't—accept them.

My anger surged. "You know what, Naomi? You're a fraud." My voice was heavy with resentment. "You say you want respect as a coach, and yet you parade around with Max, using that taboo relationship to get attention for yourself."

Her eyes flared in surprise at my outburst.

Feeling emboldened, I continued, "You're playing right into Todd's hands, letting him use you as a publicity stunt. And worst of all, you won't even admit it. You're a coward, Naomi."

The moment the words left my lips, I regretted them. My heart clenched at the sight of her reaction. Tears pooled in her eyes. But before I could apologize or try to take back my harsh words, she turned on her heel and walked out of my office.

As I watched her go, I felt a strange mixture of frustration, anger, and despair. I knew I was right about the connection between us, that it wasn't one-sided. It must have been what propelled me out of my chair to follow her

out. If I let her go now, our chance was lost forever. I felt that as surely as we'd lost tonight's game.

"Naomi."

"Stay away from me, Pierce." The harshness of her words had me stopping.

"Fuck." I slammed my fist against a nearby locker. The metallic clang reverberated through the room. Maybe I shouldn't have pushed so hard. Maybe I shouldn't have pushed at all. Or maybe it was time to see the situation for what it was. Success as a coach overrode everything else for her.

I laughed derisively as I realized I was a notch on her bedpost. I guess she really was making it in a man's world.

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Naomi

The next day I was off, and boy, did I need the break. I was sick of the way Big Ed was a jerk. I was irritated by all the publicity about me and Max. Worst of all, I was frustrated by my undeniable but totally inappropriate attraction to Pierce. How did my life get so complicated?

I woke early but didn't bother dressing at first, deciding to make a cup of coffee and have a slow morning. It was November, and temps were supposed to be nearly seventy today. It didn't feel like the holidays were upon us. Back home in Minnesota, it was likely below twenty degrees. Nothing said holidays like bitter cold and snow.

While I drank my coffee, I purposefully stayed off my phone. I didn't want to know what bizarre and inaccurate story the media was posting about me today. If it was big enough, Todd would call.

I thought about Pierce and how he'd pushed me on the way I was going with the flow on Todd's idea. It told me that I wasn't as strong as I thought I was. Oh, sure, I pushed back, but in the end, because I wanted to keep my job, I'd acquiesced.

Not that I would have fallen into a relationship with Pierce if I didn't have all the media attention going on. The sex was great, and there were times when he was sweet and kind, but I wasn't going to risk my job or my heart just to have an affair with a rival coach.

By mid-morning I was dressed and cleaning up my place. I was about to make another cup of coffee when my phone rang with my mother's ringtone.

I realized it had been awhile since I'd talked to her.

"Hi, Mom."

"Naomi, you're alright. I was getting worried."

"I'm sorry." I hated that I'd caused her stress about my well-being. "Everything is good."

"It sounds like it. Georgie looked up the hockey news, and you've been on a winning streak. And apparently, you have a new beau. Do you think it's wise to date one of your players, though?"

Ugh. I put the phone on speaker so I could make my coffee. "The media has it all wrong, Mom. Max and I are friends. That's it. How is Georgie?" I asked about my brother. I had three of them. Triplets, no less.

"A handful, just like Hank and Wally. They're waiting to hear from colleges they've applied to. Next year, they'll be gone." She let out a long sigh. I knew it would be difficult for her when they left. She'd be alone.

"Are they looking at colleges that are close?" I put a coffee pod in the machine, set my mug under the spout, and pushed the *Brew* button.

"Some. Others are far away."

"Maybe you should think about selling the house and coming out here with me."

"That's very nice of you, but I could never leave this place. This is where your father and I built a life."

It made me all the sadder that she'd lost my father. She'd never dated or looked at another man, as far as I knew. On the one hand, it was wildly romantic to think about a love that strong, but also such a tragedy that they were apart.

"Are you coming home for Christmas?" she asked.

I took the coffee and went out on my little balcony to sit. "I have only a few days. Three. But yes, I'd like to come home." I could use the respite.

We chatted a little bit longer. When we hung up, I used my phone to book a flight home for the holidays, then I finished my coffee and continued to have a lazy afternoon.

I was thinking about going for a run when my phone buzzed with a new text message. I glanced at the screen and saw that it was from Analyn.

Hey. Congrats on the win. We're celebrating your win tonight. Meet us at 8 p.m. Dress fun and fabulous.

My heart skipped a beat as I read the message. Had she really set up a night of celebration for me? It seemed odd that she would, considering her

husband's team was the one I beat. But then I remembered how she and Ruby were able to support me as a woman striving in a man's world. They must have great husbands if they were okay with their wives celebrating with the rival team.

I hesitated in answering as I'd planned to stay home all day and night, but finally, I decided to take her up on the offer.

Sounds great. See you at 8. Thank you.

As I rifled through my closet, trying to find an outfit that would be fitting for whatever surprise Analyn had planned, my thoughts drifted back to Pierce. It was annoying because there was no reason that looking for a fun and fabulous dress should conjure him up, but it did.

I couldn't help but replay our encounter from several days earlier. The way he'd looked at me in the locker room, his intense blue eyes burning into mine. It made my heart race even now.

"Naomi, I want to be with you." His voice had been husky, full of desire.

Was I an idiot to tell him no when a part of me wanted to say yes? I hated telling him it wouldn't work. But I had to think about my career, my team, and the media scrutiny that would come with dating a coach from the rival team. When he called me a coward, it stung like hell, even though part of me knew he was right.

Ugh. I shook my head to dispel the memories and instead focused on a dress. I settled on a flirty red dress, slipping it on and adding a denim jacket and some strappy sandals to complete the look. I quickly did my hair, deciding to wear it down, and then completed the look with light makeup, except for the red lipstick.

At just about eight, my phone rang. "Are you ready, Naomi?" Analyn's excited voice rang through the phone.

"All set. Can't wait to see what you have planned." This was what I needed, carefree fun with gal pals.

"Perfect. We'll be there in a few minutes."

A few moments later, I received a text that they were out front. I grabbed my purse and headed out. A sleek, luxurious stretch limo was waiting in the parking lot in front of my building. I couldn't help but grin as I stepped up to the vehicle to see Analyn, Ruby, and another woman waving at me from inside the vehicle.

"Come on in," Ruby called out. "Meet Betts."

I slid into the plush leather interior of the car. "Hey, everyone."

Betts smiled warmly at me, her bright green eyes sparkling with excitement . . . or maybe it was the champagne they'd already starting drinking. "Nice to meet you. Analyn and Ruby have told me so much about you."

"All good, I hope."

AS THE LIMO glided smoothly down the street, Analyn handed me a glass of champagne, and I was glad I'd decided to do this. I needed the company of these amazing women to support me.

"Okay, ladies." Analyn clapped her hands together excitedly. "Time for the big reveal. Tonight, we are dining at Taste of Whimsy."

"Ooh, I've heard of that place," Ruby said. "Their menu is supposed to be really unique and fun."

"I thought it would be the perfect spot to celebrate Naomi and how she's kicking ass."

"Thank you. This means so much to me."

Upon arriving at the restaurant, we were immediately escorted to our table. The walls were adorned with colorful murals of fantastical creatures, while the tables were set with mismatched plates and utensils that somehow looked perfect together.

"Look at this menu," Ruby exclaimed as she opened hers. "There's a dish called 'Clouds on a Plate'. I have to try it."

"Ooh, and what about the 'Rainbow Spaghetti'?" Betts added, pointing at another item.

"Let's order a bunch of different dishes and share them all," I suggested, excited to sample as many whimsical creations as possible since I couldn't decide on one.

"Great idea," Analyn agreed.

When the food arrived, we were all amazed by the presentation, from delicate foam clouds floating atop the succulent scallops to the tangle of multicolored pasta that seemed to defy gravity.

"Wow, this is incredible." I marveled at the chef's ingenuity. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Me neither." Betts twirled a forkful of rainbow spaghetti. "I hope it tastes as good as it looks."

We'd ordered wine, except for Ruby who was having sparkling water. I

raised my glass. "Cheers."

"Cheers to you. We're so excited at your success," Analyn said, clinking her glass with mine.

We chatted, and I learned that Analyn and Betts had been good friends growing up, and Analyn had moved to Las Vegas to room with Betts. But then she met Reed.

Betts looked at Analyn with a teasing expression. "I knew it the minute she said she'd slept with him—"

"Hey. No giving away my secrets," Analyn interrupted Betts, but with humor.

"Secret?" Betts laughed. "Honey, it was no secret."

"How did you meet?" I asked Ruby.

"Through Bo. I grew up with him, and when he came home to rehabilitate a shoulder injury, we reconnected."

"It was about time, though, wasn't it?" Analyn said.

I looked at them both, wondering what that meant.

"Bo and I were close, and before he left for college, we had a little hookup that resulted in our daughter Laina. She's ten now."

"And now, another on the way." I thought her story was sweet. I was a hopeless romantic. Not that I believed in true love. Well, I did, but just not for me.

"I'm glad you're joining us because it's not easy being the only single girl in the group," Betts said.

"Are you single?" Analyn asked. "I know you don't like the media attention, but it sounds like you and Max are still going strong."

Ugh. Again. My life was turning into one groan after another. Maybe I should tell them the truth. I'd told Pierce the truth.

"If she doesn't want to discuss the media attention, she doesn't have to. I still stick with we're two single ladies," Betts said.

Inwardly, I thanked her for giving me a way out of talking about the chaos that was my life.

It felt like ages since I'd allowed myself to relax and simply enjoy the company of friends.

"Thank you, guys," I said as the evening was winding down. "This night has been just what I needed, and I don't mean a celebration of the team's victory."

"Let's take a picture to remember this night," Ruby suggested, pulling out

her phone and opening the camera app. We all huddled together, our arms around each other, smiles lighting up our faces.

"SAY 'WHIMSICAL FOOD'," Analyn called out, and we laughed as we repeated the phrase while Ruby snapped the photo. The image captured the happiness and camaraderie we shared, even in the face of my tangled personal life.

"I think it's great that you can all be friends considering how Analyn and Ruby are married to men who are part of a rival team," Betts said.

Analyn waved away the concern with a dismissive flick of her wrist. "What happens on the ice has no bearing on what happens off the ice," she said, grinning at me. "We're friends, not rivals—and that's all that matters."

Her words made total sense to me at first. Our friendship had nothing to do with hockey or our jobs. It occurred to me that if I could be friends with members of the rival team, why couldn't I date one? The realization hit me hard. For a moment I allowed myself to consider Pierce's proposal. But almost immediately, I dismissed it. Friendship and dating were two different things.

The media wouldn't care if I was friends with Analyn and Ruby. They'd just see it as an interesting situation. But if they knew I'd slept with Pierce . . . Well, that would be a media field day they'd never let me forget.

"Naomi?" Ruby's voice pulled me from my thoughts. "You okay?"

I forced a smile onto my face, hoping it looked genuine. "Yeah, just thinking about how lucky I am to have friends like you."

As we continued our evening, laughing and sharing stories, I pushed thoughts of Pierce and the complications he'd brought to my life away.

Pierce

I dragged myself out of bed, my body feeling like dead weight. My sleep had been restless ever since the game against Naomi's team a few nights ago. It wasn't the loss that was gnawing at me—it was losing her. I rubbed the sleep from my eyes, grumbling under my breath as I shuffled across the cold hardwood floor.

The doorbell rang, echoing through the condo like a foghorn. That's what woke me up.

"Coming." I called out, trying to suppress the irritation in my voice. I swung the front door open, expecting to find some package delivery guy or maybe even Reed. Instead, a boy stood on my doorstep, clutching a suitcase like his life depended on it. He couldn't have been more than ten or eleven, with dark hair and blue eyes.

"Can I help you?" I asked.

The boy poked at a cell phone and then thrust it at me. I took the phone, glancing at the screen. A video played of a woman in her mid-thirties.

"Hey, Pierce," she began.

My brow furrowed. This woman knew me? How?

"What are the odds that you remember me? Twelve years ago, in Milwaukie. Jeannie Brown. We spent a night together. Well, the result is standing right in front of you. His name's Porter, and he's your son."

What the fuck? Her words hit me like a sledge hammer.

"I figured I'd raise him on my own, but things have changed, and I can't

care for him anymore. So, I'm asking you to take him in, at least for now. I'll call soon to explain everything."

The video ended, and I stared blankly at the screen, my mind racing. A son? I scanned my brain to remember her. The truth was that there'd been a lot of women back then. Good God, what if they all came forward with a child? Or what if this was a scam?

"Are you done?" Porter asked, a hint of impatience in his voice. He snatched the phone from my hand and shoved it back into his pocket.

"Look, Porter," I said, forcing a smile while desperately trying to keep my composure. "There must be some kind of mistake. Why don't you come inside, and we'll figure this out together? We'll call your mom, okay?"

"Whatever," he muttered, pushing past me and stepping into the house. "Thought you were rich." Porter looked around my place, unimpressed.

"Is that what she's after?" I'd heard stories of women trying to pawn off pregnancies or children on rich men to get money.

"Where am I sleeping?"

Good question. I had a guest room, but I wasn't ready to take a strange kid into my home.

"Porter. I know this is confusing, but we need to talk about what's going on. We can't just pretend like this situation is normal."

"Normal?" He scoffed, turning to face me with a fierce glare in his eyes. "You think any part of this is normal? My mom sends me halfway across the country to live with some guy I've never met, and you want to talk about normal?"

Way to be a dick, Pierce. I'd been so caught up in my own shock that I hadn't considered his feelings.

"Listen. I understand you're upset. I am too. We need to find out what's going on."

"Whatever. Just don't expect me to call you 'Dad' or anything."

Dad? Good Christ. Could I really be a father? The kid had my dark hair and blue eyes, but lots of kids did, right?

I was reeling from this situation, but I also felt a sense of responsibility toward this boy who claimed to be my son. I had to verify Jeannie's claims, but for now, I needed to step up and be there for him—whatever that meant.

"We need to talk to your mom."

He did the biggest eye roll I'd ever seen. "Here. Call her yourself if you don't believe me."

As I took the phone from him, I had a strange mixture of emotions—anger, confusion, and even a hint of curiosity that this boy might actually be my son. That led to feelings of terror. What the fuck did I know about kids?

"Hello?" Jeannie's voice echoed through the line.

"Jeannie, it's Pierce," I said, trying to keep my voice steady. "We need to talk about . . . about Porter." My gaze flicked to the boy standing in front of me, his arms crossed defensively over his chest.

"Fine. But I already told you everything you need to know in the video."

"Look, this is a lot to process. You can't just dump a kid on my doorstep and expect me to take him in without any questions."

"Technically, you're not a stranger," she replied sharply. "You're his father."

"But I didn't even know he existed until today."

"Neither did I," Porter muttered, his eyes narrowing as he glared at the floor.

"How is it that I'm only finding out about this now? Is it money you want?" Maybe it was wrong, but I was willing to pay.

"You weren't an asshole when I met you before. Granted, we barely spoke, but . . . no, this isn't about money. It's about Porter needing a strong male presence in his life. That's the father's role, and the father is you."

"Jeannie, listen—" I began, but she cut me off.

"I can't talk now, Pierce. My plane is boarding. I said I'd call later, and I will." The phone went dead.

"Jeannie." Jesus, if I was going to get her to take him back, she couldn't get on a plane.

"See?" Porter sneered, snatching his phone back from me. "She doesn't want me either."

"What? That's not what she said." In fact, it sounded like she was doing this to help him, not to get rid of him. But if the boy needed help, she should have hired a therapist because I didn't know shit about parenting.

"Listen, Porter, I don't know what's going on here, but I promise you that we'll figure it out."

"Whatever." It seemed to be his preferred response to just about everything.

My mind raced with thoughts of DNA tests and verifying Jeannie's claims, even as I knew none of it mattered. Right now, Porter was in my care, and I needed to step up.

"Look," I said, trying to keep my voice even, "I know this is a mess, but I promise you, Porter, I'll do my best to take care of you." I glanced around my house—a bachelor's home, filled with memorabilia from my hockey career and late nights spent drinking with Reed. This wasn't a place for a child.

Porter scoffed, rolling his eyes. "Yeah, sure."

"Listen, I don't know what's going on with your mom, and I don't know if I'm really your dad, but right now, we're all we've got, so let's make the best of it."

Uncertainty flashed across his features before being replaced by a steely determination. "So, what, now you're gonna play hero? A little late for that, don't you think?"

I was baffled. I clearly couldn't reach this kid. "How about I show you where you can sleep?"

He shrugged. "Whatever."

Jesus fuck, I hated that word.

I showed him upstairs to the guest room. He looked around and then ushered me out, shutting the door in my face.

A part of me wanted to call him an ungrateful brat, but then I remembered his ordeal was more difficult than mine. He was just a kid, shipped halfway across the country to live with his father. I'd be scared and pissed off too.

I went down to the kitchen to figure out what I had that a kid could eat. Did kids like eggs? Deciding he might like pancakes better, I pulled out the ingredients to make a batch.

"Hey, Pierce," Porter called from the living room. "Where's the remote?"

"On the coffee table," I replied, hoping this meant he was settling in.

"What is this?"

I poked my head out of the kitchen toward the TV. On the screen was the video we took of the game with the Silver Nuggets so I could study it and do better when we faced off again. As it turned out, the silver lining to all this chaos was that it had effectively distracted me from her. I'd been haunted by the memory of our last encounter, which had left me frustrated, even more so since I still ached for her.

As I thought about our passionate night together, a sudden wave of panic washed over me. We hadn't used protection. My heart raced at the thought of another unexpected child entering my life. But then, just as quickly as the panic arose, I dismissed it. Naomi was fiercely devoted to her career. There was no way she would let something like an unplanned pregnancy derail her

efforts. She must have been on the pill or some other form of contraceptive or she would've said something, right?

I blew out a breath and worked to push her out of my head. With a child on my doorstep, I had more important things to focus on.

He poked buttons until a video of a video game filled with car chase and gun sounds appeared. He turned up the volume and with a jump, landed on his ass on the couch.

"Turn it down, please." I rubbed my temples in hopes of staving off the headache that was forming.

"Whatever," Porter grumbled, and the noise level decreased significantly.

I reminded myself that I had to care for this kid, even if I had doubts about Jeannie's claim.

"Porter, why don't you come sit with me for a bit?" I called out, surprising myself with the sudden urge to connect with this boy who had invaded my life.

"I'm watching this."

"You can watch later."

"Fine," he grumbled, dragging himself like he had a million pounds of weight slowing him down. He sat in the chair at the table as I got us both orange juice.

"Tell me about yourself." I set the juice in front of him and hoped that I sounded genuinely interested despite the storm of emotions raging inside me.

"What do you like to do?"

"Video games."

"That's it? Do you play a sport?" *Please, God, have him like hockey.*

He shrugged. "Soccer because Mom says I need to get out and learn sportsmanship."

"You don't like sportsmanship?"

He shrugged again and sipped his juice.

"How about hockey?"

He gave me a look like he thought I was lame. Was it for playing hockey or because I was trying to connect with him?

"In hockey there's a lot of aggression." I was sure this wasn't what Jeannie had in mind when she sent him to me.

He studied me. "Like fighting?"

"Sometimes. But that could get you thrown from the game. Mostly, we just check . . . run into players. Knock 'em down."

He didn't look impressed. "You're not the first hockey player I've met. Mom has lots of hockey player friends." He said *friends* in a way that let me know Jeannie continued to entertain hockey players like me. Hockey teams could be like rock bands. Women liked to meet 'em and fuck 'em.

"You're the oldest, though."

Great. Now he was calling me old. "Have you played?"

He shook his head.

"Maybe I could teach you."

He shrugged. "Whatever."

Okay. I'd had enough.

"Can I watch TV now?"

I nodded. "I'll make us some pancakes."

He was out of the chair and into the living room faster than a puck across the ice.

I sighed. In a moment, my life had changed, and I didn't know what the fuck to do about it.

Naomi

A few weeks later, we were in Providence, Rhode Island. The energy was electric as our team crushed the competition, adding another win to our growing streak. With each win, our momentum grew stronger, and I was finally feeling confident that we could go all the way and win the season. And maybe I'd finally get attention for wins, not my fake relationship with Max.

When the team had cleaned up, we all headed back to the hotel.

"We should get drinks to celebrate," Max said as he stopped near the bar.

"You buying?" a player joked.

"My own beer, yes."

With a laugh, Max and the rest of the team entered the bar.

"Coming, Coach?" Max asked. I realized it was the first time I'd been invited by the team to join in their celebration.

"Sure. Why not?"

We took up most of the bar. A few drinks in, and it was likely this rowdy bunch would be asked to leave, but until then, we'd celebrate as a team.

"To Coach Withers," Max called out, "who whipped our asses into shape."

The team members cheered, holding their drinks in the air. I felt warmth from their appreciation and support. It was a stark contrast to the initial skepticism I'd faced when I first joined the team. I was finally being accepted by them.

"Thank you so much. I'm honored to be your coach, and I believe in each and every one of you. Together, we can go all the way. A championship run is within our reach."

"Damn straight," one of the players hollered, and the rest of the team erupted in cheers.

As the celebration continued, I looked around at my team, their faces flushed with excitement. It was a testament to how far we'd come. Of course, Max had been the one to slowly rally the team around me.

"Thanks for the toast, Max," I said, turning to him. "And for your support."

"You're an incredible coach, and you deserve all the credit."

Max was a nice man and an excellent hockey player. He was a true friend, and it angered me that the media, which Todd egged on, was turning our friendship into something sordid.

"Here's to our fearless leader," Max continued, raising his glass high in the air. "To her dedication, her hard work, and her unwavering belief in this team. Thanks to her, we're on track for a championship run."

The team erupted in cheers, glasses clinking together as they toasted our success. Their enthusiasm was infectious, and I grinned from ear to ear, finally feeling truly accepted by this group of rough-around-the-edges hockey players.

"And to all of you," I said.

"To us," the team echoed in unison.

I took a sip of my drink, savoring the taste of success.

I finished my drink and found myself in need of the ladies' room. I excused myself from the celebration, heading to the hotel hallway in search of the bathroom. I stared at myself in the mirror, basking in the glory of success. Not just that we were on a winning streak, but that the team was finally accepting that I could lead them to victory.

When I finished in the ladies' room, I stepped out into the hall intending to return to the bar.

"Hey there, Coach," Big Ed's voice slurred as he appeared in the hallway, his imposing figure blocking my path back to the bar. He took a swig from the beer bottle in his hand, his bloodshot eyes roaming over me with an unsettling intensity. For a big guy, booze went to his head quickly. "Why don't you come up to my room for a little while? I could remind you of what a woman should be doing."

I laughed, thinking it was just another one of his tasteless jokes. But as his dark eyes bored into mine, I realized he was serious. My laughter died in my throat. Big Ed stepped closer, his breath reeking of alcohol.

A surge of anger rose within me as I squared my shoulders and faced him head-on. "Back off, Ed. I'm your coach, not your plaything."

"So, what? I'm not good enough for you? You only put out for Max?"

Dammit. "Show some respect."

"Respect?" He sneered. "You're too big for your britches. I won't rest until you're fired."

"Is that so?" I shot back, refusing to let him intimidate me. "Well, good luck with that."

Max appeared from behind Big Ed, his brows furrowed with concern. "Everything okay here?" He stepped to my side.

"Stay out of this, pretty boy," Big Ed growled.

"Ed, leave her alone. Go enjoy the celebration."

"Fuck you. I want a little of what you've been getting."

"You shouldn't believe all that you read," I said.

"Can you read, Big Ed?" Max's cutting remark surprised me.

Big Ed's face turned red, his temple throbbing with rage as he seethed. "You've got a big mouth and all your teeth. I'm about ready to remedy that."

The tension between them crackled like electricity, causing the hair on my arms to stand on end.

"Give it your best, dickhead."

I held my breath, praying that this wouldn't escalate into a full-blown brawl.

Big Ed's gaze darted around, his shoulders tensing as if preparing for a fight. Then he backed off with a snarl. "This isn't over, Coach." He pointed a meaty finger in my direction. "I'm gonna make your life difficult." Then he stormed off, leaving an uneasy silence in his wake.

My heart pounded in my chest. The victory that had tasted so sweet only moments before now felt tainted by the ugly confrontation with Big Ed.

"Are you okay?" Max asked, his eyes filled with concern.

I nodded, trying to brush off the incident. "Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks for stepping in."

"Of course. Don't let anything he says mess with you. He's just blowing off steam."

I nodded, although I wasn't going to brush Big Ed's vow aside. If Big Ed

followed through on his threats, things were about to get a whole lot more complicated.

Max stepped closer, wrapping his arms around me in a comforting embrace. His body pressed against mine, warmth radiating from him like a protective shield.

For a moment, I allowed myself to lean into him, grateful for his unwavering support through all of this. "Thank you." But then I remembered the media and stepped back, giving Max a sheepish smile. "I appreciate your support, but I don't want to add more fodder to the fire."

He looked around and winced. "Right. Sorry. Shall we go back to the party?"

"You know what, I'm exhausted. And really, the victory is yours and the team's. You celebrate. Just don't do anything that will be bad for the team."

"Are you sure? You're a part of the team."

"I know. I'm just tired. Will you give my excuses?"

"Should I walk you to your room? In case Big Ed is lurking about?"

I shook my head. I could only imagine someone seeing us together, and it would be in the media how Max came to my room. "I'm fine, really."

"Alright," Max agreed reluctantly. "If you need anything, let me know."

"Thank you, Max." With those words, I turned away from the celebration over in the bar and made my way to the hotel elevators.

Once inside my room, I locked the door behind me and leaned against it. The tension from the night's confrontation washed over me like a tidal wave, leaving me feeling vulnerable and exposed.

I changed into pajamas and crawled into bed. Exhausted, I closed my eyes, willing sleep to come quickly.

THE SUNLIGHT STREAMING through the curtains woke me the next morning. I groaned, feeling a slight pounding in my head from last night's drinks, but I pushed it aside as excitement bubbled in my chest. I couldn't wait to see the coverage of our team's win. Stretching across the hotel bed, I grabbed my phone and quickly searched for news about the game.

LOVE TRIANGLE DRAMA: Coach Withers Caught Between Players

I gaped at the headline. Below it was a photo of Max hugging me in the hallway, his arms wrapped around me protectively. Another photo showed Big Ed towering over me in the hallway, his face contorted with anger. My heart dropped, nausea creeping up inside me. What the hell was going on?

This was the last thing I needed after everything that had happened. I dialed Todd's number, my fingers trembling as I pressed the call button, not caring that it was still early in Las Vegas. He picked up on the second ring.

"Naomi. Have you seen the news? Genius, right? We're going to sell out the whole season."

"Genius. This is wrong, Todd."

"Hey, now," he replied, unfazed by my outburst. "This type of story sells tickets."

The realization hit me like a slap in the face. Todd was behind this. He'd orchestrated the entire thing. "You set this up, didn't you?" I accused, my voice shaking.

"Actually, I'm more of an opportunist. The media started this, but seeing how it brought in fans, I hired a team photographer."

What the hell?

"But I didn't count on Big Ed coming into the picture."

"Opportunist or not, this is my life."

For a brief moment, Pierce's face flashed in my mind. What was he going to think when he saw this news? God, why did I care? It had been weeks since I'd seen him. "My life is not some made-up story to sell tickets."

"Naomi, your job depends on ticket sales," Todd reminded me, his voice calm and infuriatingly rational. "Just go along with it. People will forget about it when the next scandal comes around."

"Easy for you to say." My heart sank at the thought of playing along with this charade. But what choice did I have? Maybe if we were losing and the team was still pushing back against me, I'd give up. But now I was proving myself. The team was winning. "I don't get it, Todd. We're winning. Why do we need to fan the flames of a bogus story?"

"I understand this is hard, Naomi. I'm not asking you to pretend to be in a relationship. Just let the press do what they do. Ignore them."

Ugh. The last thing I wanted to do was to throw my coaching career away because of some stupid tabloid rumors. "Fine, but I'm not happy about this."

"Trust me. This will all blow over soon enough."

I hung up, feeling hollow and betrayed. The excitement of our win was

now tainted by lies and manipulation. But I had made a promise to myself and my team—I wouldn't let anything stand in the way of our success.

My stomach didn't have the same confidence. It churned violently, probably fueled by last night's celebration and the bitter sting of betrayal. I bolted for the bathroom, barely making it before I retched into the porcelain bowl. When I finished, I looked at my reflection in the mirror above the sink. I'd seen better days. I splashed cold water on my face, hoping to wash away the remnants of nausea and despair, but it did little to ease my frustration.

I tried to focus on my breathing, reminding myself that I didn't have to face this alone. My team—most of them, anyway—had shown their support for me just last night. That had to count for something, didn't it?

I was a good coach. I was breaking barriers and changing the game. I couldn't let some stupid tabloid story get in my way. I couldn't change what had happened, but I could control how I reacted to it. That was what Analyn said to do. I wouldn't let Todd's machinations or Big Ed's threats define me or my career. I was here to make a difference, and no amount of sensationalist gossip, nor Big Ed or Todd, could take that away from me.

Pierce

The sizzle of the pan filled the kitchen as I flipped a piece of chicken, taking in the aromas of garlic and olive oil. Cooking was a form of therapy for me, and God knew I needed it now more than ever. Between the mess with Naomi and the shocking discovery that I was the father of an eleven-year-old boy, I craved normalcy in my life.

The headline in today's news feed flickered in my head.

LOVE TRIANGLE DRAMA: Coach Withers Caught Between Players

JESUS FUCK. Was that Todd's idea? Or was she lying to me when she said there was nothing going on? There was no way she'd be with Big Ed, right? The man was the very definition of misogyny. And why was I even thinking about it? She'd been clear. She didn't want me.

"I put the stuff on the table," Porter said in his usual bitter tone. "Am I done?"

I studied him. I was rethinking the DNA test as I could see me in him when I was his age. Not his attitude, but his dark hair and blue eyes. And he was tall for his age. I tried to deny it, but when I pulled out old photos, there was no doubt. The kid was mine.

"Can you toss this together?" I motioned to the salad bowl.

He rolled his eyes but did as I asked. As we worked side by side, I prayed that this evening would go well. Reed and Analyn, and Bo and Ruby, were coming over for dinner, and Bo and Ruby were bringing their daughter, Laina. I hoped she and Porter would hit it off. Since enrolling him in school, Porter hadn't made any friends and seemed to be getting into trouble more often than not.

The doorbell rang, and I wiped my hands on a towel. "That must be them. Why don't you let them in while I finish up here?"

"Fine," he mumbled, not quite meeting my eyes as he left the kitchen. Was the fact that he didn't say "whatever" a sign of progress? Then again, he used the same tone saying "fine" as he did "whatever".

"Hey, Pierce." Bo's voice echoed through the condo as they entered. "How's it going, man?"

"Good, good," I called back from the kitchen. "Just putting the finishing touches on dinner."

"Something smells amazing. You've really outdone yourself," Reed said, clapping me on the back.

"Maybe I should have married you." Analyn inhaled the scent of chicken.

"Don't even joke about that," Reed said, wrapping his arm around her and tugging her close.

It was a sweet gesture that tugged at my heart. I had an image of me doing the same in this kitchen with Naomi. With an inward kick in my ass, I pushed the image away. The woman haunted me, and I was getting pissed about it.

"Thanks. I just hope it tastes as good as it smells."

"Hi, Porter. I'm Ruby, and this is Laina."

"Hi, Porter," Laina said.

"Hi." Porter stood stiff and uncertain. Did the kid have friends at home?

"Why don't you show Laina your fancy new gaming system?" I suggested.

"Uh, sure." Porter led her toward the playroom I'd set up in the extra bedroom. I felt a sense of relief as I watched them go. Maybe this evening would be exactly what we both needed.

As the kids disappeared from sight, I turned to my friends and gestured toward the living room. "Please, make yourselves comfortable. I'll grab us some drinks."

"Mind if I tag along?" Reed asked, following me back into the kitchen.

"Of course not."

"Listen, Pierce," Reed began as I pulled out glasses and a chilled bottle of wine. "I just wanted to check on things."

I arched a brow. "Things?" I got the feeling we weren't talking about hockey or our recent losing streak.

"With Coach Withers."

I frowned, not appreciating his intrusion into my personal life. I knew he cared for me, but I also knew he had concerns about the team.

"Reed, that's really none of your business. But since you asked, nothing's going on." That was true. Oh, sure, I'd fucked her again, but that was weeks ago and she left without looking back. I was the putz who was pining while she was . . . well, I wasn't sure what she was doing except winning.

"Alright." Reed held up his hands in surrender. "I know it's not my business. I just don't want any distractions to hurt our team. We're not—"

"I'm well aware that the team is struggling, but it's not because of Naomi Withers." At least not directly. "Everything's fine."

"Good." He nodded.

I went back to work, grabbing a tray to put the wine and glasses on.

"You know," he said casually, leaning against the counter, "it's crazy to think about how we lived our lives back when we were young hockey players."

I raised an eyebrow but played along. "Yeah, we were definitely out of hand at times." Jeannie Brown came to mind as I recalled our wild nights and numerous conquests.

"Who'd ever think that one of those women would come knocking on your door with a kid in tow?"

Now he was going to fuck with me about Porter? I glanced at him. "Worried?"

He gave me a sheepish smile. "Maybe. A little. After all, condoms aren't foolproof."

"Yeah, we could both have a brood of kids out there," I joked, though the idea was unsettling. Especially when I remembered that I hadn't used protection either time with Naomi, not that I was going to tell Reed that.

Reed looked like he might be sick at the thought. "Let's hope not."

"I imagine if a woman showed up now, Analyn would understand as long as she wasn't pregnant or having a baby."

“Hey. I’m a one-woman man now.”

“Then don’t worry. Now let’s get back to our guests and enjoy this dinner.” I put the glasses and wine on a tray and then got a glass and seltzer for Ruby who I knew wasn’t drinking alcohol.

We returned to the rest of my guests. “Here you go,” I said, opening and pouring wine.

Once everyone had their glass in hand, conversation flowed smoothly, catching up on the latest news and gossip.

“Did you see the news about Coach Withers?” Bo asked.

My gut clenched. The last thing I wanted to do was talk about Naomi.

“I don’t buy it,” Analyn said.

“Why?” I asked, curious about the vehemence in her voice.

“I just don’t. She doesn’t strike me as a woman who’d compromise her integrity or goals.”

“Analyn and Ruby have befriended Naomi,” Reed explained.

My initial thought was that I was glad Naomi had nice friends like Analyn and Ruby. But then annoyance grew. She could be friends with the enemy but not date one?

“Is that a function of keeping your friends close and your enemies closer?” I asked.

“Not at all,” Ruby said. “Hockey business isn’t between us.”

I looked over at Reed and Bo, both of whom didn’t seem bothered by their wives hanging out with a rival team’s coach.

“How are things going with Porter?” Bo asked.

“Porter is struggling. I’m not quite sure how to handle it.”

“It can’t be easy for Porter either. It must be just as shocking for him to be thrust into your life, with a father he doesn’t know, as it is for you to suddenly have a son,” Bo said.

“I know,” I agreed, watching my wine as I swirled my glass. “But we need to find a way to connect.”

“Sometimes, it just takes time, I imagine,” Ruby said, her eyes shining with sympathy.

Before I could respond, the sound of rapid footsteps interrupted our conversation. Laina burst into the room, her face red with anger.

She went straight to Bo and Ruby. “Porter said girls can’t do what boys do. But I told him how you beat Daddy in hockey when you were kids. And the Silver Nuggets have a girl coach who beat Pierce in their last game.”

I felt a mix of embarrassment and anger bubble inside me. "He said that?" Laina nodded. "And then he called me a name and pushed me."

"Okay, Laina. We'll handle this." But Ruby looked at me to do something. As she should. Porter was my son.

"Porter," I called out, summoning him from the playroom. He appeared in the doorway, his expression a mixture of defiance and annoyance. "Did you say those things to Laina and push her?"

"No."

"He did so," Laina insisted.

I took a deep breath, struggling to find the right balance between supporting my son and addressing his behavior. My heart ached for him. I knew he was feeling just as lost and confused as I was. But I couldn't let him hurt others.

"Porter, I want you to go to your room," I ordered. "We'll talk about this later." I wasn't sure that was the right answer, but I didn't know what else to say or do at that moment.

"Fine." He stormed off to his room, slamming his door.

As the echo of the slam subsided, I turned back to my friends. "I'm sorry about that."

"Being a parent is tough," Bo said sympathetically, his arm still around Laina. "Especially when you're thrown into it like you were."

I suppose he'd know since he'd only recently learned he was Laina's father. But Laina had Ruby, who'd done a great job raising Laina for the first nine years alone. Porter wouldn't talk about his mom, but my sense was that he hadn't had that.

"Thanks, Bo." I stood up. "It's time to eat."

I set the meal out and then went to get Porter to join us, letting him know he needed to behave. Everyone had gathered around the table already when Porter took his seat, eyes downcast.

I decided it was progress that he was here and eating with us even if he was giving us all the silent treatment and evil stares. We carried on with our meal, sharing stories and laughter.

Before long, Porter had cleaned his plate and stood up abruptly. "I'm done." He left the table without another word and retreated to the sanctuary of his bedroom. I probably should have made him clear his plate, but I didn't want to argue with him while company was here.

Laina finished her meal and asked to be excused. She left the table and

found a spot on the couch where she did something on her phone.

With the kids gone, the atmosphere shifted as the adults were left alone at the table.

"Guys, I don't know what to do," I confessed, running a hand through my hair in frustration. "I want to be there for him, but it's like he's constantly testing me."

Reed leaned back in his chair, swirling the wine in his glass thoughtfully. "Analyn and I haven't faced anything like this yet, but I can only imagine how tough it must be."

"He needs boundaries and structure, consistency and love," Analyn said. "Maybe he hasn't had that. It's up to you to give him that stability he's been missing."

I took a deep breath and looked down at my plate, the weight of responsibility settling on my shoulders once again. I knew they were right, but it didn't make the task any less daunting. How could I be the father Porter needed when I barely knew him?

"Analyn is right, Pierce," Ruby chimed in. "Porter must feel unwanted by his mother, and now he's trying to navigate this new relationship with you, a father he never knew existed."

I bristled at the mention of Jeannie, my hands clenched under the table as I tried to keep my defensiveness in check. "I didn't know about him either, Ruby. If I had, I would've been there for him from the start."

"Of course you would have, Pierce," Ruby reassured me. "I wasn't saying that you'd abandoned him. I'm only saying that you need to see it from Porter's perspective. Kids often think things are about them, even when they're not."

"Take it one day at a time," Analyn said. "No one expects you to be perfect, Pierce. You're going to make mistakes, but that's okay. As long as you're doing your best and giving Porter the love and support he needs, you'll both come out stronger for it."

Her words resonated deep within me, stirring a newfound determination to become the father I knew I could be . . . or at least hoped I could be.

"Maybe take some extra time with him," Bo suggested, taking a sip of his wine. "With Christmas coming up, it could be a great opportunity for you two to bond."

I considered Bo's words. The idea of spending the holiday season with my son was both thrilling and terrifying. I'd have a chance to make up for lost

time and show Porter that I cared for him deeply. But if I failed . . .

"Bo's got a point. The boy will be out of school, so you'll have more time together. Maybe even work out a coaching schedule to help bridge that gap." Reed surprised me with his suggestion to adjust the schedule considering the struggles of the team. Normally, we got three days max at the holidays, not a lot of time to spend with family.

"Or bring him to practice. You can take out a lot of aggression on the ice," Bo added.

I mulled it over as I imagined Porter and me on the ice together, teaching him everything I knew about the game. "Thanks, guys. You've given me a lot to think about."

"We have every confidence in you, Pierce." Reed raised his wine glass in a toast. "To new beginnings and the challenges they bring."

When the evening ended and everyone had left, I let Porter continue to stew in his room as I did the dishes and reflected on my next steps with him. It was going to be a bumpy ride for sure. Even so, I knew I needed to devote myself fully to guiding Porter through his anger.

I thought of Bo and Reed and how they'd taken to fatherhood. Of course, their children weren't sullen. They also had a partner, a woman they loved and who loved them. I would have liked that. It was another reason to end my adolescent craving for Naomi. She wasn't in a place in her life where motherhood was on her radar. Any woman coming into my life now would need to be a mother to Porter.

Now, all I needed to do was find a way to exorcise Naomi from my mind and learn how to parent Porter.

Naomi

My own retching woke me up from an uneasy sleep. My stomach twisted and churned, making me lurch to the side of the bed in search of the trash can. I'd barely managed to pull my hair back before the bile came rushing up.

I groaned, wondering how this could keep happening. The persistent stomach bug had followed me home for Christmas with my family last week, and now back to Las Vegas. I knew it was stress, so it was annoying that a few days of rest hadn't cured me. At first, it was bearable, but after throwing up nearly every day for a few weeks, it started to take a toll on me.

Still, the best way to deal with stress was to forge forward, so I ignored the lingering nausea and crawled out of bed. Immediately, my stomach revolted. I rushed to the bathroom, and after another vomiting session, I knew I needed to reconsider what was ailing me. Maybe it was time to call a doctor. Maybe I had an ulcer or something.

Before I could even grab my phone, it rang loudly, making me wince. Squinting at the screen, I saw that it was Analyn.

"Hey, Naomi. I hope I'm not calling too early, but we've got an emergency. Betts lost her job, and Ruby and I are taking her to lunch to support her. You should come too."

I hesitated since I woke up sick, but after that last session with the porcelain god, my stomach was settling. My friendship with these women was important. Crucial. "Sure. I'll come." I didn't want to let Betts down. I

could worry about my health later.

AT THE RESTAURANT, the four of us sat in a cozy booth, with me sipping ginger ale to make sure my stomach stayed calm. I ordered chicken soup for lunch, hoping it would be gentle enough on my insides.

"Can you believe it?" Betts said. "Our marketing firm was sold, and half the staff got the boot. Just like that. I don't even know if I'll find another good position."

"Of course you will." Analyn rested a hand on Betts's arm. "You're brilliant, Betts. If no one else is smart enough to hire you, I will. Better yet, Naomi's team could use a better marketing person."

I was startled by Analyn's assertion. Then again, the fact that my love life had more attention than the team suggested that Todd could use a new marketing person.

"I won't disagree, but hiring isn't part of my job," I said, wishing I could hire Betts to teach Todd about marketing.

"Maybe you could talk to Todd," Analyn suggested.

I nodded. "Sure." I could hear Todd already. "Why do we need a marketing person? Everything is working great as it is."

I worried Betts might get her hopes up by my agreeing to talk to Todd. They'd been good friends to me, so I owed it to them to be honest. "But I don't think he's looking to hire. He feels all the publicity around Max and me is bringing in fans. It's not true, though."

"What's not true?" Ruby asked, rubbing her baby bump.

"Me and Max. Or me and Big Ed." That thought made me feel sick to my stomach. "The media saw us and made it up. Todd feels it's good publicity, which is why we've ignored it instead of revealing the truth."

"I knew it," Analyn said, surprising me with the force of her words. "Is he making you pretend to be in a relationship?"

I shrugged. "No. He's just not denying it and he's asking me not to deny it." Should I tell them he had a photographer taking pictures of me and Max? "The point is, I don't know that he's looking for someone. But I can talk to him, if you'd like?"

"I don't want to mess things up for you, Naomi," Betts said. "I know you've got enough pressure."

"I don't mind asking," I said. And I didn't.

"Whatever happens, we're all here for you, Betts. You're not alone," Analyn said.

"Thanks, guys. I'm lucky to have friends like you," Betts said.

Ruby let out a little gasp, pulling our attention toward her. She looked down at her swollen stomach and smiled. "This baby is kicking like crazy today."

"Wow, what's that like?" Betts asked, her earlier troubles momentarily forgotten.

Analyn and Ruby exchanged glances before launching into a series of funny and sweet stories about swollen feet, strange cravings, and the wonder of feeling life growing inside them. I wanted to be a mom someday, but some of their stories didn't make pregnancy sound very fun.

"Morning sickness, though." Ruby made a face. "That part wasn't fun at all. I was so glad when that ended."

"That was hard," Analyn agreed, shuddering at the memory. "Waking up every day and getting sick or dry heaving. God. It felt like forever."

My mind raced. Daily, long-term sickness . . . in the morning. Could there be a connection between their experiences and the nausea I'd been experiencing? No, it couldn't be possible . . . could it?

"Naomi, are you okay?" Betts asked, concern etched across her face. "You look pale."

"Uh, yeah, I'm fine." I worked to shake off my thoughts. "Just still not feeling great from this bug, I guess."

Analyn raised a brow. "Are you sure you and Max—"

"Absolutely," I interrupted. *But me and Pierce . . .*

"Maybe you should see a doctor," Ruby suggested. "It's not normal to be sick for so long. You're under so much stress, and maybe it's manifesting physically. You should have it checked."

"I will." And she was right. I'd probably be diagnosed with an ulcer or something.

"You know what was great about pregnancy?" Analyn resumed the discussion. "I didn't miss my period at all."

"Right," Ruby agreed. "You just have to be okay with carrying a bowling ball in your belly for months."

Everyone laughed. I tried to too, but her words struck me like a bolt of lightning. My period. When was the last time I'd had it? The fact that I couldn't remember was a bad sign.

"Naomi?" Betts asked, her brows furrowed with concern. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"Uh, yeah." I tried to keep my voice steady. "Just something . . . something Ruby said made me think about something else."

"Is there anything you want to talk about?" Analyn's expression was concerned as well.

I hesitated, fear gripping me. "No. I just remembered that I needed to take care of something." A part of me wanted to confide in my friends, but I wasn't ready to face the possibility out loud. I couldn't even think it.

I stood up, feeling unsteady on my feet. "I'm sorry, guys. Can we catch up later?"

"Sure thing, Naomi," Betts said with a nod. "Thank you for being here."

I felt selfish for leaving when I was supposed to be supporting Betts. But I needed to leave before my head exploded from the possibility that I could be . . . no, I couldn't.

As soon as I stepped outside, I took a deep breath, trying to calm my racing thoughts. Could I really be pregnant? The idea seemed both terrifying and surreal. I needed to know for sure before I let my mind spiral any further.

I made my way to the nearest drugstore, my hands shaking as I picked up a pregnancy test. The cashier gave me a friendly smile, but all I could manage was a tight-lipped nod in return. My heart pounded in my chest as I hurried back home, my every thought consumed by what the test might reveal.

Once inside my apartment, I wasted no time in following the instructions on the box. The minutes it took for the results to appear felt like an eternity. I paced the bathroom floor, my mind racing with a thousand different scenarios. What would this mean for my life, for my career?

One minute, I told myself I was crazy for taking this test. I was on the pill.

The next minute, I remembered my body joined with Pierce's without protection.

God. I was going to go crazy before the results arrived.

Finally, I couldn't avoid it any longer. I forced myself to look at the test.

Pregnant.

My breath caught, and a wave of emotions crashed over me. I sank to the floor. My mind went blank. I knew I needed to be making plans. Telling Pierce. But this had to be a dream. It couldn't be real.

I pressed my hands over my belly. I was clueless as to how my life was

going to proceed beyond the one fact that I was going to be a mother.

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Pierce

I sat in my office, absently tapping a pen against my desk as frustration gnawed at me. The holidays were over, and I was back at work while Porter was back at school. Christmas hadn't gone as smoothly as I'd hoped. Jeannie had missed several calls, leaving the boy angry despite his claims to the contrary.

All the gifts I'd given him, like the hockey gear he'd seemed so excited about, now lay abandoned in favor of video games that consumed every spare moment of his time. It was as if the more I tried to make things right, the further away he pulled. I'd done everything I could think of to earn his trust and compliance, but it felt like I was just spinning my wheels.

As if on cue, my phone rang with the school's caller ID. With a heavy sigh, I picked it up, dreading the conversation. "Hello?"

"Mr. Jackson? This is Principal Andrews from Porter's school. I'm afraid we've had an incident involving your son."

My heart sank. "What happened?"

"Porter got into a physical altercation with another student. We've had to suspend him for the rest of the day."

"Jesus . . ." I pinched the bridge of my nose, trying to hold back the tide of anger and disappointment. "I apologize for his behavior. I'll come pick him up right away."

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson. We'll see you soon."

As soon as the call ended, I grabbed my coat and headed out of the office

and down to the rink where Bo was working with a few team members. "I've got to go pick up Porter from school. He's been suspended for fighting."

Bo winced. "Damn, man. That sucks."

I shrugged. I was beginning to think that this was going to be my lot in life, at least until Porter was eighteen.

"Will you still come to our party tonight?" Bo asked. "Kids are invited, so you're both welcome."

Dammit. I'd forgotten. "Are you sure you want Porter around?"

"He's your son, Pierce. Of course we do. Besides, the more he's around normal people and kids, the more chance he'll change, right?"

I gave him a tight smile, skeptical of his claim.

I left the rink and headed to the school. When I arrived, I went to the office, checked him out, and loaded him into the car.

The ride home from school was filled with an oppressive silence. I glanced at Porter, trying to read the emotions behind his clenched jaw and narrowed eyes. I should ask him what happened, but he'd likely lie. He knew right from wrong. What good would talking about his behavior do? Which wasn't to say he wouldn't be disciplined. I only wasn't going to try and decipher why he was so angry and acting out. Chances were he didn't know the answer, anyway.

When we arrived home, I decided it was time for a change in approach. "Porter. I'm taking away your new gifts for now." I headed straight to the extra room where all his games and toys were stored and began unhooking the gaming unit to pack it away.

"You can't do that," he yelled as he reached for the game.

"Yes, I can. You'll get them back when you prove you can manage your anger and stop acting like a selfish brat." Was it wrong to call him a selfish brat? Maybe I needed to find a parent education course.

"You hate me. Everyone hates me."

My heart wrenched in my chest. I stopped what I was doing but didn't put the game box down. "I don't hate you, Porter. But I'll be honest. Sometimes, I don't like you. I don't like how you treat me and others. But make no mistake—I love you."

"If you loved me, you wouldn't take my stuff."

"I'm taking your stuff because I love you. Because I need to teach you how to behave." I wondered what the hell Jeannie did to discipline him. I suppose he was with me now because whatever she'd tried didn't work. She'd

sent him away because he wasn't acting right.

"I hate you."

His words were like a knife to the chest, but thinking about our situation and putting myself in his shoes, the pain was even worse. "I want you to know that nothing you do is going to change things. I'm sticking, Porter. I might take your games as punishment, but I won't send you away."

He stared at me, and for a moment I thought I saw emotion besides anger in his eyes. But it was a flash, and then he was glaring again. "Whatever." He stormed out of the room and to the living room, where he picked up the remote.

I followed him and took it from him. "No TV either. Instead, I've got some work for you to do. You need to learn that actions have consequences."

I took the games and remote, locking them in my room. Then I returned to the living room with a bucket full of cleaning supplies. "You can start in the guest bathroom."

He sat on the couch with his arms crossed.

"The longer you sit there, the longer you'll be without your games."

He continued to ignore me.

I shrugged. "Okay. But nothing else happens until you clean the bathroom. No TV. No meals. Nothing." I left the bucket on the coffee table and went to the kitchen. I wanted to grab a beer but instead got water and wondered if I was doing the right thing. How long could he sit there? Days? I couldn't let him go days without eating.

A few moments later, I heard the door to his room slam shut. I considered going and getting him and putting him on the couch but decided to let it go.

I meant what I said. I wasn't going to give up on him, but I needed help. I pulled out my phone and called Jeannie. "Porter's been suspended from school for fighting. I've taken away his gifts and given him chores, but nothing seems to be working. I don't know what else to do."

"Maybe it's because you haven't been there for him, Pierce," she said. "He's had twelve years of anger building up inside, and you think a few weeks of playing Dad are going to fix that?"

She had some fucking nerve. "Gee, Jeannie, maybe if you'd told me about him, we wouldn't be in this situation."

She was quiet for a moment, I hoped reflecting on how fucked up it was that she'd kept him from me . . . kept me from him. "You can't send him back."

"I don't want to send him back," I snapped. In fact, I didn't want to ever send him back. Not that I would stop him from seeing her, but clearly, the way she'd pawned him off on me and was inconsistent with staying in touch with him, she wasn't providing the stability he needed. "I was hoping you'd have some ideas on how to reach him."

"Maybe you need to keep trying. You've only had him for a couple of months."

Jesus, she'd had twelve years and he was like this. How much time would it take? "I just want him to be happy."

She snorted. "Which is it, Pierce? You want him to act right or be happy? If you just want him to act right, punish him. If you want him to be happy, let him do what he wants."

I pulled my phone away and stared at it, shocked by her statement. "He can be both, you know."

"Pierce, if I knew that, he'd still be with me." With that, Jeannie hung up.

"I hate you."

I swung around to find Porter standing in the doorway, his face red with fury.

"Porter—"

"You and my mom never wanted me, anyway."

I walked over to him, but he backed away. "I didn't know about you. But now that I do, now that you're here, I want you. I plan for you to stay with me. But I need help on how to help you."

"Save it," he spat. "I don't need your help, and I don't need you asking my mom about me."

I sighed. "Your behavior at school is concerning, and we need to work together to address it."

"Work together?" He scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest defensively. "Yeah, right. You don't know anything about me, so don't pretend like you care. "

"Of course I care." I was desperate for him to understand. "You're my son, and I want to be there for you. But you have to do your part as well. It doesn't have to be like this, you know?"

A battle raged behind his eyes as he considered my words. For a moment, it looked like he might give in, but then his expression hardened once more. "Whatever."

I cocked my head to the side. "What happened at school?"

Porter hesitated, his gaze flicking to the floor as he began to speak. "This kid, Jake . . . he's been giving me a hard time ever since I got here. Today, he just pushed me too far, so I fought back."

I'd gotten in a fight or two in school, so I knew where he was coming from. Even so, fighting was never the answer, even if it felt good in the moment. "Is fighting him going to solve anything?"

He looked up, his eyes filled with defiance. "He deserved it."

I nodded. "Standing up for yourself is important, but there are better ways to handle things than violence. Was there a teacher around?"

He rolled his eyes. "I'm no tattletale."

Right. "So, what do you think you could have done differently?"

"I don't know." Porter shrugged, looking away again.

"What about your friends?"

"I don't have any. Jake told them I had a disease."

I wanted to punch Jake myself. "Making friends takes time, and it's not always easy. Are there other kids that you can hang out with?"

He shrugged.

I placed my hand on his shoulder, and for the first time, he didn't pull away, giving me a flicker of hope that maybe, just maybe, we could find a way to get along. "I tell you what, you go clean the bathroom—"

He jerked away and glared at me.

"And afterward, we can go out to dinner. Maybe even get ice cream."

He stared at me, and I had no clue what was going on in his head. "I don't know how."

"What?"

"I don't know how to clean the bathroom."

"Oh . . . well . . ." I guess it was another thing Jeannie had failed to instill in him. "We'll do it together, then. I'll show you, and then from now on, it will be your responsibility to keep it clean. I'm going to count on you to follow through. We don't want guests to think we live in a dirty home, do we? So it will be your job to make sure it stays clean."

He eyed me suspiciously but nodded. We went to the bathroom, and I showed him how to use the cleaners safely. He even got a kick out of using the toilet bowl brush to clean the toilet.

Once the bathroom was cleaned, we headed out to eat. As I drove, I felt a mix of hope and apprehension. This was a small step forward, but I had no illusion that Porter and I were past all the problems. I realized that I needed to

make sure that Porter knew that I truly cared about him and that I wasn't going to give up on him, no matter how many obstacles we faced.

"Where do you want to go for dinner?" I glanced over at Porter in the passenger seat. He stared out the window, his expression unreadable.

"Doesn't matter to me. You pick."

"Alright. There's a diner nearby with great burgers and shakes. How does that sound?"

"Sure, whatever." His voice was flat, but at least he wasn't arguing.

As we drove toward the diner, I racked my brain for conversation topics that might help us connect, but short of gaming and fighting, I knew almost nothing about him.

Once in the diner, we ordered burgers and fries with large chocolate milkshakes.

"Porter?" I asked once our waitress left to turn in our orders. "What do you need to be happy here?"

He shrugged. "I dunno. I just want to have fun."

I thought about what Jeannie said about indulging him if I wanted him to be happy. But I knew that wasn't the answer. "Is it fun not getting along with me? Or at school?"

Instantly, his hackles rose and he turned to look away.

"Porter, you have everything you could want right now—video games, your own room, lots of free time, and yet, you're not happy. I get the feeling you don't want to be happy because the only thing stopping you from having fun and being happy is . . . well, yourself. You're so mad all the time that it's like you won't allow yourself to enjoy anything."

His expression shifted from defiant to vulnerable in an instant. I wanted to see it as a victory, another step forward.

He didn't respond and instead, looked down at the table, poking at his spoon.

I wasn't sure what to say beyond that. "Hey, want to see something?" I took a sugar packet and turned my spoon around so the handle was near me. I put the packet on the end. Then I pressed down hard on the spoon, sending the packet flying over to his side of the table.

His lips quirked up, although he fought it. "I want to try."

"Okay." I looked around at the diner, thinking maybe this wasn't the best thing to teach him, especially as he sent a packet nearly flying over my head. I was able to catch it.

“Score.” He thrust his hands up in the air. For a moment, I marveled at the excitement on his face. The glitter in his eyes. The smile. This was what I needed to coax out of him more often.

I taught him table hockey with a spoon and a packet after that, which we played until our food arrived.

After dinner, we headed to the ice cream shop down the street, and I was feeling pretty good as a parent. As we stood in line waiting to order our cones, my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out, frowning when I saw Bo's name on the screen.

"Hey, Bo. What's up?"

"Where are you guys?" he asked, sounding concerned. "Everyone's here, and we were expecting you an hour ago."

I bit back a curse, realizing that I had completely forgotten about Bo and Ruby's party. "Dammit, I'm so sorry. We got caught up . . . we'll be there as soon as we can."

"Alright, see you soon."

"We'll get ice cream, but then we need to go. I promised Bo and Ruby that we'd go to their party."

Immediately, his demeanor changed from okay to sullen. "Whatever."

"They're our friends, and they want to get to know you too."

"Fine," he mumbled, not meeting my gaze.

The drive to Bo and Ruby's house was tense, with only the sound of the radio filling the silence between us. I guess it was true about two steps forward and two steps back.

Naomi

I took a deep breath as I stepped into Bo and Ruby's living room. Anxiety filled me at the prospect of seeing Pierce again. I hadn't told him about the baby growing inside me, and the weight of the secret bore down on me.

"Naomi. You made it." Ruby greeted me with a warm hug.

"Wouldn't miss it for the world." Okay, so I'd tried to come up with a few excuses not to come, but only because I knew Pierce would be there and I wasn't ready to face him yet. I scanned the room, searching for him, but I didn't see him.

I felt relief, but strangely, disappointment too. I was sure that after all these weeks, the attraction would have cooled by now, although my dreams, filled with his strong arms and heated kisses, suggested otherwise. They'd intensified even upon learning I was pregnant.

Analyn joined us, giving me a hug as well. "Come on, let's get you a drink."

"Just seltzer and juice," I said.

"Teetotalling?" Analyn asked.

"I figured Ruby needed a non-alcoholic drinking partner," I said, hoping they didn't guess at my condition. While a part of me wanted to confide in them and get their advice, they were both friends with Pierce, and it wouldn't have been right to put them in a difficult situation between us two.

I settled into the evening, deciding Pierce likely wasn't coming. I'd

overheard Bo expressing concern because Pierce had to pick up Porter from school for fighting. Who was Porter? Did Pierce have a team member still in high school or something?

Not long after, the doorbell rang, and Pierce entered with a boy. Pierce profusely apologized to Ruby and Bo for being late. They said it was okay and got Pierce a drink while the boy ran off.

Pierce's gaze scanned the room, and the moment our eyes met, my stomach flipped. Nope. The attraction was still electric.

"Hey, are you okay?" Ruby asked gently, pulling me out of my thoughts. I gave a small nod, unable to tear my gaze away from Pierce. His eyes lingered on mine for a few seconds before returning to his conversation.

"Naomi, come chat with Betts too." Analyn led me to where Betts and another person were talking. I followed her, but my thoughts were preoccupied by Pierce. How could I tell him he was going to be a father? I couldn't do it here.

"Naomi." His voice was low and husky. "How have you been?"

"Good, thank you." I forced a smile.

"I see we're both invited to the Pacific Coast Tournament in San Diego."

I nodded. God, this was awkward. The weight of my secret was making it impossible for me to relax around him. The truth was, I wanted to sink into him. Feel his arms around me. Have him tell me that having a baby now would work out fine for us and my career. But that was all fictional fairy tales and rainbows.

"Excuse me, Pierce . . . I see someone I need to talk to." As I walked away, I could feel his eyes on me. Did he know I was hiding something?

I went to the kitchen for a respite, as if I could wash away my guilt and yearning.

"Naomi." Ruby entered the kitchen. "Can you help me? We need to make sure Porter doesn't try to mash up the cake he's been threatening to destroy."

"Sure." I was glad for the diversion. "Who's Porter?"

Ruby lowered her voice, her expression turning serious. "Pierce recently found out he has a son, one he's never met."

It took a minute for the words to sink in. "What?" Good God, how many unplanned pregnancies was Pierce responsible for?

She glanced out to the living area. "I feel for the guy. It's not easy missing so many years of your child's life. I didn't tell Bo about his daughter for a decade, and I regret it every day."

I wasn't sure what to say to that since guilt at my own secret washed over me.

"But Porter, he's a handful, and poor Pierce is struggling with him. It doesn't sound like the mother is much help either."

"That's too bad." I plastered on a smile and nodded at Ruby. "Let's save that cake, then."

Ruby pulled out the cake, and we brought it out to the party. But all the while, my mind was going crazy with thoughts. How would Pierce react to the news of another unplanned child? Would he welcome our baby with open arms or turn away, unable to handle the responsibility? With his focus on his son, would he have the time to give our child?

"Earth to Naomi." Ruby's voice snapped me back to reality.

"Oh, sorry." I helped her cut pieces of the cake and serve them. Pierce was the last to step up to the table. By then, everyone, including Ruby, had dispersed.

"Hey." He almost seemed nervous.

"Hey." I tried to sound casual despite the butterflies in my stomach. I couldn't look at him and not want to drown in his crystal blue eyes or be held in his strong arms. I wanted him more than ever.

"Great party, huh?"

"Definitely." Small talk was excruciating. So was my effort to not reach out and touch him. "Ruby and Bo really know how to throw a bash." I was withering under the guilt and yearning. "I need to grab another drink. Excuse me."

"Sure thing." The disappointment filled his features, and I hated myself for always doing things that I was sure he felt as rejection.

I hurried over to the punch bowl, and my hand shook as I poured the fruity concoction into my cup.

Just then, a young boy, Porter, came barreling over, bumping my arm and causing me to spill punch all over the table.

"Oops." Porter laughed, clearly amused by my misfortune.

"Here." I grabbed a stack of napkins and handed them to him. "Clean this up."

"Me?" He looked shocked but also defiant, reminding me of my younger brothers when they'd been caught doing something they shouldn't. "Why should I?"

"Because you caused the mess."

“It was your drink.”

“Because you bumped me.” I stared down at him, hoping he could see that I wasn’t asking and there was no room for argument.

He looked around, and I got the feeling he was going to bolt. I shifted, blocking his escape, and raised an expectant eyebrow.

Porter frowned but begrudgingly took the napkins, muttering under his breath as he began to mop up the spilled punch. I wondered if he was like this all the time, and if so, Pierce had his hands full. Too full to make room for another child?

"I'll help you if you ask me nicely." I didn't want him to think that I was being too harsh.

He glared at me. "Why am I even cleaning this up if you're willing to do it?"

"Because it's not my responsibility. But I'm willing to help because accidents happen. We just need to take care of them."

Porter stared at me for a moment. "I don't need any help." He finished cleaning up the spilled punch and shoved the stack of wet napkins into my hands before storming off.

I sighed, watching him weave through the crowd of party guests. Turning to toss the napkins in the trash, I caught sight of Pierce standing in the doorway, his blue eyes trained on me. A flurry of emotions washed over me—guilt, desire, and a desperate longing for things to be different. I forced myself to meet his gaze.

“I saw what happened with Porter. Thanks for handling that.”

"Of course."

Pierce nodded and hesitated before asking, "How did you get him to listen to you?"

“I'm used to dealing with rambunctious kids. My brothers were a handful growing up.”

“And they listened?”

“With boundaries and love, yes.”

His eyes searched mine, as if he was trying to find something. Was it about Porter and dealing with him, or me? God, how I wanted it to be me. Except, no. There was too much against us. And now, with Porter, how was he going to react to the news of another child? I looked away, feeling more lost than ever.

"Naomi." Pierce's voice was hesitant. "I could use some help with

Porter."

I looked at him again, surprised by the vulnerability I saw in his blue eyes.

"What do you need help with?"

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I just . . . I don't know how to connect with him. Sometimes, I feel like I make headway, and then I realize I haven't. He's so angry all the time, and I can't seem to break through. You seem to have a way with kids."

"Porter needs someone who believes in him," I explained. "Someone who's willing to be patient and support him while also setting boundaries. You're his father, Pierce. You have the power to make a difference in his life."

Pierce's gaze held mine, the intensity of it stealing my breath. "I feel like I'm trying that, but without luck."

"It takes time. And you have to trust yourself, too. You have it in you. Everyone knows how you helped Bo . . . or at least kept him alive."

His lips quirked up, and the memory of his kisses flashed in my mind. God, I was a mess. Here the guy was asking for help with his son, and I was thinking of all the ways I wanted to devour his body.

"Thank you. I suppose Bo was a handful. I appreciate your faith in me."

As he spoke, my resolve began to crumble. How could I continue keeping this secret from him? The man standing before me was desperate to be a good father, and yet I was denying him the chance to be that for our child. My heart screamed at me to tell him about the baby.

But I didn't.

Pierce

I never expected to see Naomi at Bo's and Ruby's party. Bo and Reed had told me that Ruby and Analyn had befriended her, so maybe I should have considered she'd be there.

My heart skipped a beat when I caught sight of her across the room. She looked stunning in a simple dress that accentuated her athletic figure. A figure I hadn't spent nearly enough time exploring, and yet, I knew I never would again. I should have taken more time last time. But she had a way of making everything but need and desire disappear.

"How long do we have to be here?" Porter whined.

"Just a little bit."

"We have cake," Bo said as he came to greet us. "We have a gaming system set up in the other room if you want, Porter."

He shrugged. "I guess I could do that." He ran off, and I hoped he'd be nice to Laina this time. When I heard Laina say, "You can't smash the cake, Porter," I knew I'd need to make this visit short.

I scanned the room, finding Naomi again. What would she think about the fact that I had a son from a one-night stand twelve years ago? The way she wanted nothing to do with me now made me believe that she wouldn't care. Besides, considering the two hookups I'd had with her, she probably wouldn't be surprised.

It was clear to me that she was ignoring me, and except for a brief hello, I let her. I might be a fool for continuing to yearn for her, but I wasn't stupid. I

wasn't going to push for something she clearly didn't want. So I turned my focus on my friends, with an eye on Porter to make sure he was behaving.

When Porter accidentally knocked over Naomi's drink, spilling it, I watched with admiration as she flawlessly had him clean it up. Porter wasn't happy about it, but he obeyed with minimal fuss.

As I watched her interact with my son, I felt a pang of jealousy. Why could she connect with him, but I couldn't? It appeared she understood him, whereas I was clueless. What was her secret? How did she know how to handle kids so well? I had to know. I'd told myself I'd leave her alone, but I couldn't now. Not if she could give me tips or insight on raising Porter.

When I asked her about it, she said similar things that my friends had, but I clearly didn't know how to conceptualize it or turn it into action. I needed a tutor. A mentor.

"It takes time. And you have to trust yourself, too. You have it in you. Everyone knows how you helped Bo . . . or at least kept him alive."

I was surprised at how much her words touched me. She wasn't wrong. There was a time that I think I was the only one who tried to look out for Bo and guide him away from his reckless lifestyle. In the end, Ruby was the one who settled him down and made him happy. But I suppose I did keep him alive. I drove him to the hospital enough times. And somehow, Naomi knew that.

"Thank you. I suppose Bo was a handful. I appreciate your faith in me."

"Of course."

"The thing is, Naomi, I cared for Bo, but I wasn't responsible for him. Porter is a kid, and I'm wholly responsible for him and I'm floundering. I need someone to show me the ropes." I was an asshole for using this situation to get close to her. Or maybe I was just pathetic. "Maybe you could come to dinner and give me some pointers on the fly? Like, be my coach?" I attempted a lighthearted grin. Maybe charm would convince her.

When she tensed, I knew I'd pushed too much. "You don't need a coach, Pierce. You just need to persevere. In time, Porter will come around."

I smiled and nodded, even though on the inside her rejection hurt.

She looked around, and I knew she was looking for an exit. Jesus fuck, she wanted to get away from me. I really was pathetic. Especially since I'd do just about anything to keep her talking with me.

"Sorry, but I've got to head out," she said hurriedly, avoiding my gaze. "I hope everything works out with you and Porter." She couldn't get to the door

fast enough.

I couldn't tear my eyes away as Naomi disappeared, and I chided myself for pushing her and once again setting up a situation in which she could reject me.

"Here," Reed said, appearing at my side and thrusting a beer into my hand. "You look like you could use one."

"Thanks," I muttered. I took a swig of the cold brew, wishing it could wash away my humiliation.

"Did something happen with Porter?" His gaze followed mine to the door Naomi had just exited through.

"Something like that." I didn't want to divulge the whole truth that I was lusting over a competitor's coach who was nearly twenty years younger than me. Reed had been against my interest in Naomi from the beginning, and I didn't want to hear another lecture.

"Or maybe it's Naomi you're brooding over." Reed's comment proved I wasn't doing a good job hiding my attraction to her. "I've seen the way you look at her, Pierce. You're interested in her."

I grumbled under my breath, feeling exposed by his observation. "I don't want to be, but I can't exactly control how I feel."

"True. But you can control what you do about those feelings." He took a sip of his beer. "Besides, you've got your hands full with Porter. Maybe now's not the time to get involved with someone new."

I was surprised he wasn't cautioning me against seeing her for professional reasons as he had before. "Maybe not." But fucking hell, I wanted Naomi in my life, even if it made things more complicated. But she'd made her position clear. She didn't want me.

"Focus on your son. If things are meant to work out with Naomi, they eventually will."

I looked at him over my beer bottle as I took a sip. "Eventually? You're the one who was against it."

He shrugged. "I won't deny I see issues, but the heart wants what it wants, right? I learned that with Analyn. You were there as I went through it."

I had been. And I'd cautioned him away from Analyn as he had done with Naomi and me. But Analyn worked for Reed, so I'd seen a potential lawsuit if things hadn't worked out. With Naomi and me, there could be bad press or pissed off fans, which wasn't quite as serious unless, of course, fans stopped

coming to games.

"I remember."

Reed took a swig of his beer, his eyes regarding me seriously. "Pierce, do you really want to pursue a relationship with Naomi? If it's just lust, man, keep your distance. Or find someone else." He glanced toward Porter, who was engaged in a cut-throat video game. "You've got your hands full with him."

I stared into the amber liquid in my bottle, wishing I could find an easy answer to all my problems. "I know. But I can't help but think there could be something more. It's not just lust."

"Then I'll support you, buddy." Reed put his hand on my shoulder. "Just be careful. Don't let this get in the way of your responsibilities to Porter or the team."

I gave him a humorless laugh. "What I feel doesn't matter. She's made it clear she's not into me. Why should she be? I'm ancient compared to her."

"Does the age difference bother her?" Reed asked, raising an eyebrow.

"I don't know for sure." It didn't bother her enough to not fuck me. "Her excuse was that we're rivals."

"What about all the media about her and Max? The last thing you want to be in, Pierce, is a love triangle."

I remembered when Reed had thought Analyn and Bo were dating. It nearly made his head explode. That was what thinking about Naomi with someone else did to me.

"You know the media. They're wrong as much as they're right."

"You know, it sounds like she didn't say she didn't like you. She just came up with an excuse not to see you."

I gave him a look. "Same difference."

"Same result, maybe, but not the same difference. Not being with you because of her career is different from not liking you."

"As you said, the result is the same."

"You know, Pierce, you and I have been a part of professional hockey for a long, long time. The fans give us some leeway when we fuck up. But Naomi, she's got to prove herself. If her fans learned about you two, they could definitely see it as a conflict of interest."

I nodded. "Our fans might not like it either."

"Yeah, well, they like Bo, so we've got that going for us. But listen, what I learned when I fell for Analyn is that when you find love, you should grab

onto it with both hands. The rest of the stuff doesn't matter."

I narrowed my eyes at him. "You just told me to forget her and focus on Porter."

"I did if she's just a momentary attraction. If it's more, then you should pursue it."

I wanted to grab his words like a lifeline. I wanted to believe that with the same time and patience I needed with Porter, I could win Naomi. But I couldn't ignore the obstacles that stood in our way.

"Thanks. I'll keep that in mind."

"Good." He gave me another supportive pat on the shoulder.

Deciding I'd had enough drama for one night, I gathered up Porter and we headed home. For once, Porter prattled on and on about a game he'd played with Laina.

Reed's advice confused me. On the one hand, he said to focus on Porter and forget Naomi. But then he said if I truly felt something for her, I needed to pursue her. Did I feel something? Yes. It was more than lust, but I couldn't know if it was love. I just knew my mind, my soul, was continuously drawn to her.

When we got home, Porter got ready for bed with minimal effort. Once he was asleep, I went to the kitchen and poured myself a glass of whisky and took it onto the balcony. The sky was clear, and the moon was like a giant golf ball in the sky. Despite knowing I needed to let Naomi go, I couldn't not think about how beautiful she was, the way she'd looked up at me with those captivating hazel eyes, and how effortlessly she'd handled Porter. My heart ached, wishing she wasn't so adamant that we couldn't work.

I sighed. I was going to make myself crazy constantly yearning when there was no hope. What there was hope for was bonding with Porter. I needed to find common ground with him and create opportunities for connection.

Video games. That was the answer. I needed to enter his world and learn to understand him there, and video games would be my way in.

I sipped my whisky, feeling a renewed sense of determination. I would be the best father I could be to Porter. And Naomi . . . well, I wished I could forget her. I knew I couldn't. The best I could manage was to put my thoughts of her aside for now. Maybe, just maybe, one day, Naomi would see me as more than just an older man coaching a rival team.

I downed my drink and headed inside to the extra bedroom. I turned on

Porter's gaming system, determined to learn how to play.

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Naomi

The team office was unusually quiet. I tried to concentrate on the stats of our opposing team this week, but my mind kept drifting back to the party the other night. The way Pierce had looked at me, the intensity of his blue eyes as he extended the invitation to dinner, haunted my every thought. He just wanted help with Porter, so why did I read more into it? The only reason I said “no” was because I knew I couldn’t resist him if he still wanted more. My life was so complicated right now, and I couldn’t afford to go where my heart was wanting to lead me. Yes, I was pregnant with his child, but parenthood wasn’t the key to a lasting relationship. Even Pierce’s saying he wanted to pursue this attraction didn’t mean anything other than he wanted to exhaust this burning attraction. No. I couldn’t get caught up in Pierce. My focus needed to be on the team and my baby.

As if on cue, the alarm on my watch went off, reminding me that it was time to leave for my doctor's appointment to have an ultrasound. I quickly gathered my things and headed out.

The doctor's office was warm and inviting. Several very pregnant women sat discussing pregnancy issues, such as sciatica and cravings. I wondered if that was standard or if they were special. I wouldn’t mind cravings unless they were gross. But I definitely didn’t want sciatica.

I was invited back, where a nurse took my blood pressure and temperature. She explained the procedure to me and then left me to wait for the doctor. As I lay on the examination table, my heart raced with

anticipation and fear. Except for the nausea, I didn't feel different, so I think a part of me didn't believe I could really have a baby growing inside me. An ultrasound would reveal the truth, and I wasn't sure I was ready to face the reality of my situation.

The doctor walked in, introducing himself as Dr. Lyman. He smiled and had me lift my shirt as he squeezed gel on my belly. Was it rounder?

"Based on your report of your last period, I'm thinking you're about ten weeks, but we'll take measurements to make sure."

"Okay."

He rubbed the wand over my belly, every now and then stopping, studying the screen, and then moving the wand again. Was that normal? Was something wrong? Maybe he couldn't find a baby. Maybe I wasn't pregnant after all. How strange that the idea of that made me sad. The wand moved over my skin, and I held my breath, waiting for him to tell me what he saw.

"Interesting," he murmured, his brow furrowed as he studied the screen. For a moment, he went quiet, moving the wand around with a precision that made me increasingly nervous.

"Is something wrong?" I glanced at the screen, trying to make sense of the images.

He moved the wand and then typed in something. He did that a couple of times. Finally, he met my gaze. "Ms. Withers, you're not just having one baby."

My heart stopped. Twins? Was I having twins? "What do you mean?"

"You're having three."

I stared at him, unable to comprehend.

"Triplets," he repeated, pointing to the screen. "Here's one. Two. Three."

I looked at the screen but didn't see any babies. "What?"

"Everything looks fine, but we'll want to watch carefully. Triplets aren't that common."

"I have triplet brothers," I said absently because I still couldn't process what he was saying.

"Multiples can run in families."

My mind raced as I tried to process what he said. Not just one baby, but three? How was I going to juggle coaching a hockey team and raising triplets on my own? I couldn't. Could I?

"Ms. Withers, your pregnancy is considered high-risk," Dr. Lyman continued. "You'll need to take things easy, avoid stress, and make some

adjustments to your lifestyle or you could risk complications. There's no partner listed. Are you alone?"

I swallowed hard. "I'm single."

"And the father?"

God. Pierce. What was he going to think? He was going from one child to four. "I haven't told him, but I will."

"Will he help you?" The doctor was professional, but I could hear in his tone how important it would be for me to have help.

I nodded. I felt certain Pierce would help, although I didn't know how.

"What do you mean by complications?" My hands instinctively cradled my belly. The thought of anything happening to my unborn children terrified me.

He wiped the gel off my belly. "Preterm labor, gestational diabetes, preeclampsia . . . These are just a few of the risks associated with multiple pregnancies. We'll also want to monitor their growth. Sometimes, one or more babies' weight can be impacted as it's a tight space. We'll create a plan that ensures the best possible outcome for both you and your babies."

"Thank you, Doctor." I pulled myself together enough to sit up on the examination table. "I understand. I'll do whatever it takes to keep my babies safe."

"I'll print you a picture of them. Next time, we should be able to see what you have in there."

"What I have?" Weren't they babies?

He smiled. "Boys or girls or both. We'll schedule your next appointment before you leave today. And remember, if you have any questions or concerns, don't hesitate to call."

As I walked out of the doctor's office, the world was both spinning and standing still. Triplets. Three tiny lives growing inside me. It seemed impossible. Incredible.

What would this mean for my career in hockey? I had worked so hard to break through barriers and prove myself as a female coach, determined to pave the way for others like me. But the thought of raising three infants alone while maintaining the grueling schedule that came with coaching and traveling . . . I couldn't imagine it was possible.

I tried to cling to a shred of hope that I could do it all, but deep down, I knew it would be nearly impossible. My dreams were crumbling around me, replaced by the daunting reality of single motherhood. If I didn't coach, what

would I do? What job was conducive to being a single mom of triplets? Was I even qualified to do it, whatever it was?

When I arrived home, I was still in shock, but my brain was starting to function. The doctor said I'd need help. I couldn't rely on Pierce. Not that I didn't think he wouldn't be involved, but I had no clue what that involvement would be. That left one other person.

I picked up my phone and called my mom. God. What was she going to think?

"Mom, would you ever consider coming to Las Vegas?" I blurted when she picked up the phone.

"Las Vegas? Oh, honey, you know I could never leave our home. Your father and I built it with our own hands and raised you kids here. It's got too many memories," she replied gently. I knew that. It wasn't the first time she'd said it. "Is something wrong? You know you can come home any time you want, right?"

I should tell her about the babies. After all, she'd given birth to triplets. What better person to guide me? But once I told her, she'd be on me constantly to come home. My career might be over after this season, but I was going to do whatever it took to finish the season.

My mind circled back to Pierce. They were his kids too. If I ever got the courage to tell him, I was sure he'd help somehow.

"Alright, Mom. I understand. Just thought I'd ask."

"Is everything okay, sweetheart?" she asked again, concern growing in her voice.

"Everything's fine, Mom. I'll talk to you later." I hung up before my voice betrayed me.

Pierce. Maybe we could pool our resources and hire a nanny together. But even as the thought crossed my mind, it didn't sit well with me. I didn't want to pawn my children off to someone else. They were my responsibility, and I wanted to be there for them.

I tried to imagine telling Pierce that he was going to be a father of triplets. His head might explode. He was having a hard enough time trying to balance coaching and being a father to Porter.

I rubbed my belly. One step at a time. First, I'd do everything I could to take care of my babies and get through the season. If this was it coaching-wise for me, I was going to go out with a winning season.

The other thing I needed to do was to keep the news of my pregnancy

from the media. They'd have a field day if they found out, making things even worse for me in the press. I could see it now, a headline questioning whether Max or Ed was the father. And when the truth came out that it was yet another man, I'd be branded a hussy.

No, I couldn't let that happen. My life wasn't just about me anymore. It was about protecting my babies, too. I would find a way to navigate through the chaos of my life, one step at a time.

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Pierce

It was a fucking miracle that I was in San Diego, California, at the Pacific Coast Tournament. Somehow, after losing to Naomi and a few others, we'd pulled ourselves together and were now here. We had only one game, against Naomi, of all people. I hadn't seen her since Bo's party nearly two weeks ago. Well, I hadn't seen her in person. She'd starred in quite a few NSFW dreams.

The moment I stepped into the luxurious hotel lobby with Porter by my side, a wave of excitement washed over me. I liked being on the road. I just hoped that now with Porter in tow, I could make this single-father thing work. I considered getting a sitter, but who knew what Porter might put her through? So now, he was here with me, and I hoped it would be a time for us to connect.

"Do I get my own room?" Porter asked as I stepped up to the reception desk.

"No. But you get your own bed." I watched him, wondering if he'd make a stink about that, but his eyes were taking in the hotel. He acted like he'd never been in one before.

I pulled out my wallet to provide identification. As I glanced up, a familiar figure stepping up to the reception person next to mine caught my eye.

"Naomi."

She startled when she saw me, but then smiled. "Pierce."

Goddammit. Why did she have to be so beautiful? My heart was hammering in my chest, and my fingers itched to touch her long hair. To be safe, I put one hand in my pocket and used the other to set my ID on the counter.

“You’re in early too.”

She nodded. “It was the only direct flight from Las Vegas.”

“Todd doesn’t charter for you?” Considering how well the team was doing, the least he could do was charter a plane for them.

“Not this year, but it’s definitely going into my contract next year.” She turned away as she said the last words. I wondered if that meant something. Was her job on the line?

“Absolutely, and if he doesn’t want you, I do . . . ah . . . I mean, as a coach.” *Jesus fuck, Jackson.*

Her breath hitched, but she quickly recovered. “I think you have enough with you and Bo. Besides, my team is better.”

I laughed as the tightness in my chest loosened. She didn’t think anything of my Freudian slip. “We’ll see.”

“You’ll see,” she tossed back. God, was it any wonder this woman captivated me? She looked over at Porter. “Hello, Porter.”

“Hey.”

“Are you helping your dad coach?”

“Nah.”

I put my arm on his shoulder, glad that he didn’t shrug it off. “He’s our mascot.”

“Will you be dressing like a Buckaroo?”

Porter made a face, and I laughed. The reception person handed me a key card. As much as I’d have liked to have stayed and talked with Naomi, it was time to go or it would be obvious that I had the hots for her. “Best of luck to you and your team.”

“Thanks, Pierce. You too.” She flashed me a smile. A real one. It made my heart sing.

“Do you like her?” Porter asked as I guided him to the elevator.

“As much as you can like a rival team coach,” I said.

“No, I mean like her, like her. Like a girlfriend.”

We stepped into the elevator, giving me time to come up with an answer. “Why would you ask that?”

He shrugged. “She’s pretty.”

Inwardly, I laughed as I poked the button to our floor. My son had inherited my taste in women.

"So, do you? You smile funny when you talk to her."

God, even my kid could notice. "I think she's a nice person, Porter. That's it. Friends." I hoped I was able to hide the truth. And how much longer was it going to be like this? When would I stop thinking about her and wanting her?

We arrived on our floor, exiting the elevator and walking to our room.

"Can I do the key?" Porter asked.

"Sure. You just press it against this part over the handle." I handed him the card, but I muffed the transfer and it fell to the floor.

As he picked it up, Naomi appeared at the door next door.

"Hey, again," she greeted us casually.

"Are you next door?" Porter asked.

"I am. It looks like we're neighbors."

"Seems that way." I didn't know what to think. A part of me liked the idea of her next door. But then I remembered I couldn't act on it. I couldn't sneak in to see her, to kiss her, to touch her until she was screaming my name. Knowing that, having her next door was torture.

"I guess I'll see you later at the press conference," she said as she opened her door.

"I'll be there with bells on."

Porter finally got our door unlocked. "What does that mean?"

I followed him in. "It means I'll show up with enthusiasm."

"I think you like her," Porter said. Fortunately, I didn't have to respond as the room took his attention away from me and Naomi. "Cool." He darted from one corner to the other, exploring every nook and cranny while I watched him. It was something to see the world through his eyes, especially something he'd never seen before. It made me want to give him more experiences.

"What's in here?" He'd already opened the closet and bathroom doors. "Why's there another door without a handle?"

I walked over to where he stood, examining the adjoining door that connected our room with Naomi's. "That door leads to the next room." I hoped my voice didn't betray my own unease at the thought of being so close to her. "If the people in both rooms wanted to share a bigger space, they can open their doors."

"So we could share with Coach Naomi?" Porter asked.

"Technically, yes. But they can also stay closed when you're not sharing."

Porter shrugged and then was exploring the room again, poking the remote buttons, opening the drawers, and jumping on the bed.

I took a moment to breathe as I worked to grapple with the task of bonding with my son while also having to face off against the woman I longed for but couldn't have.

"Hey, what do you say we order some room service?" I suggested, eager to take advantage of the hotel's amenities to make this trip memorable for Porter.

Porter's eyes widened with excitement. "Like a restaurant but they bring it to our room?"

I nodded.

"Can I order?"

"Of course." I handed him the menu and watched as he eagerly scanned the options.

"I want a hamburger and onion rings. Mom says French fries are better because onions make your mouth stink. But I like onion rings."

"I do too. We'll order two servings." After we placed our order, I thought I'd remind him how things were going to work. "Tonight, after we eat, there will be a little press conference."

"Coach Naomi will be there."

I nodded. "Yes. Tomorrow, we play."

"And the next day, we can go to the special zoo?"

"Yes." It had taken hours of shoot 'em up games, but finally, I was able to learn that along with gaming, Porter liked animals. Big cats especially, but other wild animals as well. When I learned we were invited to play in San Diego, I knew I needed to bring Porter to the zoo here. So while my team would fly home the day after tomorrow, Porter and I would hang out for an extra day. I wondered if Naomi would join us. Ugh . . . no. *Stop thinking about her.*

When our meal arrived, we sat at the table overlooking San Diego. I wished they'd built the ice arena closer to the beach. It would have been nice to see the water. Maybe I'd still take Porter to the beach.

"Did you play in tournaments when you played hockey?"

Porter's question caught me off guard. He rarely asked questions about

me personally. The last one was why I'd been with his mom. At least this one I could answer honestly. "I did."

"Were you good?"

"I did alright. I wasn't as good as Bo was."

"I bet you could beat Coach Naomi." He dunked his onion ring into his ketchup.

I had to tread carefully. I didn't want Porter to have an idea that men were better at things simply because they were men. "Back then, maybe. But now, I'm not so sure. Your old man is old now. And Naomi was an outstanding player when she played."

He studied me over the soda straw. "I think you like her."

"I admire all great hockey players." I shoved my burger in my mouth, hoping to hide any evidence that he was right.

"How come you're not married? If you're old, you should be married."

"Not all people get married." I didn't ask about Jeannie because Porter had let me know that he'd already had two step-dads. Both ex-hockey players. One, I knew well back in the day.

"Don't you like girls?"

I took a bite of an onion ring as I tried to figure out how I could coax this conversation away from what I worried might be coming—a discussion of the birds and bees.

"I like women. But I also like my job. And I also like being your dad."

His eyes rounded like he didn't expect that. "You do?"

"I do. A lot." God, I wanted to reach over and hug him, but while we'd made progress, I didn't think we were at the hugging stage.

He looked down. "You're a pretty good dad."

My heart leapt in my chest. He'd yet to call me Dad. That was the closest to it. "Thank you."

THAT EVENING, dressed in our best, I took Porter downstairs to the press conference. As we entered the bustling room, I found Bo standing in the back.

"You know, you could do this," I said to him.

He shook his head and grinned. "No one goes up against Coach Withers like you do. If I didn't know any better, I'd think . . ."

The memory of Bo calling me out for watching Naomi when we'd snuck

over to check out her coaching and the team surfaced. He'd told me I was too old for her. If I were a bragging sort of man, I might tell him I wasn't too old to get it up and fuck her hard.

"Can you watch Porter for me while I do this?"

"Yep. Good luck."

I turned to Porter. "I'll be just up there." I pointed to the front of the room where a table with microphones was set up. "If you need anything, just let Bo know."

"Kay."

With one last glance at my son, I stepped up to face the reporters and Naomi. *Don't let them see you sweat*, I chanted in my head. And I didn't mean sweat from nerves for the game. I meant nerves at being around Naomi and not being able to hide how much I wanted her.

My eyes locked onto Naomi's as she entered from the other side. Good Christ, she looked fantastic. Like the winning coach she was.

"Good evening, Pierce," she said, her hazel eyes shimmering with amusement. She was ready to bring it on.

I rolled my shoulders, ready to go toe-to-toe with her. We shook hands and then sat, and then we were bombarded with questions about our strategies, our past experiences, and how we planned to handle the competition.

When she spoke, I'd look her way, because that was polite, right? But it was hard to focus on the next question because I was captivated by her hockey smarts and beauty. Hockey and grace weren't words often used together, but Naomi had both.

"Coach Jackson," one reporter called. "How do you plan to counter Coach Withers's aggressive offensive tactics?"

I realized that they were finally calling her Coach Withers and not Naomi as they had in the beginning.

"By playing smarter, not harder," I replied without missing a beat. "We'll be focusing on our defense and making sure we capitalize on any openings they leave us." There wouldn't be many now that Big Ed was fully on board with Naomi's coaching. At least that's what it seemed like.

"And what about you, Coach Withers?" another reporter chimed in. "What's your secret weapon against Coach Jackson's team?"

Naomi's lips curled into a sly grin. "Well, if I told you, it wouldn't be a secret anymore, would it? But I promise you this, we won't be easy on them."

Her playful remark sent a ripple of laughter through the room, and I couldn't help but laugh along with her. The tension between us was palpable, and it felt like everyone in the room could sense it, too. I needed to cut the cord on it, but I couldn't. I was well and truly fucked when it came to her.

"Is there anything else you'd like to add, Coach Jackson?" the reporter asked, turning back to me.

"Only that I look forward to seeing what Coach Withers has up her sleeve," I replied, my voice laced with amusement. "I have no doubt it'll be an exciting game."

When the press conference came to a close, I shook hands with her, and it was quite possible that I held on too long.

Then I made my way back to Porter with Bo, who had an arched brow and a smug expression on his face.

"How is it that every time you and her are together, things get really warm?" he said.

I made a face and nodded toward Porter. I didn't need my son overhearing any sexual innuendo Bo was going to accuse me of.

"I'm just saying that I wasn't sure if we were still talking about hockey."

"How about some ice cream?" I said to Porter.

"Yeah."

I led him out of the room while Bo was behind us. For a moment, I wondered if Reed had told him about me and Naomi. No. He wouldn't.

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't say things like that around Porter," I murmured to him.

"Then I'll save them for the game." He grinned. "I gotta go call Ruby and Laina."

As I led Porter to the restaurant in the hotel, I realized that no matter what I did, Naomi's presence ensnared me. It was frustrating because it was a reminder of what I longed for but could not have.

After ice cream, Porter and I returned to our room and got ready for bed. He was out like a light in the other bed, but I lay wide awake, unable to rid my mind of the beautiful, untouchable woman who had captured my attention.

Naomi

The hockey rink echoed with the sounds of skates slicing through the ice, sticks clashing, and bodies colliding as the players fought for control of the puck. The fans were loud, their thunderous cheers and jeers filling the space.

From my spot, I watched my team execute the play we'd practiced countless times in preparation for this game. Skating up the wing, Max swiftly passed the puck to Big Ed, who veered toward the net in a power move that left Pierce's team scrambling to defend.

"Yes!" Finally, they were all in sync on the ice.

This was the third time our teams had faced off. Each of us had one win under our belts. Although not official, I saw this game as a tie-breaker and the game that could prove my worth as a coach. If I could lead my team to victory tonight, maybe it would finally silence the doubters and critics who questioned my place in this male-dominated world. Maybe the media would stop focusing on rumors about my nonexistent relationship with Max and start treating me like the professional coach I was.

But Pierce's team wasn't going to hand the win over to us. They were fighting as hard as we were, which was why we were currently tied. I glanced over to Pierce across the ice. He was huddled close to Bo, clearly working on a strategy. A part of me couldn't help but admire the intensity and passion he brought to his coaching. His players looked up to him in a way mine didn't. He exuded a caring about them that went beyond the game. I'd heard stories

about how hard he'd worked to rein in Bo during Bo's crazy stage.

The idea that Pierce was like a father-figure to his players reminded me of my pregnancy, followed by a feeling of guilt that I still hadn't told him. I thought about telling him during this trip, but with Porter by his side, it didn't feel like the right time.

Big Ed took the shot, but the goalie blocked it.

"Alright, regroup. Keep the pressure on them," I called out. The team was giving it their all. While they may not love having a female coach, they loved winning, and it showed in their playing.

Pierce's team took control of the puck but only made it halfway across the ice before Big Ed muscled his way in and took the puck. With a flick of his stick, he sent it over to Max who flew down the ice and shot the goal. The light went off and the buzzer sounded. We'd scored.

"Yes!" I jumped up as did the rest of the team. The stands roared with excitement. I checked the clock. Only a minute and a half left. It was enough for Pierce's team to tie us. Hell, it was enough time to win. But my team did their jobs, and as the final seconds of the game ticked down, they didn't let Pierce's team get close to scoring. The buzzer rang, signaling the end of the game, and a wave of euphoria washed over me. We'd done it. We'd won.

I glanced across the ice to Pierce again. He flashed me a smile and winked. He'd just lost, and yet he seemed to be happy for me. The gesture filled my heart with warmth . . . and an ache. How were all the complications in my life going to play out?

We returned to the locker room, and I overheard several on the team also noting that we had more wins over the Buckaroos.

"Pierce Jackson has nothing on our coach," Max said.

Even Big Ed seemed joyful.

I left them to get cleaned up, heading back out into the hall. As the locker room door swung open, a swarm of reporters and their flashing cameras descended upon me. The adrenaline from our victory still coursed through my veins, and I hoped the game would be the focus of their questions.

"Coach Withers, that's twice in a row you've beaten your rivals in Nevada. How does it feel to lead your team to victory over Coach Jackson and Coach Tyler, both legends in hockey?" one reporter asked.

"Amazing. They played their hearts out tonight and proved they have what it takes to be champions."

The questions continued, and much to my relief, they focused on the

game and my coaching instead of prying into my personal life. When the interviews finally concluded, I re-entered the locker room to address my team one last time.

"Great job out there, guys. You've earned this victory. Now go enjoy yourselves, within reason. You deserve it."

"Hell yeah," several of them yelled out.

When we returned to the hotel, Max and a few others invited me to join them in the bar to celebrate.

"Thanks, but I'm exhausted." The fatigue from the pregnancy was difficult to ward off. I did my best when I needed to coach, but I knew for my babies' sake, I needed to rest whenever possible. "Have fun, and don't stay out too late."

I boarded the elevator and hit the button for my floor. Just as the doors began to close, Pierce slipped inside, his son Porter leaning against him with drooping eyelids. My heart skipped a beat, seeing Pierce up close again after our playful exchange during the game.

"Congratulations, Naomi." Just like the smile and wink, there was sincerity in his voice, even though his team had lost. "You did an incredible job out there."

"Thank you." Looking down at Porter, I asked, "Did you enjoy the game?"

He grumbled something about losing, but I couldn't tell if it was genuine disappointment or just the exhaustion written all over his face.

Pierce laughed. "I'd offer to buy you a victory drink, but I've got to get this guy to bed."

I had a strange sense of disappointment. I wanted to have a drink with Pierce. I wanted his assessment of my team, not because I needed the praise but because I respected him as a coach. Oh, who was I kidding? Sure, I thought he was a great coach, but he was also kind, and sweet, and sexy . . .

"Of course. Although you could have a drink in my room." The words left my mouth before I knew I'd formed them. "So I can rub my victory in your face."

Pierce chuckled, his eyes twinkling with humor and maybe something else. "Just give me a few minutes to get Porter settled, and I'll be right over."

As the elevator doors opened, I felt a mix of anticipation and anxiety about spending time alone with Pierce. This was a bad idea. When we were alone, the chemistry was palpable. Undeniable. But despite the

complications, I needed to be near him.

"See you soon." I stepped out of the elevator and headed to my room, second-guessing what I was doing. I entered my hotel room, taking a deep breath to calm my racing heart as I walked over to the adjoining door between our rooms. My hand hesitated for just a moment before I turned the knob and pulled it open.

A FEW MOMENTS LATER, Pierce opened the door on his side, a warm smile lighting up his handsome face. He stepped into my room, leaving his door slightly ajar, I suspected in case Porter needed him.

"I hope you don't mind that I didn't bring any celebratory champagne." He held up several mini-bottles of booze. "But I do have whiskey and vodka."

I smiled even though inside, guilt filled me again. I couldn't have whiskey or vodka or champagne. He didn't know that. Not yet, anyway.

Our eyes locked for a moment, and an electric spark zapped through me. How did he do that? I looked away, focusing instead on making him something to drink.

"Let's see what I have here." I opened the mini-fridge. I grabbed a bottle of juice. "Do you want a mixer in your whiskey or vodka?"

"Nah. I'll drink it straight. Which do you want?"

I unscrewed the cap of the juice. "I'm already keyed up enough. I'm sticking to juice." I held up the juice bottle. "To your crushing defeat."

He let out a laugh as he opened the lid of the whiskey and held the tiny bottle up. "And to your well-deserved victory."

I sipped my juice while he emptied the whiskey. "It's gonna take more than this to soothe my wounded ego." He opened the vodka and downed it.

"Any better?" I asked, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"Nope." He stared down at me. I felt like he was looking into my soul. "I don't like losing, Naomi, but I enjoyed watching you win."

I pursed my lips at him. "You're just saying that."

"I'm not." He sat down next to me.

"You were outstanding out there today."

My cheeks flushed at his compliment. He'd always been like that, I realized. I'd been the one who was a bitch. I hadn't wanted to be. In different circumstances, I'd have taken him up on his offer to see where this chemistry

would lead us. But now, we were in different circumstances. I was having his babies.

"Though I'm not surprised. You were something on the ice yourself, and I can see you've shared your secrets with the team. Hell, even Big Ed pulled one of your moves."

"You followed my career?" I swallowed, feeling touched and surprised. Why would Pierce Jackson have been interested in me as a player?

"Yes. Of course. I love hockey."

I raised an eyebrow. "Are you just saying that so you can figure out how to beat us next time?"

Pierce shook his head, a small smile playing on his lips. "You don't take compliments well, do you? No. I'm not looking for a way to beat you, although I do plan to do so at some point. You have a natural gift for the game, and it's been amazing to watch you grow and evolve as a coach."

My chest constricted with an emotion I couldn't quite name. It wasn't just admiration for the hockey player and coach he was. Nor just lust. It was something more. Something that scared me, and yet, I wanted it so desperately.

"Thank you, Pierce. That means more to me than you could ever know."

As our eyes met once more, the room shrank. The air grew thicker. The tension was heady with desire, but also my unspoken secret. I tried to push it aside, wanting to focus instead on the friendly banter between us. But the silence consumed the moment. Pierce's blue eyes searched my face. Was that longing I saw in his gaze? My heart raced as I wished things weren't so complicated for us.

"Naomi," he murmured, his voice low and magnetic. "I know we have our differences, but this thing between us . . . it's driving me mad."

My breath caught in my throat. This was the moment. I needed to tell him about the babies. I tried to find the right words, but my brain was blank.

"Me too." The confession slipped past my lips before I had a chance to reconsider.

At that moment, the rest of the world fell away. There were no teams, no rivalry, no pregnancy, just the two of us, drawn together by an undeniable attraction that refused to be denied.

Pierce closed the distance between us, his strong hands gently framing my face as he leaned in. His lips brushed against mine, tentative at first, as if asking permission. But as I kissed him back, giving in to the temptation I'd

been fighting for so long, all hesitation vanished. It was as if our bodies were two magnets, pulled together by a force stronger than either of us could understand or resist.

I wrapped my arms around his neck, reveling in the warmth of his embrace as our kiss deepened.

He groaned in frustration and pulled back. He held my chin between his thumb and index finger as his blue gaze stared intensely at me. "I want you so fucking bad."

"I want you too." There was no sense in denying it even if I could.

He watched me, as if he was searching for permission or confirmation. "I can't handle any more of your regret or rejection. So, I need you to be sure."

"It's like you said before. There's something undeniable here."

I knew that sooner or later, I'd have to face the consequences of our actions, but for now, all I wanted was to lose myself in the magic of this moment, to forget about everything else except this man.

Pierce

I swear to God that when I came into Naomi's room, I had no intention of kissing her or touching her. I was going to share a celebratory drink and that was it. It wasn't like I hadn't ever had a drink with another coach before. The only difference was Naomi was the first coach whom I'd fucked. Whom I wanted to fuck again. But while the insatiable desire lingered, frequently spiking when I was around her, I told myself that I couldn't allow it to get the better of me. After all, the last two times she and I had fucked, it ended badly when it had been clear that she had regretted it. As much as I felt like I would do anything to be able to touch her again, there was only so much rejection my ego could take.

And yet, here I was, kissing her again. The taste of her was beyond compare, and her kiss was as potent as it ever was. I wasn't sure why that surprised me, considering time and space hadn't lessened my desire for her.

When the kiss started, I hadn't realized what I had done. I'd acted on instinct. But the minute her taste exploded in my mouth, I knew what was happening, and I half expected her to push me away. But she didn't. No, it was quite the opposite. She was leaning into me, her hand on my chest, her fingers clutching at my shirt. Of course, giving in to the desire now didn't mean she wouldn't regret it later if we took things to the next logical step. But holy hell, how could I stop? *Maybe this time will be different*, I told myself, like the fool I was.

My mind was quickly disintegrating into nothing but need for this

woman. But along with the fact that she would likely think this was wrong was that my son was in the adjoining room.

She let out a mewling sound, and that's when all bets were off. An inferno raged through me. I had to have this woman, or I would die.

It took all my strength to pull back from the kiss. I brought my hand to her face, holding her chin between my thumb and index finger as I stared into her beautiful hazel eyes, clouded with desire.

"I want you so fucking bad." My voice was rough with need.

"I want you too."

Her words tangled in my brain, but I worked to maintain some level of reason. "I can't handle any more of your regret or rejection. So, I need you to be sure."

For a moment, she just looked at me, and my heart stopped in my chest as I waited for her answer. She gave a little nod. "It's like you said before. There's something undeniable here."

She didn't say that she loved me, but it was as if my heart thought she had. It soared. It filled my chest.

I stood up and walked over to the adjoining doors. I reached in and tugged the door from my room shut. Because it did not have a handle on Naomi's side, I'd have to return through the main door of my bedroom. Thankfully, I had my key card in my pocket. If Porter woke and needed me, he could still open the door on his side to find me. That didn't mean he might not walk in on something, but the kid was zonked out when I put him to bed, and I couldn't imagine he was going to wake up until morning. I closed the door on Naomi's side only enough to have it open a crack.

I turned back to her and studied her as she sat on the bed watching me. I loosened my tie as I walked back over to her.

"I'm going to help you celebrate your victory by giving you the orgasm of your life."

Her lips twitched upward, and her brow lifted. "You're feeling pretty full of yourself at the moment."

"I am." I tugged the tie from around my neck, and taking it in both hands, I reached forward. "Put this on."

"What for?"

"Because tonight is just about you and pleasure. Can you do that, Naomi? Can you relinquish control for one night? Or are you too afraid to give in to your desire?"

I could tell that the idea of relinquishing control wasn't her favorite, and yet at the same time, she seemed to view it as a challenge as she took my tie and used it to blindfold herself.

I kneeled on the floor in front of her, my hands cradling her face as I pulled her in for a searing kiss. I kissed her long and slow until I could feel her body soften, her will begin to surrender. Only then did I slowly undress her, taking time to touch and taste her skin as it was exposed.

When she was completely naked, I laid her beautiful body back on the bed. I made it my mission to touch every single inch of her skin. I was going to imprint her body into my brain, knowing this could be last time I'd ever be allowed to touch her. My hands roamed, and everywhere they touched, she arched into me, and it made me feel powerful.

Once my hands finished their exploration of her soft body, I started over, this time using my mouth. I started at her lips, loving the sounds she made as I kissed her like there was no tomorrow. Then I moved on, trailing my lips along her jaw, to her neck and down until finally landing on her round, lush tits. I sucked one and she gasped. Jesus, they were so sensitive.

I moved down over her belly, soft and lightly rounded. I hadn't remembered that from before, but then again, before, we had fast, furious fucks. I hadn't had time to explore and savor her body.

I continued downward, loving how her hips gyrated in the rhythm I'd set. I reached her pussy, glistening with her juices. "You're so fucking wet for me."

She arched and groaned. "Don't tease me."

"I'm not teasing. I'm savoring." I slid my hands underneath her fantastic ass cheeks, settling my shoulders between her thighs, and then I devoured her pussy.

Her hand gripped the sheets and the other held my head to her as I used my mouth and tongue to do obscene things to her.

"Oh, my God."

I flicked my tongue over her clit, and she whimpered, making me feel like a sexual god.

I pulled away, but she increased her grip on my head. "Don't stop. Don't you dare stop."

I chuckled, or maybe it was a groan, since my own need was off the Richter scale. I slid my tongue inside her pussy, lapping at the sensitive walls as my thumb pressed against her clit.

Her body went taut and then shuddered as I licked and sucked, and drank up her juices. I'd fucked a lot of women in my life, but never before had a woman made me feel like I felt now.

Her hand shook as she reached up to remove the tie around her eyes.

"Not yet." My fingers wrapped around her wrists and brought them over her head as I spread my body over her. "Stop fighting me. Give in. Let go."

"Is this your way of trying to control me? Do you have a problem with a powerful woman?"

I settled over her, pressing her into the mattress, wanting her to surrender. My dick was screaming for release as it teased her entrance. Energy radiated off her skin, but it was as if she didn't want me to know it. She didn't want to give in to me.

"This isn't about me trying to control you. It's about your allowing somebody else to have control. It's your choice, Naomi. Give yourself this moment. Give me the opportunity to drive you wild with pleasure. I promise you won't regret it."

I waited, wondering what she was going to do. And then I felt it. Her surrender. She handed over her pleasure to me. I was in awe of her courage. I vowed that she wouldn't regret this moment.

"That's right, baby . . . Let me make you feel so fucking good." I watched her face as I pressed inside her, resisting the urge to plunge, and instead, I took my time.

Her head arched back, exposing her neck. I dipped my head, sucking her skin along her collar bone, needing the action to curb my desire to fuck her fast and hard. This was about her. About her feeling good.

Once I was seeped inside, I ground against her, loving it when she gasped. Then I sucked on one nipple, amazed at how her pussy pulsed around my cock with each tug on her tit.

"Pierce."

"Yes." I sucked on the other nipple. It occurred to me that I could stay here forever. There was no better place than here, with my dick inside Naomi while sucking her tits.

"I need to come."

"So do I, baby. So do I." Still, I held her in place, her hands over her head, my tongue lapping at her tits, my dick pulsing inside her pussy.

"Now." She arched, and her pussy squeezed, making my eyes practically roll back in my head.

I groaned, giving in. I withdrew and slid back in, wanting to keep this slow and steady, a long, slow burn that would blow both of our minds. My dick had other ideas, so it was a battle to keep things in control.

Her body hummed underneath me as she rocked and writhed. I watched her face as I slid in and out, in and out. She was so fucking beautiful. Mine. God, how I wanted her to be mine. It was a pie-in-the-sky wish. I had so much working against me, starting with my age and having an eleven-year-old son, all the way to our being coaches of rival teams. I pushed all that away. Right now, there was only Naomi and me. In this moment, she was mine. All mine. Only mine. And I was hers. Fully. Completely.

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Naomi

Where did the man find the patience and control? My body was quivering. My blood was on fire. The need to come was swallowing me whole.

And then I was there. Unlike the previous times when my orgasm was like a freight train, this time, it was like a slow-moving tsunami, big and powerful and yet also fluid. It rolled through me, around me, until I was a shuddering, boneless mess. He thrust once more and groaned out something that sounded like “mine”, but I couldn’t be sure as my ears were buzzing.

I lay under him, working to get my bearings. This must be what it felt like to have a total body massage. Pierce did things to my body that drove me wild and sent me soaring, but now as the shimmer of the orgasm subsided, my body felt completely loose and lax. There wasn't a tense muscle in my body, and it felt so good.

Pierce lay over me, his body still seeped in mine. He stared down at me, his fingers removing the tie and gently brushing my hair away from my face. "You all right?"

"Is there something that gives you the impression that I'm not?" To be honest, I was surprised I could form words, that's how lax I felt.

He flashed a grin. "No. In fact, all signs appear to be the opposite." His facial expression turned more serious. "But the orgasms were never the problem, Naomi."

I knew what he was saying. He was waiting for me to tell him that this

was a mistake. To give him all the reasons we shouldn't be having sex because all the issues continued to exist. But along with my lack of energy was my lack of motivation to reiterate the problems.

Which didn't mean there wasn't anything I couldn't tell him. I needed to tell him about the babies. I should have mentioned it before we had sex. When he'd gone to look in on Porter and then shut the door, I'd been rehearsing the words in my head, knowing that this was the moment I needed to tell him. All the while, I was wondering how he was going to take it. I had no doubt that he would do what he needed to be a father. After all, Porter had shown up on his doorstep unknown and unannounced, and Pierce had thrown himself full-force into the task of parenting. But just because he would do what was expected didn't mean he would be happy about it. Maybe he'd blame me because clearly, he believed I was on birth control.

Whatever his response, it would change things, and as he had handed me the tie and was telling me what he wanted to do to me, the words about the babies drifted away. At that moment, I wanted everything that he was offering. An escape from the challenges of my life. A respite from constantly having to be in control. I wanted to feel craved in a way that only Pierce was able to make me feel. And he hadn't disappointed.

I opened my mouth to speak, but he began to shift, moving his weight off me and instead tucking me close to his side. I snuggled in, inhaling the scent of him and feeling the warmth and strength of his body. I closed my eyes to savor all of it.

I WOKE UP WITH A START, uncertain about where I was. I looked around the room, and it all came back to me. I was in a hotel after winning a hockey tournament and having the most spectacular sex I'd ever had in my life.

I reached my hand next to me on the bed, turning my head in that direction. There was only emptiness. I sat up and looked around, discovering the adjoining door to Pierce's room was closed on my side. I'd fallen asleep, and at some point, he had returned to his room. A profound sense of disappointment filled me that I wasn't waking up by his side. But of course, I knew that couldn't happen. He needed to be with Porter. The poor kid would've been afraid if he woke up and his father was gone. Besides, if Pierce had been here when I woke up, it would be too easy to sink into him again, to hand over control to him. While it was fun for one night, I knew it

was something I couldn't let myself get used to.

I checked my watch and saw that it was a little bit after six. I rose from bed, my body still feeling like it'd had that total body massage. Pierce really knew his way around a woman's body.

I took a shower and then got dressed. I decided I would pack up and head to the airport early even though the plane didn't leave until later in the afternoon. We were still flying commercial, but hopefully, if the season ended well, Todd would splurge for charter flights next season. My hand went to my belly. Would I be here next season? Could I manage coaching and raising three babies? I didn't want to figure out those logistics yet, so I finished dressing, and when my stomach growled, I decided to go down for breakfast before heading out.

The hotel offered a lovely buffet. Had the team arrived before me, the place might've been depleted of food, but none of them were there. They were probably sleeping off a night of partying. As long as nobody got hurt or in trouble, that was okay.

I picked up a plate and started by putting some fruit on it. Next, I got some eggs and bacon, and then I toasted an English muffin thinking I would turn it into a breakfast sandwich.

"Hey, Naomi." Porter stepped up next to me, his hand reaching over mine toward the pastries. He grabbed a doughnut, and as he pulled back, he hit my plate. I was able to keep most of my breakfast, but a few pieces of fruit fell on the floor.

He looked at me, his eyes wide. "Sorry." He bent down and started to pick up pieces of the fruit. When he stood up, he stood with the fruit in his hands, as if he wasn't quite sure what to do with it.

I held out my hand with my napkin on it, and he placed the fruit in it. "Thank you for picking that up."

He nodded, his expression turning to relief. "You should come eat with us." He used a thumb to motion over his shoulder.

I looked, and Pierce was sitting at the table. He gave me a wave and a wink. My entire body lit up as the memory of last night awakened all my neurons.

My plans had been to eat and then go to the airport, but I couldn't find the words to say no. "Okay. Just let me get a little more fruit first."

"K." Porter trotted off toward his table.

I tossed the napkin with the fallen fruit away and then went back to the

fruit bowl and put more on my plate.

I walked over to Porter and Pierce's table, setting my plate down.

Pierce rose and held my chair out for me. "How'd you sleep?"

I turned my head to him, and because his hand was still on my chair, it brought me in very close proximity to him. I thought he was trying to keep his face impassive, but I was able to see the smug smirk on his face. He knew I slept like a baby because he'd done as he promised. He'd given me the orgasm of a lifetime.

"I slept okay." I sat down.

"Just okay?" He lowered into the seat next to me, his eyes shining with mischief. "I haven't slept that good in a long time." He winked again.

For a moment, I stared at him, but when the ache in my heart became too much, I looked down at my food. I was playing with fire, and I couldn't help but think it wouldn't be long before I was going to get burned. The question was, what would be torched? My career and dreams? Or my heart?

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Pierce

A part of me wondered if Naomi agreed to join us for breakfast because she couldn't say no to Porter. While I wanted her to want to be with me, if she joined us because she was being nice to Porter, I'd accept that. In the end, she was sitting at our table, enjoying her breakfast. For now, this would do.

Getting out of her bed last night was one of the hardest things I'd ever done. She was snuggled in close against me, looking so serene and beautiful as she slept. There was nothing I wanted more than to close my eyes and have them open to see her in the morning.

But I was a father now, and my priority had to be Porter. So eventually, I got out of bed, dressed, shut the adjoining door on her side of the room, and then exited her hotel room through the main door and returned to my room. But as I lay in bed, the image of her next to me kept me warm all night.

"When are you all heading home?" she asked as she piled her eggs and some bacon on an English muffin and began to eat it like a sandwich.

"The team is flying back today, but Porter and I are staying an extra day to take in the sights."

She arched her brow as she wiped her mouth with a napkin. "Reed splurged for two private planes?"

I flashed her a grin, remembering her comment the other day about flying commercial with her team. "Well, first, yes, and second, I am part-owner of the team as well. Whether Reed likes it or not, Porter and I are sticking

around for an extra day."

"We're going to the zoo." Porter drowned his pancakes in syrup. With that much sugar, I was going to have to put him on a treadmill to run off the energy.

"That sounds like a lot of fun. I hear the San Diego Zoo is quite the place."

"Why don't you come with us?" I said the words automatically, but upon reflection, I determined that it was a good idea. Naomi and I had this wild chemistry, and last night, after a little time alone, we discovered we had quite a few things in common. Spending a day away from hockey would give us an opportunity to connect away from all the complications.

"It's very nice of you to offer, but I definitely wouldn't want to get in the way of father-son time. Besides, my plane leaves this afternoon."

"Cancel it. Spend the day with us, and you can fly back with us tomorrow." I hoped I didn't look too eager.

She looked from me to Porter and back to me again, her expression uncertain.

"You should come," Porter said with a mouthful of pancakes. "My dad likes you."

My cheeks had to be the color of beets if the hot flush was any indication. I glanced at Naomi, who was looking at me with amusement in her eyes.

I shrugged. "It seems to be an open secret." Emotion flashed in her eyes, and I was desperate to understand what that meant. I had just come out and admitted my feelings to her and to Porter. I had told her before that I wanted to see where this thing between us could go. Last night, I showed her. Maybe it wasn't something that would last, but what in life ever really did? The question was, had her feelings about it changed at all?

She looked down at her fruit, poking at it with her fork. "What about your father-son bonding time?"

I looked over at Porter because she was right. This trip was supposed to be for the two of us. "I did tell you that it was just going to be us two, buddy."

Porter shrugged. "I don't mind if she comes." A part of me wondered if he wanted a third person as a buffer between us. Porter and I were getting along, but I could tell that sometimes, too much touchy-feely was difficult for him.

I looked over at Naomi. "We'd both like you to come." I could feel it deep in my bones that she was going to say no. I steeled myself for the rejection.

As I watched her, it was as if there was a battle going on in her mind and

I wondered what it was about. Was she worried about Todd? The woman was delivering him a winning season. Surely, he could give her a day. Maybe she was worried about the media. Maybe I should be too, but to be honest, I didn't give a shit what they said about me. All that mattered was being able to spend time with Naomi.

In reality, the media was likely done with us. Or perhaps they were in the lobby or the airport, but they'd be gone once the teams were.

Naomi took in a deep breath and then slowly let it out. "Okay. I'll do it."

Fan-fucking-tastic. I wanted to jump up on my chair and do a dance. Or high-five Porter for being my wingman. Instead, I picked up my coffee and sipped as she took out her phone to cancel her ticket and called Max to put him in charge of ensuring the team got on the flight.

THE SAN DIEGO ZOO was different from most other zoos. It had a more traditional zoo, but it also had a wildlife park where we got to ride in open-air buses to the various compounds housing the animals. Porter was entranced as he sat on the edge of his seat, scanning the horizon for whatever animals we were supposed to be seeing now.

Initially, Naomi tried to put me next to Porter and then her on the other side of me, but I managed to switch it so she was next to Porter and I was on the other side of her. This way, I was able to rest my arm over the back of the seat and lean closer into her when I spoke to Porter or saw the animals outside. I wasn't being lecherous, at least not most of the time. I just wanted to be able to feel her warmth and inhale her sweet scent.

After the tour, we went to lunch at a place in the park. Porter talked a mile a minute as he reviewed everything we saw. Naomi sat and listened not just patiently, but with a rapt expression like she was genuinely interested in what he had to say, even though she was a witness to everything he was telling her. I watched, taking the three of us in, noting how none of this should work. I was so much older than Naomi. In fact, Naomi was closer in age to Porter than she was to me. And up until a couple of months ago, I didn't even know Porter existed. Even now, with things seemingly going better, I had no clue whether I was doing it right. No. This day shouldn't be working, and yet it was. It wasn't just working. It felt right, like each of us were part of a puzzle and all our pieces were snapped together.

"Can we get a souvenir now?" Porter said.

"We will soon."

"It's what you said before." Porter's frustration rose, something over the last few months I began to recognize as a sign that things could veer off course.

"We haven't even finished lunch. I said we'd go, and we will unless you begin to act out."

Both his hands slammed down on the table. "I'm not acting out. You're the one who said we could go and we're not going."

"I didn't say we're not going. I said we would go soon."

He turned to look in the direction of the gift shop. "Can I just go in and look?"

"No. We're spending the day together, so we're going to stay together."

He crossed his arms over his chest and gave me his evil stare. "You're just being like this to impress Naomi."

"Why are you being like this? Do you think this is impressing her?" I snapped.

Naomi put her hand over mine in a gesture I took to mean that perhaps I was overstepping. I wasn't sure how or why, but I took a breath and picked up my water to take a sip.

"I don't care. You like her more than me, anyway."

I pointed at him across the table as anger grew in me. "I'm here for you. If I didn't care, we wouldn't be here."

"Porter, do you really think your dad is going to back out on taking you for a souvenir, or are you just being impatient?" Naomi asked him.

In my mind, what did it matter? He was acting like a brat after everything I'd done for him today.

"I just want to go see the stuff."

"What stuff do you hope to see? Is there something specific you're looking for?" she prodded.

Porter was still agitated, but there was definitely a lessening of tension. "I want to see if they have a book on lions. Maybe the elephants too. They were kinda cool."

She smiled at him. "I thought the elephants were really cool too."

All of a sudden, Porter was off talking about the elephants. His pissed off demeanor from a second before was gone. His hands and expression were animated as he talked about the elephants.

How the fuck did she do that? I must've been gaping because she gave me

a quick glance and a subtle eyebrow lift before she turned her attention back to Porter.

It occurred to me that every time I was around her, I was given proof positive about why she needed to be in my life. But now, I was beginning to think she needed to be in Porter's life as well. And since Porter and I were a package deal, I needed to find a way to keep her with us.

OceanofPDF.com

Naomi

During the Uber ride back to the hotel, I was again sitting next to Porter by the window as he flipped through the books that Pierce bought him at the gift shop. He also bought him a T-shirt, which Porter insisted that he wear right away.

I had to admit that, except for a few moments of tension, Pierce actually did have a pretty good handle on parenting Porter. At the same time, I could see that if Porter wanted to push things, he could get Pierce to a point of frustration where he was stuck on what to do. My experience in helping with my brothers taught me to de-escalate and distract. They were tools I used as a coach as well.

"Thank you." Pierce's voice was low, as if he didn't want Porter to overhear.

I turned my head to find that Pierce had leaned close to me, and now we were nearly nose to nose. For a moment, I was mesmerized by his crystalline blue eyes. "For what?"

He gave a very slight nod toward Porter. "Helping me."

I was surprised that he hadn't said for helping Porter. It was if he recognized that he was the grown-up and that the problems they were having were his to manage. My heart did a slow roll in my chest, followed by a swell of emotion. Pierce was a good man. He was a good father. I had no doubt he would be a good father to our babies as well. I really needed to tell him, even though I was still nervous about his reaction. Just because he *liked* me, as

Porter had said, didn't mean he wanted to pursue something permanent. These babies would bind us together forever, but that didn't mean he wanted to be bound to me.

Another wave of emotion swelled as I realized I wanted to be bound to him. We'd known each other only a couple of months, and for much of that time, we didn't see or talk to each other. But when we were together, the connection was instantaneous. It felt deeper than just the attraction of lust.

Yes, I needed to tell him about the triplets, but now wasn't the appropriate time. Not with Porter here. I would have to wait for a time when we got home and I could see Pierce alone and in private.

We pulled up to the hotel.

"Porter and I are going to go upstairs and rest a little bit," Pierce said.

I nodded in understanding. Porter was hyped up on sugar and excitement, yet the fatigue showed on his face.

It showed on Pierce's too. "But then you'll come to dinner with us?"

"What about the beach?" Porter asked.

"I thought we could have dinner out there. We can eat and see the ocean."

I turned my head toward Porter. "Would you be alright if I tagged along?" Next to me, Pierce tensed, and I got the feeling he didn't want Porter's approval on this one, but he didn't say anything.

Porter shrugged as he turned the page of his book. "Whatever."

We entered the hotel and went up to our rooms together. Pierce let Porter into the room but lingered as I opened my door. "We'll pick you up at about five thirty?"

I smiled. "I'll be ready."

Pierce's gaze drifted to my lips, and I wondered if he wanted to kiss me. I knew I wanted him to kiss me.

"Do I have to sleep?" Porter's voice echoed out the door.

Pierce shook his head. "Duty calls."

I laughed and went into my room. I walked over to the bed and fell back on it, feeling exhausted from the day and yet happy. Happy in a way I hadn't felt in a long time. I'd spent my life chasing a dream to be the best female hockey player, and later, when I had to give that up, to be a great coach in the men's league. And I was doing it, but it didn't bring the happiness that I was feeling after a day with Pierce and Porter. Not that I was unhappy. I was proud of all my accomplishments. But the constant conflicts and complications meant that I had to always be on edge, always be anticipating

something going wrong, which stole the peace that the happiness I had now brought.

I rummaged through my purse and pulled out a picture of the sonogram Dr. Lyman had given me. He had put markers on it to show me the outlines of the babies, and now, after studying it so often, I felt I could see them. I had three little beings growing inside me. I laid the ultrasound picture on my chest and closed my eyes.

I woke with a start at a knocking on my door. I sat up, checking my watch, wondering if I was late. No. It was five, but I didn't have much time to get ready.

I started toward the door when the knock came again. Except it wasn't against the main door. It was against the adjoining door. I turned, heading to it and pulling it open.

Pierce stood in a pair of jeans and a blue button-down shirt. A few buttons at the top were undone, and I had this crazy desire to lean in and kiss him at the base of his neck.

"I got you something at the zoo. But I didn't want to give it to you with an audience."

I looked over his shoulder, wondering where Porter had gone.

"I sent him out to fill the ice bucket."

I laughed. "What do you need ice for?"

"I don't. I just needed him gone for a couple of minutes." Pierce pulled out a square box from his pocket and handed it to me. "I know it's sort of crazy being with me and Porter, and perhaps you don't want to memorialize this day, but I wanted to get you a token anyway. Today meant a lot to me. And Porter too."

My eyes welled with tears, which I blamed on hormones. Or maybe it was because I was finally accepting and letting in the fact that Pierce made me feel things I'd never felt before.

I took the box and opened the lid. Inside was a beautiful pendant with an elephant . . . no, it was two elephants, a mother and baby. I looked up at him. Did he know?

"I know it's a mother, but I figured it could also be me and Porter." His cheeks reddened. "It's silly—"

"It's beautiful." And I wasn't talking about the necklace. I was talking about his gesture. I looked up at him. He smiled, and I swore I saw relief in his eyes. "You didn't need to get me anything."

"I wanted to." He took the necklace from the box, undoing the clasp and then holding his hands forward. "May I?"

I turned, and he brought the necklace over my head and then around, clasping it at the nape of my neck. His fingers lingered, gently rubbing my neck, and I couldn't stop the sigh that escaped from his touch. Then it wasn't his fingers there. It was his lips, and that sent a rush of need through me.

A loud banging sounded. Pierce straightened and let out a breath. "Time's up. Will you be ready in a half-hour?"

I turned on wobbly legs. "I'll be ready."

I took a quick shower and then put on a pair of jeans for which I had to get a button extender because I was beginning to show, a reminder that I couldn't put off telling Pierce about the babies much longer. I put on a flowy floral peasant shirt that hung over my belly. Because we were going to the beach where I knew it could be windy, I pulled my hair back into a ponytail. When Porter and Pierce knocked at my door, I looked in the mirror one last time, making sure the elephant necklace could be seen over my top, and I went to answer the door to my dates.

Pierce hired a car to drive us to the ocean. As we pulled up to the restaurant, Pierce leaned over to me. "I hope you don't mind the restaurant. Porter's taste buds pretty much only tolerate burgers and pizza."

I looked at the giant neon taco sign. "This is tacos."

He laughed. "And tacos. The good news is this place has some of the best reviews for tacos along the coast."

We entered the restaurant and were seated outside where we could see the beach. Porter talked our ears off on all the things that he was learning from the books that Pierce had bought him. Like earlier in the day, the evening was relaxed and enjoyable. I wasn't a part of them, really, and yet I felt connected to them, and it was nice. It was definitely something I could get used to.

As we waited for dessert, my phone pinged. Realizing I hadn't checked to make sure that the team had arrived at the airport on time, I decided I needed to check the text just in case there was an emergency. Just my luck, some of the players could still be stranded in San Diego. Or worse, in jail.

I pulled the phone from my purse, holding it in my lap as I checked my notifications. Thankfully, it wasn't from Todd or Max. It was something from Analyn. I opened the text.

HAVE YOU SEEN THIS?

ALONG WITH HER text was a link. I poked the link and up came the news article.

COACH WITHERS'S Love Triangle is Now a Square.

MY HEART STOPPED in my chest. I scroll down to see a picture of me at the zoo with Pierce and Porter.

No, no, no. This couldn't be happening.

I did my best to plaster on a smile as I looked up at Pierce. "Can you excuse me for a minute?"

He looked at me, concern etched in his expression. "Is everything all right?"

I nodded. "Just need to use the little girls' room." I hurried off to the bathroom, locking myself into a stall as I poked the autodial for Todd.

"Are you behind this?" I said without any preamble.

"Naomi, I don't have to be responsible. You have a tendency to do things that attract their attention all on your own."

Dammit, he was right. The fact that he didn't ask what I was talking about meant he'd seen the report. Of course he had. The man was obsessed with the team's media.

"I will tell you, though, that I think it's great," he said.

"What?" I practically shrieked the word. "How is this great?" Todd was a happy-go-lucky guy, but how wasn't he upset that I was with Pierce? The fans couldn't at all be happy about my seeing the coach of a rival team. That was the whole reason I'd been trying to avoid him in the first place.

"You know me, all news is good for us. I doubt Reed will agree. I'd be curious to know what Pierce thinks."

I leaned against the stall wall, feeling the world crashing down. It was only a matter of time before Pierce would get a similar text from Reed.

"The fans won't be happy about this." For once, the news got the story somewhat right, which meant I couldn't deny it. Maybe I needed to talk to

Pierce about this. His fans might not like it either.

"I don't think there's gonna be a problem with our fans. They're spinning it as you using your feminine wiles against him. After all, you've beat him in nearly every matchup."

"Todd. God . . . why is it always about my being a woman? Are you ever going to give me credit for these wins because I'm a good coach? It has nothing to do with the fact that I have breasts and a vagina. Are you really this much of a misogynist?" The words came flying out without my having any control. My emotions were running haywire and I was tired of this game.

The line was quiet for a moment. I wondered if I was about to be fired. It sure would solve a lot of problems if I was.

"I know full well that the team is winning because of your coaching, Naomi. If you remember, I was the one who hired you. And when I did, the entire hockey community thought I was a fool. I'm sorry if this hurts you, but no one can see how good you are if they don't come to the games."

I was exhausted by all of this. "But they are coming to the games now, and we're winning. Surely, that's enough."

"Naomi, I didn't plant the story. You are a story in and of itself. If you don't want people talking about your private life, then you need to stay home. What are you doing with Pierce Jackson, anyway? You're supposed to be home now."

I didn't want to talk about what was going on with me and Pierce because to be honest, I wasn't quite sure. "From now on, any press that you or anyone on the team does can't be about my private life. Promise me that."

"Like I said, Naomi, I'm not the cause of this. If you want to deny seeing Pierce, I'm okay with that."

"What about Max and Big Ed?"

"You can deny it all if you want."

"I think I will." I said goodbye and hung up the phone. I wanted to call all the reporters and tell them the truth, but I realized it wouldn't matter. At this point, I'd let the lie go on so long, they would assume my denial was untrue.

When I returned to the table, Pierce's eyes watched me closely. "Are you all right?"

"It's just been a long day. I'm exhausted."

He nodded. "Then we'll head back to the hotel."

I expected Porter to fuss because we hadn't yet gone onto the beach, but he was busy eating an ice cream sundae. When he finished, we returned to

the car and headed back to the hotel.

We said our goodbyes at our hotel room doors. I entered my room, heading to the bathroom to clean up and put on my pajamas. Then I climbed into bed. I was so tired and yet sleep wouldn't come.

I don't know how long I tossed and turned when my phone beeped with a message. Reaching over to the side table, I picked it up.

PORTER'S CRASHED OUT, but I can't sleep.

IT WAS PIERCE. I texted back that I couldn't sleep either. Then as an afterthought, I texted asking if he wanted to come over.

A second later, there was a knock on the adjoining door. I got out of bed and opened the door. Pierce stood in lounge pants and a T-shirt, and in that moment, he was the sexiest man I'd ever seen. Without saying anything, I put my arms around him and crushed my lips to his.

He let out a sexy growl as he banded his arm around me and lifted, carrying me into the room. He pulled his door shut and then tumbled with me onto the bed and rolled us until I was on top.

"Tell me you want me." His expression was cocky, and yet I swore I saw vulnerability in his eyes.

I sat up, straddling him as I ran my hands under his shirt. "I want you. Do you want me?"

He gripped my hips and moved me until my pussy was over his hardness. "You tell me." He was hard, and I rocked over him even though deep down, I wished we weren't just talking about sex. I wanted more than sex. He'd told me before that he wanted to pursue this chemistry, but that didn't mean he wanted more than sex.

He levered up, sliding his hands underneath my shirt and tugging it off. He unclasped my bra, and once it was tossed aside, he buried his face in my breasts. He sucked and kneaded my nipples, extra-sensitive now with the pregnancy. It was driving me mad, and I rocked faster over him as need coursed through my veins.

"I need to be inside you."

"I need that too." My hands flew over our clothes, getting us both

undressed. He lay underneath me naked, looking like an Adonis. My hands roamed to discover his body, the hard planes of his chest, the six-pack of his abs, the velvet over steel of his dick.

I moved down, desperate to taste him.

“Fuck, Naomi . . . I don’t know if I’ll last.”

I pushed his hands away and sucked in the tip of his cock, running my tongue over the soft tip.

He groaned and arched, his dick pressing further in my mouth. I lapped at his length and then sucked hard.

“Yes . . . fuck, that’s good.”

The more he praised me, the more I wanted to give him. I hadn’t always been very nice to him. I hadn’t been truthful to him about how he made me feel, although I hadn’t been honest with myself either. I wanted to change that. I wanted him to know how wonderful I thought he was. How much I admired him not as a hockey coach, but as a man. I wanted him to know about the babies and to be happy about it. I still didn’t have the words, but I could show him, so I did.

I stroked and sucked until he finally pushed me away. “I want to be in you, baby.”

I smirked. “You are.”

“You know what I mean. Someday, I’ll let you suck me dry, but right now, give me your pussy.”

I slid up his body and hovered over his dick. I settled over him, taking him in.

“Yes . . .” He levered up, wrapped his arms around me, and held me to him. His lips found mine, and he kissed me until I was dizzy.

I whimpered with need.

“Okay, baby.” His lips trailed down my neck, and finally, he lay back. “Take what you want, Naomi.”

I rested my hands on his chest, over his heart. That was what I wanted. But the words stayed hidden. Instead, with my gaze holding his, I started to ride until pleasure took hold.

Pierce

If I died and went to heaven, it would be as blissful as this moment. I watched Naomi move over me. She was so graceful. So beautiful. Beauty in motion. I was in awe of her. Being mesmerized was the only thing that was keeping me from blowing my load the minute she took me in. I was so fucking hard from her mouth on my cock that I could barely see straight. A part of me wanted to come in her mouth, to watch her drink up my essence. But more than that, I wanted this. I wanted to be inside her body, watching her face as pleasure consumed her, feeling her pussy squeeze my cock.

When she came, I sucked in a breath, holding off long enough to watch her fully succumb to pleasure. Then I let go, bucking underneath her as I emptied.

I've had plenty of satisfying sex in my life, but with Naomi it was satisfying at an entirely different level. It was more than the pleasurable pop of orgasm, like scratching an itch. The experience filled my entire body, consumed me. It wasn't just lust but something more, something soul-deep.

Is this lovemaking? The way my heart thumped hard at the thought tells me it is, in which case I must be in love.

I pulled Naomi close, loving the way she rested her head on my shoulder, her hand over my heart. Could she tell that it was beating for her? I wanted to tell her everything that I was feeling, but my mouth stayed shut except for a gentle kiss on the top of her head.

Up until last night, Naomi had done everything she could to tell me our

being together was wrong. The one time I talked to her about giving us a try, she couldn't get away from me fast enough. Had it been too much, too soon, or was this just about sex for her? Either of those were good reasons for me not to say anything at this point. Not unless I wanted to risk the rejection of her quickly kicking me out of her room.

She made an annoyed groaning sound as she pushed off me. "Sorry, nature calls."

I watched her naked form as she made her way to the bathroom. Jesus fuck, she was beautiful. She'd put on a little weight, but it made her sexier as far as I was concerned. I'd just come hard, but my dick was ready to go again.

A few minutes later, she made another groaning sound. "Oh, my God, my hair is a mess."

I grinned, knowing that it looked that way because of the way I ran my fingers through it. "Sorry." But of course, I wasn't.

I imagined her looking at herself in the mirror, her hair wanton, her lips swollen from my kisses. In an instant, I envisioned taking her from behind, right there in the bathroom, the both of us watching each other in the reflection of the mirror. I hopped out of the bed and started making my way to the bathroom.

"I need my brush. It's in my purse."

I peeked into the bathroom. "You don't need a brush."

She gave me a look. "With all this hair, if I don't get the rat nests out now, I'll never get them out." She turned back toward the mirror, working through a tangle.

I considered pushing my luck, but maybe it would be better if I let her comb her hair and then she wouldn't be thinking about it. Instead, she'd be thinking about me again. "I'll get your purse."

I walked over to the small table in the room where her purse was sitting. "Do you just want me to grab it out of your purse?"

"Sure."

I reached in her purse, grabbing the brush by the handle and pulling it out. As I did, a piece of paper came out and fluttered to the floor. I reached down to pick it up to put it back in her purse. As I moved to slip it back in, I stopped, frowning as I studied the image on the paper. It was similar to the images that at one time Reed and later Bo waved in my face with glee, telling me they were pictures of their babies. All I ever saw was a gray blob, but of

course I expressed my happiness for them as I tried to decipher a baby from the picture.

I glanced at the top right thinking maybe it belonged to someone else.

Withers, Naomi with a birth date.

My heart stopped in my chest. This could only mean one thing. Naomi was pregnant. Or maybe she had a tumor, but why would she carry a picture of a tumor? No. This photo only made sense if it was a baby.

For a moment I felt sick, thinking about fucking her when she was carrying a child inside her. Stunned, I made my way to the bathroom.

When she saw me, she turned and smiled, taking the brush from me. Her gaze drifted down to my groin where only a few moments ago, I was hard as a rock ready to take her again. Now my dick was shriveled.

She frowned as she looked up at me. "Is something wrong? A minute ago, it looked like you were ready to go again."

I held up the picture I'd been holding in my other hand. "What is this? Because it looks like one of those sonogram pictures of babies."

Her breath hitched, and her eyes turned to worry, confirming my suspicion.

"You're pregnant."

She nodded.

The world was spinning, tilting off its axis. I stumbled my way out toward the bed. I sank down on it, putting my elbows on my thighs and digging the heels of my hands into my eye sockets.

"I know this wasn't planned, but I'm going to keep them," she said.

I couldn't wrap my brain around what was happening. Here I was, falling in love with Naomi, and she was pregnant. Was she really seeing Max and I was just a fling? Or maybe there was somebody else and I was just a fling. Based on what I knew about her, I wouldn't think she was the type of person to cheat, but what did I really know about her? Now all the reasons she'd told me we were wrong made sense. What she lied about was the reason.

I looked up at her. "Who's the father? Max?"

Her apologetic expression morphed into anger. "I told you there was nothing between Max and me. All that stuff in the media wasn't true."

If not Max, then who? It would be difficult to believe that Big Ed was the father, but again, I was beginning to realize I didn't know this woman at all. Maybe she was with Big Ed and he was acting like a dog all the time out of jealousy.

"Big Ed?"

"Why don't you believe me? I told you I haven't been with them. I've only been with you."

I shot up from the bed, my own anger pulsing through me. I was glad for it, because the feeling of being used, of being a putz, sucked. "You have some nerve being indignant over my line of questioning when you're the one who's been lying this whole time. If it's mine, why didn't you tell me? Or were you going to wait until it was eleven years old and drop it on my doorstep?"

She flinched. "I would never do that."

"How do I know that?" God, my chest hurt. "How long have you known?"

She looked down, her fingers entwining in nervousness. "A few weeks." Her gaze lifted to mine. "I was going to tell you. I just hadn't found the right time yet."

My jaw was so tight it was a wonder it didn't break off. "Couldn't find the right time? Not last night when we were sitting and talking to celebrate your win? Not tonight?"

Her eyes took on a pleading stare. "I was distracted and nervous."

I may have been a little wild in my younger days, but I always thought that I was a good and decent man. But the fact that I now had two women whom I had impregnated not tell me they were pregnant made me wonder if I was defective. "What's wrong with me?"

Her brows furrowed in confusion. "There's nothing wrong with—"

"There must be something wrong with me. Jeannie, and now you, don't think I deserve to know about a baby? Why is that? Jeannie, I can sort of understand, considering we had only one night, but you, surely, you would know better. You have to have seen how hard I've been trying with Porter. I can be a good father."

She stepped forward, her arms reaching out for mine, but I stepped back, pushing them away.

"No, goddammit, I want to know why you don't think I should know about my baby."

"You do deserve to know, Pierce. I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I was going to tell you. Really. This wasn't planned, and it was a shock to me as well. I've been trying to grapple with how I'm going to raise three babies and still keep my career."

What the fuck did she just say? "Three?"

She nodded. "I just found out it's triplets. I've been overwhelmed and scared and—"

"Too scared to tell me? I could be there for you, Naomi. Jesus fucking Christ. Do you know how often I've been there for you even though you pushed me away?" I scoffed and stepped back, running my fingers through my hair, hating the pain that seized my chest.

"I was going to tell you, Pierce, I truly was."

I looked at her again, wishing things were different but now recognizing how it truly was. "Now that I do know, rest assured that you will not keep this baby . . . these babies . . . from me."

Fear shone in her eyes. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to be a father. If you don't think you can handle your career and the babies, you can give them to me. I'll do it."

Her expression was stricken, as if I had reached across and slapped her. "You won't take my babies away from me."

She could've stabbed me through the heart, and that statement still would have hurt more. The idea that she thought I'd take them away from her gutted me. It told me that she didn't know me, either. How the fuck had I fallen for her?

"To think that I was in love with you, trying to figure out a future for us." I shook my head.

"How can you love me if you don't believe me?"

"Because, as it turns out, you're not the woman I thought you were."

Her eyes contained a mixture of pain and fury. "You don't have to worry about anything, Pierce. I'll take care of these babies. You don't have to have anything to do with me."

"Like hell will I abandon these kids." Unable to look at her any longer, I exited through the main door, wishing I had never opened the adjoining doors between our rooms. It wouldn't happen again. I was done being a fool over Naomi.

Naomi

I was such an idiot to forget that the sonogram picture was in my purse. I was an even bigger idiot for not telling Pierce about the pregnancy sooner. I tried to work up more anger at him for not believing me. Had he really loved me and I blew it? If that was true, wouldn't he forgive me? Wouldn't he have stayed so we could talk it out?

I knew deep down that the situation was all my fault. Considering what Jeannie had done, I could see why Pierce would feel like he was living in *déjà vu*. Plus, there was the fact that up until the tournament, I did everything I could to push him away. Once, I'd told him that what we had done was wrong. So, what choice did he have but to think I was a selfish, callous person who didn't care about him?

It was funny, and unfair, how much you realized you loved and wanted someone the moment you knew you couldn't have them. Maybe over time, as we interacted in decisions about the babies, he would come around and I would be able to prove myself to him.

I learned another interesting fact of life and how quickly priorities could change because my job of proving I could be a good coach now seemed secondary to wanting to prove to Pierce that I could be the woman he had loved.

I thought about the flight I was supposed to be on with him and Porter the next day to return home. Normally, I would have used that time to make my case, but Porter would be there and it didn't seem like this was a discussion

he should be witness to.

To avoid the awkwardness, when I got up the next morning, I booked a flight, packed up my things, and headed to the airport. I texted Pierce a message letting him know I was flying home on my own so he didn't think I was trying to run off with the babies. I received a read-receipt text, but no response from him. I didn't hear from him that day nor a response to any of the texts and voice messages I'd left over the next two weeks. When he did text, he wanted to know when my next doctor's appointment was and where.

It was ripping me apart to know I'd hurt him. To know I'd hurt our babies by killing any chance that we could be a family. I wanted to talk to Analyn and Ruby because I felt so alone and confused, but I had to consider that their loyalty would be with Pierce since their husbands' loyalty would be to Pierce. It was one thing to be my friend when I was part of a rival team, but it was a whole other when I was accused of lying to and betraying Pierce.

One night after a crying jag, I had an epiphany that wallowing in my mistakes wasn't going to change anything. I had to focus on the things that I had control over. The things that people were counting on me to be a part of. That meant I needed to take my team to the championships, and I needed to have a serious discussion with Todd on how I could be both the coach and a mom. I vacillated on when I should talk to him since it was quite possible that he'd fire me. If I could win the championship, or at least get us into the championship game, I'd have more leverage. But my belly was swelling, and I didn't have that much time before people would begin to notice.

Maybe I was underestimating Todd, considering he'd made the wild and crazy decision to hire me in the first place. In fact, knowing him, I could see him deciding that the triplets would be mascots. While I couldn't let that happen, I had to consider that while Todd had some strange ideas for marketing, I thought deep down, he really did believe in me. If I could stay on as coach, not only would I be proving that a woman could make it in a men's hockey league as a coach, but that a single mother could do it as well.

I made the appointment to meet with Todd before our next practice. Regardless of how things went, I intended to tell the team as well. I hoped that it wouldn't matter to them one way or the other, but it was quite possible that they'd revert to their old behavior, in which case we wouldn't make it to the championships. I had to hope that this winning streak, and the very real prospect of winning the league championship, was a bigger desire than getting back at me for being a woman.

"Naomi, sit down." Todd looked at me over his desk, his head tilted to the side. "You all right?"

"I'm fine, at least physically. But I do have something important I need to talk to you about."

He held up both his hands in surrender. "Whatever's on social media, I didn't do it."

I shook my head. My lips twitched upward slightly. Of course he'd think that's why I was here. "No, it's not that." The truth of the matter was all the drama around the media had shrunk down to not being important compared to these babies and what I had done to Pierce.

I took a deep breath, unsure of how to proceed even though I'd practiced talking to him so many times. "I'm pregnant." Blurting it out seemed like the best way to go.

Both his brows rose to his hairline. He was quiet for a moment and then he said, "Pierce Jackson?"

I gaped. "How'd you know?"

He shrugged. "For one, all the other pictures of you with Max and Big Ed were at hockey events. They're easily justified by your celebrating with the team or talking to them as a coach. But you at the zoo with Pierce and his kid, you looked like a little family unit."

Tears welled in my eyes at the words *family unit*. I could've had that had I done things differently. "And two?"

"And two, whenever the two of you do interviews together, there's a snap, crackle, pop. It's probably why photographers followed you. It was on high display at the tournament."

Under any other circumstances, I might've taken a moment to think about that, but there were more pressing issues. "The thing is—"

Todd waved his hand. "Despite what you might think, I'm not a misogynist pig. I believe women, including pregnant ones and mothers, can do a job. And even if I didn't, in general, I would know that *you* could, Naomi. Despite all the media stuff, the only reason you're here is because I believe you can take my team all the way to the top. And I expect you to do that whether or not you're carrying Pierce Jackson's baby."

His words lifted my soul, which seemed impossible. I didn't think I would ever have a moment of happiness again. "The thing is, Todd, it's not just one baby. It's three. So I'm going to be getting really big, really fast. I should be able to make it to the end of the season before they come, but there will be

times that I'll have to take it easy. I know you're counting pennies, but maybe now would be the time to get an assistant coach. I mean, the trainers are all well and good, but maybe another coach just in case."

"I'm not against hiring an assistant coach, but I hired you to lead this team, and I don't want a situation in which somebody else is doing it."

All those good feelings I had before tanked. "I understand. And everything that the team will do will be my plan. And like I said, I intend to be there all the way. There just might be some times where I need to take a little rest, in which case—"

"How about Max? He's the team captain."

I nodded. "Max is good and can be really inspiring, but he skates too and sometimes needs coaching."

He nodded. "Well, I'm committed to making this work, Naomi. I just need you to keep me up to date on what you're going to need over the next few months. I don't need to remind you that you need to do all that you can. I know you will."

"I will. Thank you. I was thinking I would tell the team today as well. I'm not going to be able to hide it much longer."

He nodded. "You need me there when you do?"

I shook my head. It was long past the time when I needed help to talk with my team. "No, it'll be fine."

I made my way down to the ice where the team was warming up. I called them all into the box.

"I've got something I need to tell you guys."

"Are you moving up to the National League?" one of the players called out. I smiled because it told me they believed in me as a coach. "Not yet. You guys are stuck with me for a while longer." A few made groaning noises, but as I looked at them, I saw that they were in jest.

"The thing is, guys, I'm pregnant."

All eyes turned to Max.

Max's eyes rounded and he stepped back. "It wasn't me. I've never touched her."

"It's not Max's. And it couldn't be Max's. I would think all of you would know that by now. The media often gets its facts wrong."

The men seemed to accept that.

"So, who is the daddy?"

"That's not important." I felt confident I could keep the team with me with

this news, but if they knew a rival team's coach was the father, I might lose them. "The point is that I might be a little tired sometimes, and I'm going to start getting big soon because as it turns out, there isn't just one baby. There's three."

"Jesus fuck," Big Ed said. "Baby daddy's got some serious swimmers."

I arched a brow at him but didn't respond. "Despite any limitations I might start to have, you are going to be expected to work your asses off. We are going to take this championship even if I have to waddle out and whack you with a hockey stick."

"Sure thing, Coach," Max said.

As I scanned all their faces, they all seemed to be on board except maybe Big Ed, whose unreadable eyes were on mine.

"All right, onto the ice. We've got some work to do."

Everyone exited onto the ice except for Big Ed. He reached down and picked up a coat that was on the bench. He handed it to me. "In case you get cold."

For a moment I was afraid he was patronizing me, but as I looked closely, I think he really thought he was caring for me.

I tried not to think too much about Big Ed going from a bully to a softy. I took the coat. "Thank you, Ed."

He gave a little grunt in response and then headed to the ice. I was feeling really good about my talk with Todd and the team, and when I got home, I hoped that maybe Pierce would be ready to come around as well.

As I made myself some dinner, I took out my phone and dialed his number. My hands shook and my heart thundered in my chest, wondering if he was still going to be angry. The phone rang and rang and rang. His voicemail finally picked up.

I sighed. "Hey, Pierce. I just wanted to remind you of the doctor's appointment coming up. And I also want to let you know that I told Todd and my team about the pregnancy, but I didn't mention your name. It seemed like something we needed to talk about before it gets to the media. I'd like to talk to you. Please call me back."

Several hours later when I went to bed and checked my phone for the final time, there was still no response from Pierce.

Pierce

A torrent of emotions raged inside me as I entered the doctor's office. All the misery and anger were my own fault. I'd let my libido get the best of me. Because of the lust I had for a younger woman, I was not only looking like a fool for having fallen for her, but also an idiot for not using protection. I was having a hard enough time raising Porter. I wasn't sure how I would be able to deal with three more children, but I would. The truth was that the most challenging part of my life going forward would be having to continue to see Naomi. Staying away from her had never caused her to leave my mind, but at least it protected me from being a fool. But now I couldn't stay away. From now on and for the rest of our children's lives, our lives would be intertwined. This torture was going to be part of my existence.

Yes, it was my own fault that I was here, but it was easier to blame Naomi. Considering she hadn't wanted to be with me, why couldn't she have been stronger in resisting our attraction? Why hadn't she told me she wasn't on birth control? That was the part that really didn't make sense. She was driven to succeed in a world that would be difficult for a woman but even harder for a single mother.

As I stepped into the waiting room and scanned the area, I saw Naomi sitting in a chair. She looked up from her phone, her eyes staring at me with a mixture of emotion. Sure enough, my heart lurched in my chest and yearning rose. But I used my anger to push it away. I wasn't going to be made a fool anymore.

I sucked in a deep breath to guard myself from her allure and started toward her. Another door in the doctor's office opened and a nurse stepped out calling Naomi's name. I was filled with relief that I wasn't going to have to make small talk with Naomi as we waited to be called.

Naomi stood and headed toward the nurse, and I joined her there.

"I'm glad you could make it," she said to me.

I gave her a nod. "Of course." My tone lacked affect, and it was quite possible I was being an asshole. But my heart was already tattered and bruised, and as I already mentioned, it would continue to be tattered and bruised for as long as we raised these kids together. Or, if God took mercy on me, he would end the torment by killing the love I had for her.

I followed Naomi and the nurse down the hall, with the nurse asking a variety of questions. When we entered the room, Naomi sat on the exam table while the nurse took her blood pressure and continued to ask her questions.

I stood in the corner and listened intently, focusing on her health, knowing it was important to the baby. Babies, plural. Jesus Christ, how did something like triplets even happen?

"Dr. Lyman will be in in a moment." The nurse left, and I started to panic. I wasn't ready to talk to Naomi. I wasn't ready to hear her excuses.

The room filled with nearly unbearable silence.

Naomi let out a shuddering breath. "I texted you this, but I'm not sure if you read it or listened to my message. But I've let Todd and the team know about the pregnancy."

I crossed my arms over my chest to guard against the way her voice reached out and tried to wrap around me. "I'm surprised Todd isn't spreading it all over the gossip rags. It will be a great draw for the fans."

She flinched and looked away. Yes, I was being an asshole, but how else could I protect myself?

She blew out a breath. "You'll notice that it hasn't leaked anywhere. I figured you should be involved in how that was done."

I gave her another curt nod, but I didn't respond because I didn't know how the hell to make an announcement about the situation. As it was, I hadn't told Reed or Bo. Maybe I was in denial. Maybe I was hoping the babies belonged to somebody else. But as that thought occurred to me, my heart skipped a beat, and I knew that it was a lie. If the babies weren't mine, the headache would be even worse. It would be proof positive that I was just another fuck to Naomi.

A smart man would insist on a paternity test, but I hadn't done it with Porter, and I wouldn't do it with Naomi. These kids were mine. I knew it in my heart, deep in my soul.

The door opened and Dr. Lyman walked in. "Coach Withers, how are you doing today?" He held out his hand toward Naomi and shook.

"I'm tired a lot, but other than that, I'm fine."

Dr. Lyman turned as if he had just noticed I was in the corner. He extended his hand. "I'm Dr. Lyman."

I shook his hand. "Pierce—"

"Coach Jackson. Of course. I followed your career ever since you played in the American League and later in the National League. I was shocked when you left coaching in the National League and went back down to the American League." He nodded toward Naomi. "Coach Withers, here, is giving you quite the run for your money." He looked at her and then at me as if it had only just dawned on him why I was there. "I can see the rivalry didn't come between you."

I managed a smile, but it was possible it was a grimace.

He turned back to Naomi, and I had a minute to consider that he had recognized me, which meant this situation could be leaked online. But weren't doctors required to keep information about the patient secret? But then I realized that while the staff might be required to keep mum, none of the other patients would. I was definitely going to have to let Reed and Bo know about the pregnancy before the media did.

"We'll do another sonogram to make sure everything is progressing. We should be able to hear the heartbeats this time as well, if you'd like."

I watched in silence as he got the machine ready and squeezed gel over Naomi's swelling belly. My heart swelled with love at the idea that something—or three somethings—that I helped create were growing there.

Moments later, he was pointing to images on a screen, indicating the various babies. "Do you want to know the gender?"

I shrugged, letting Naomi know it was up to her. I was feeling a bit too overwhelmed to say anything or make any decisions.

"They're not being very helpful, but I think this little guy here's a boy."

A boy.

"And this little one may be a girl." He tilted his head and moved the wand around. "But the third one wants to keep it a secret."

A boy and a girl. It wasn't like I didn't know I was about to be a father of

four, but for the most part, I'd been able to not think about it. The reality of it slammed into me like a freight train.

"You're looking a little pale over there, Dad. She did tell you there were triplets, right?"

I nodded. "Yes."

Dr. Lyman chuckled. "Knowing and seeing are two different things, aren't they?"

He finished the exam and indicated that everything looked fine. But he also warned Naomi that she would need to take it easy and pay close attention to her body and any warning signs that something could be wrong.

As he ended the appointment, my phone vibrated in my pocket. I pulled it out, noting it was a text message from Reed.

IS THIS YOU ENTERING AN OB/GYN office in Henderson?

HOLY SHIT. I looked at the picture, knowing it had to be me.

I'LL BE THERE in 45 minutes, I texted back.

I FIGURED that was the amount of time it would take me to get out of the office and back on the road up to Las Vegas. I half expected Reed to call me, but he didn't. I guess he figured I'd let him know what was going on when I arrived.

The doctor helped Naomi off the exam table.

I looked at her. "I've got to go."

Her eyes welled with tears, and she pressed her lips together like she was trying to keep from crying. It pulled at my heartstrings, but like the bastard I was trying to be, I ignored it.

She nodded. "Okay."

I shook Dr. Lyman's hand again and then headed out, going straight to my car and driving back to Las Vegas to the rink.

When I entered my office, Reed and Bo were already there. They each looked up at me from where they were sitting, their eyes wide and expectant.

I went over to my desk and sat down. "Yes, that was me at the OB/GYN office in Henderson. And yes, whatever you're thinking is true. "

Bo gaped. Reed studied me hard.

"The question is why do you seem unhappy about it?" Reed finally asked. "I thought—"

"Hold on a minute. Back up. I'm missing something."

Reed kept his intense eyes on me as he responded to Bo. "Pierce here has a thing for Coach Withers."

Bo nodded. "I thought so. But I thought it was just a crush or something."

"I believe it's more than that. And now it appears that he's acted on it, which to my mind would make him happy."

"So, you're in love with Coach Withers and she's pregnant, right?" Bo clarified.

"Right. With triplets."

This time, Reed reacted the same as Bo. Both of their jaws dropped to their chests.

"Triplets? As in three?" Reed asked.

I nodded.

"Holy fuck. I don't know if I should be in awe of the power of your sperm or feel bad for you because . . . three babies at once. Jesus."

Reed pulled his composure back together. "You still haven't answered the question about why you look miserable about this. The way you were acting at the party, I thought this would be good news."

I sighed as I dragged my fingers through my hair. "I found out about the pregnancy by accident. I don't think she was going to tell me."

"Why not?" Bo asked.

I shrugged. "Clearly, there's something about me that women make the decision not to tell me when they're pregnant. If you have any ideas what that might be, I'd like to hear them."

"First of all, you do know about condoms, right?" Bo said.

Reed shot him like a look. "Don't be a baby, Pierce. There's nothing wrong with you. I don't know why Porter's mom didn't tell you about him. Maybe she couldn't reach you, or maybe she didn't think you'd care—"

"That's a pretty big assumption."

"I don't know how women think. My point is that for whatever reason,

they think they have a good reason. I'm not saying it is a good reason. Although, I have to say I'm a little surprised by Naomi."

"She's young," Bo said.

I looked at him, annoyed that he was suggesting she was too young to tell me the truth. "She's old enough to be coaching a hockey team."

"Well, maybe it's not that she's young. Maybe it's just your goals in life. You know I've been through this just like you with Ruby. When I found out that I was Laina's dad, I was pretty pissed off. I am still devastated about the years I've missed with her. But I also know that Ruby's not telling me wasn't done out of malice or because she thought there was something wrong with me. I think she thought she was doing me a favor because I was going off to pursue my dream."

I glared at Bo. "I am over forty years old. I'm essentially living my dream."

"Yeah, but she's just starting hers. Maybe it was less about you and more about her trying to figure out how she could hold onto her dream." Reed seemed to catch on to what Bo was saying.

I turned my glare on Reed. "She could do it if she has help from me."

Reed stared at me with his hard eyes like he was looking into my soul. I hated when he did that.

"Well, then I guess your being pissed off for the rest of your life makes sense. Just be sure to hide it around the kids. But yeah, you have every reason to be mad forever."

"Fuck you, Reed," I said to his patronizing statement. "I opened myself up to that woman, and she consistently rejected me and then didn't tell me she was pregnant. I have every right to be angry and to question whether she's the woman I thought she was."

Bo nodded. "Absolutely. Like I said, I was really pissed at Ruby. It's harder when you love them and they betray you like this—"

"Do you love her?" Reed asked. "Is this different from Porter's mother?"

As much as I loved these guys and knew I needed them, I didn't want to open a vein and show them how fucked this situation made me.

When I didn't answer right away, Bo said, "You know, I knew Ruby ever since I was a kid, and I knew I was in love with her by the time I was in high school. Hell, deep down, I was still in love with her when I was sent home last summer to rehab my shoulder. When we started to reconnect, I remember thinking that maybe there was something there. Maybe we could build a life

together, and then I learned about Laina. It felt like my world had ended."

"You were pretty fucked up," Reed agreed.

"But I loved her. And I loved Laina, so I had to risk having her rip my heart to shreds again by hearing her reasoning and trying to understand why she made the decision she did, and then forgive her. It was the only way I was going to have her in my life, and as mad as I was, I knew deep down that she was it for me. Even after she kept Laina from me, I was still in love with her. Do you love Naomi?"

My jaw tensed because I did love Naomi despite the fact that I didn't want to. But Naomi didn't love me, so what I felt didn't matter. "It's not the same. Ruby loves you."

"You don't think Naomi loves you?" Reed asked.

"I'm pretty sure she does or at least feels something," Bo said.

"Don't fuck with me, man." Jesus. Did they want to hurt me more?

Bo held his hands up in surrender. "I'm not fucking with you. I don't know for sure, but I overheard Analyn and Ruby speculating on it."

Reed glanced at Bo and then nodded. "You're right. I have too. They didn't say why, but women are more attuned to these things. I meant what I told you before, Pierce. If this woman is what you want, you should fight for her, especially now that she's having a baby."

"Babies," Bo corrected.

I shook my head. "I've been there and done that."

"Then you need to go there and do it again. Look, I know it hurts, man, and it's fucking scary. But what's the alternative? If there's a chance that she loves you and you two could be happy together, isn't that worth risking a little bit more heartbreak?" Bo urged me.

"This is all easy for you to say. Both of you have found the women of your dreams."

Reed and Bo let out loud guffaws at the same time.

"There was nothing easy about it. You were there. You saw how much I struggled with Analyn. I was terrified to take that gigantic leap of faith. And I'm glad I took it, but when I did, I didn't know that it would end well. I had no guarantee that she and I would resolve things and make a life."

Next to him, Bo nodded. "There's nothing scarier than laying your innermost feelings on the line for a woman."

At first, I rejected everything they were telling me, but when I finally was able to go home and could be alone with my thoughts, I wondered if maybe

they were right. As soon as I entertained their suggestion, I'd remind myself that I had tried to lay it on the line for Naomi and she had either rejected me or lied to me. I wasn't sure I had the courage to open myself up again.

At the same time, I knew that if we were going to coparent the triplets, we'd have to at least be civil to each other. That meant I had to stop being selfish and letting my hurt dictate how I was treating her. Based on what the doctor said, having triplets could be risky with potential complications for Naomi during the pregnancy and for the babies. Naomi and I needed to have a game plan, and that meant I needed to talk to her.

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Naomi

I wanted to blame hormones for sitting in the car and bawling my eyes out when Pierce left after the doctor's appointment. I had hoped to have a chance to talk to him to make him see that I was telling him the truth and that I was the woman he said he'd fallen in love with. At the very least, we needed to make a plan for the babies. But just as the appointment was ending, he got a text. I almost wondered if he had someone call him at that exact moment, giving him an excuse to leave.

I understood the pain I'd caused him, but at the same time, I wanted to tell him to grow up. We had three babies coming, and it was possible that one or all of them would need additional help and resources. Multiple babies were at risk of being small simply because there wasn't that much room in the womb, but also because they normally were born early. We needed to prepare for that.

When I finally got myself together, I drove the short distance to my apartment. For a moment, I considered driving up to Las Vegas and forcing Pierce to hear me out, but I was exhausted. So instead, I checked in with Todd and Max, who I'd put in charge so I could go on my doctor's appointment, and hearing that everything was okay, I lay down to take a nap.

I was startled awake as my phone trilled on my bedside table. I reached for it, wondering how long I had been out. My bedroom had grown dark. I looked at the time on my phone and realized I'd been asleep for several hours.

I poked the answer button. "Hello?"

"Are you alright?"

My heart fluttered in my chest at the sound of Pierce's voice.

"Yes. I was just napping."

"We need to talk."

Finally. "I agree."

"I'm at your door."

What? I got out of bed, and with my phone still to my ear, I hurried to the front door. I pulled it open to find Pierce standing looking tired, but at least not so angry.

"I was knocking but you didn't answer."

I used my hand to push my hair away, deciding I had to look like a mess. "I guess I was really tired." I held the door open to let him in. "Can I get you something to drink? I have coffee and tea. Sorry I don't have anything stronger, but I'm not supposed to be drinking now."

He rolled his shoulders, and I wondered if it was an attempt to loosen tension. "I wouldn't mind a coffee."

I headed toward the kitchen where I found a pod and stuck it in the coffee maker, then I put a mug under the spout and pressed the button. While I was there, I pressed the lever to heat up my teakettle thinking I would have a cup of tea.

"Where's Porter?" I asked.

He frowned a little. "Are you afraid I left him home alone? Don't think I can be a good father?"

While I knew I deserved his anger, I was getting tired of his petty sniping. "It was just a question, Pierce." I turned away as I felt the tears pool in my eyes again.

He let out a breath. "Sorry. I asked Bo and Ruby to take him so I could come down here."

I nodded but didn't respond as I pulled his coffee mug from the coffee maker and handed it to him. I turned back to pour hot water over my teabag.

I gripped my mug in both hands like somehow, the warmth of it would guard me from Pierce's cool demeanor. "Would you like to sit at the kitchen table or out in the living room?"

"Wherever you'd be more comfortable."

I made a beeline for my living room, sitting down on the couch and tucking my legs underneath me. Pierce followed me in, sitting down on the other side of the couch. His body faced forward, as if he couldn't look at me.

"It was pretty amazing to hear those heartbeats today."

This statement surprised me and for a moment gave me hope. "It was." I pressed my hand over my belly. "Seems like such a miracle that life is growing inside me."

"I meant what I said before. I want to be a father. I want to be in their lives, and not just for every other weekend." He turned his body toward me, his blue eyes staring intently at me.

"I want that too." I wanted so much more, but clearly, whatever he had felt for me was gone. Then it occurred to me that while he had told me several times about how he felt, I had never shared my feelings. No wonder he was still hurt and angry.

"Pierce, I—"

He shook his head. "We don't need to rehash the past. As you said, this wasn't planned. You're being accommodating, considering."

"Considering?" What was he getting at?

He shrugged. "All I'm saying is that you're stuck with me for the long haul. I plan to be involved, and considering the risks to you and the babies, we need to start planning."

I swallowed hard. I'd really messed up by trying so hard to resist him. He believed I felt stuck with him.

"I have something I need to tell you. And even if you're not going to believe me, I need to say it."

His eyes narrowed slightly and his jaw ticked. "All right."

"First of all, I'm not stuck with you, Pierce. I know my behavior in the past suggests that I didn't want to be with you—"

"You said it was wrong."

I nodded because it was true. "The truth was, I had plans, goals, and you came into my life and distracted me from them. The fact that I kept being with you must prove that—"

"The sex is good, Naomi. I get that. Hell, there was a time, around your age, that it was all I wanted too. I get it."

Ugh. No. He wasn't understanding me. "Pierce, it's not just sex. Not for me."

He stared at me, but I saw skepticism in his eyes.

"When we were in San Diego, I started dreaming about us being a family. You, me, Porter, and the babies."

Emotion swept across his handsome face, but he worked hard to school it

back into indifference. He did feel something for me, he just didn't want to or was afraid.

I set my tea on the coffee table and moved closer to him on the couch. "I fell for you too, Pierce. I fought it, but not because of our age difference or that I didn't think you're good enough. I fought it because I was afraid that I'd ruin my career, and at that time, it was all I had. All I'd ever worked for."

"And now?" His voice was rough with emotion.

"And now, I'm terrified I ruined my chance at true happiness. Hockey is great. But it's not what I had with you." I remembered I hadn't said the important words. I took in a breath because I was terrified he'd reject them. But I owed it to him to give him the truth. "I love you, Pierce."

He let out a shuddering breath. "Are you just saying that because of the babies?"

I shook my head. "No. I'm saying it because it's true." I reached out and pressed my hand to his cheek, hope filling me when he didn't pull away. "Is it too late for me? Have your feelings changed? Can I be forgiven?"

He closed his eyes, and I was sure he was having a battle in his head. What would win? Love or fear?

His arms reached out and pulled me into his lap. Relief washed over me as he held me close.

"Say it again."

"I love you, Pierce."

He lifted his head and looked me in the eyes. "I love you, Naomi." Then his lips were on mine. A wash of emotion flooded me. Relief, love, hope, happiness, and yes, arousal because this was Pierce. Sexy, sweet, Pierce.

"I want you," he murmured against my lips.

"I'm yours."

He lifted his head and looked at me. "I've wanted to hear that for so fucking long." His smile turned sheepish. "But I was also meaning I want to touch you. Make love to you."

"Like I said, I'm yours."

He smiled as he stood while still holding me.

"You're so strong." I squeezed his bicep.

"Not too old, eh?" He carried me toward the bedroom.

"Not at all."

"Which door?" he asked.

"The one at the end of the hall. Thank God I made my bed."

“Why? We’re just going to mess it up.” He set me down by my bed, his hands lifting to cradle my cheeks. “Tell me again.”

I laughed. “I love you. Now get naked.” I pushed him, and he fell back on the bed. I crawled over him. “Maybe I’ll make love to you.”

“Maybe we make love together.” He tugged me down, fusing his lips to mine. After that, we disrobed and, flesh to flesh, showed each other how we really felt.

He moved down my body, stopping at my belly to kiss the babies. “Bo thinks I have super sperm to impregnate you with three babies.”

“Big Ed was pretty impressed too.”

Pierce rolled me under him and slowly slid inside me. “I love you, Naomi. I love you and the babies.”

“And I love you and the babies.”

He stopped for a moment. “Porter is part of the package. I want him to stay with me and—”

“And I love Porter too.”

His smile was so sweet. “You’re amazing.”

“You’re the one with the super sperm.”

His smile turned wicked. “Thinking of which . . .” He moved, and words were lost as our bodies took over, expressing love and awe and passion. Together, we rose to the peak. I flew over first, overcome with joy and pleasure. Pierce thrust again and joined me. Finally, we were together, and whatever life brought, I knew I’d be stronger by having him with me.

Pierce

Reed and Bo were right. Life could be fucking fantastic if you were willing to risk your heart. There had always been a draw to Naomi, and I had wanted to see where it could take us, but I hadn't ever imagined it would be as wonderful as it was turning out to be. From the moment we shared our feelings in her living room several months ago, I vowed that I would love her forever. Almost immediately, I set out to make that happen by asking her to move in with me and then buying the perfect house outside of Henderson that had a pool and a yard for Porter and the kids, five bedrooms for our growing brood, and of course, close to work and the doctor for Naomi. The drive to Las Vegas wasn't so far, and I didn't mind the commute.

It meant Porter had to change schools, but he didn't seem to mind. In fact, he seemed to use it as a chance to start over. Not that he didn't have moments of obstinance. Not long after Naomi and I moved in together, Jeannie called to check in with Porter. He'd always been angry with her, but it hadn't stopped him from asking her when he might be able to go home. But this time, he didn't ask. And in fact, in the conversation, he referred to his place with me as *home*. Between that and his starting to call me Dad, it made me feel like I had hit the jackpot family-wise.

It occurred to me that while I had given Porter the words that I was committed to being his father, I needed to make a symbolic gesture. So when he got off the phone with Jeannie, I let her know what I planned to do, curious whether she would fight me on it or not. She grumbled a little bit, but

I didn't buy it. I believed she loved Porter, but I didn't think she wanted him to live with her full-time. Well, good, because I planned to keep him with me.

The following week, I sat him down and handed him his birth certificate that I had ordered.

"What is this?" he asked, his eyes looking up at me with concern.

"That's your birth certificate. But it's missing something."

I pointed to the part where it said *Father*. My name had been listed, but under his name, he had Jeannie's last name. "Your name is Porter Brown. Maybe I'm being old-fashioned, perhaps even sexist, but you're my son and I want you to have my name."

He looked up at me, his eyes rounding in surprise. "Really?"

I nodded. "Absolutely. You should be Porter Jackson. Or Porter Brown Jackson. I'm sorry I didn't think of it sooner, but I didn't want to change your name without your input. How do you feel about this idea?"

His head bobbed up and down. "Does that mean I can stay?"

My heart ached that he was worried that I was going to send him back to his mother's.

"Whether you want to change your last name or not, you're staying here with me. Of course, anytime you want to visit your mom, we can make arrangements. The other thing I wanted to talk to you about is making your living with me a legal situation. What would you say to my getting full custody of you?"

Emotion swept over his face, but he worked very hard to keep me from seeing it. Someday, I hoped that he would feel safe and comfortable enough to let me see how he truly felt. He nodded in response.

"Good. Get your coat, and we'll head down to the courthouse and file the papers."

Now, several months later, everything in my life was settling into place. There was just one more thing left to do before I could call my life complete. At the moment, though, I couldn't deal with it as I watched the Buckaroos skate against Naomi's Silver Nuggets in the championship game of the league. I watched her on the other side of the rink, partly in awe and partly out of concern. She had grown so large carrying three babies, and I was worried sick about her, although she hated it when I fussed over her. In a crazy turn, though, her biggest protector on her team was Big Ed. In fact, the guy almost landed in jail when he knocked a photographer down who he felt had gotten too close to Naomi.

It wasn't that I didn't want my team to win, because of course I did, but I knew if they didn't, if Naomi won, I was going to be more than all right with that too. It was one of the reasons that I stepped back and let Bo take the lead on coaching the team for the last several months. When the news broke about me and Naomi, Buckaroo fans weren't too happy about it. By stepping back, Bo became the face of the coaching staff, and it settled fans' concerns about whether or not I was letting my dick dictate my coaching.

On Naomi's side, the fans reacted as well, but they felt she was using her wiles on me to beat us so it wasn't negative. Sure, I was easily distracted by her, but that wasn't why she'd been able to beat our team and all the other teams to get into the championship. Saying she was distracting me took away from the fact that Naomi was a gifted coach.

The second period ended, and the teams headed off to their respective locker rooms. I went up to the control booth to check in with the person managing the technical aspects of the arena. She let me know that everything was a go, and I headed back down to the rink.

When the teams returned to the ice to play the third period, the lights dimmed and a spotlight shone in the middle of the rink. The players who were about to go on the ice to warm up again stopped. Instead, I hopped the wall, having put on skates, and started toward Naomi's side while carrying a wireless microphone. While there were a few cheers, there were several boos, and I suspected many of them came from my own fans. But I didn't care. My eyes were on Naomi, and she watched me, intrigued, her head tilted to the side. She came out of the box and stood by the gate onto the ice. Big Ed came to stand next to her, his arms folded across his chest and a scowl on his face.

"What are you doing?" Naomi asked with humor in her voice. I had played this scenario out so many ways, but as I watched her with happiness gleaming in her eyes, her hands rubbing her humongous belly where our three children grew, I tossed all the plans and just went with my heart.

I brought the mic up to my mouth. "I've come to ask you a question, Coach Withers."

A gasp rang out through the arena, followed by ahs. Naomi bit her lower lip.

When I finally reached her, I opened the gate and then knelt down on one knee on the ice in front of her. Again, the arena erupted with cheers. I took a box out of my pocket and flipped it open to expose the diamond ring that I had bought her.

I held it to her as I said to her and the crowd, "I love you, Coach Withers. I want to spend my life with you and make lots of little hockey players. Would you make me the happiest man on Earth and marry me?"

Tears streamed down her face as her head bobbed up and down. "Yes, yes." She reached down, grabbing the lapels of my coat and tugging me up. I rose and slipped the ring on her finger, but she barely looked at it and instead threw her arms around my neck. It told me she didn't care about the bling or the money or anything but me and the family we were creating. The arena erupted in another roar of cheers.

I gave her a kiss but knew my time was limited. The third period of the game was still left to play.

We pulled away.

"I love you, Coach Jackson."

I grinned, feeling so fucking happy.

"But we're still going to win tonight."

"Don't you know, baby? I just won." I gave her another quick kiss and then skated back to my side, hamming it up as a man in love with the fans. When I reached my side, I hoisted myself over the wall and received handshakes from Bo and the rest of the team.

"I told you, man, there's nothing better than love," Bo said, giving me a slap on the back. I looked across the rink at Naomi, who was watching me, and the love I saw in her eyes nearly brought me to my knees. He was right. There was nothing better than love. Win or lose tonight, I knew that I had already won the greatest gift—Naomi's love.

EPILOGUE I

Naomi

I defied the laws of gravity, I decided as I looked at myself in the mirror wearing a custom-made maternity wedding dress. I thought of the bumblebee with its round, fat little body and tiny wings that somehow was able to fly. That was me. I was so big and round, I wasn't quite sure how I was able to stay standing.

I rubbed my hand over my belly, willing the babies to stay in there for as long as possible. When we won the championship, I was so happy, I jumped and then was afraid I'd induced labor when my stomach contracted. Luckily, it was a false alarm. We were just shy of thirty-three weeks of pregnancy, which was the average length when pregnant with triplets, Dr. Lyman explained. He assured me that all three were growing nicely, but there were still risks.

"You look beautiful." Analyn said as she placed flowers in my hair.

"Gorgeous," Ruby agreed.

"You always were beautiful," my mother said as she looked at me through the mirror. "Your father always worried about men. He used to tease about beating them off with a stick."

Our smiles were bittersweet as we thought about my dad.

"There's no beating Pierce off," Analyn said with a laugh. "That guy will crawl over broken glass naked for Naomi."

We all laughed at that, and I was glad that I hadn't ruined our friendship by keeping so much from them and hurting Pierce. When I finally explained

everything, they were hurt that I hadn't trusted them, but these were wonderfully kind, generous women, and they forgave me. I was even invited when Ruby went into labor and gave birth to her and Bo's second child, a boy they named Buck after Bo's father.

And when my team beat their husbands' team at the championship by a single goal, they were still thrilled for me. But of course, the talk of the game was Pierce's proposal to me. I had hoped that someday we would get married, but I hadn't expected him to skate across the ice in the middle of the championship game and propose. Then again, that was the sort of man Pierce was. Sweet, romantic, and one hundred percent mine.

Todd was beside himself when the news of our relationship broke. He especially liked the story that I was seducing the rival team to ensure a win. It didn't bug me as much as it would have in the past because I knew now that there were more important things to worry about than gossip. That didn't mean I wasn't concerned about my job. But after Pierce's proposal and our fans went even more wild, I knew it was the right time to negotiate my contract for next season. Todd was in a good mood as he not only won the championship, proving everyone who thought he was nuts to hire a female coach wrong, but he won the bet with Reed. I figured when Todd was happy, it was a good time to talk business.

Pierce and I had already begun working out the logistics of parenting three tiny babies. We would have some time during the off-season to spend with them, but I wanted to return to my career, and Pierce wanted me to, as well.

"I've already achieved everything I set out to do. Now my goal is your goal. That doesn't mean I'm going to give you coaching tips because I'm still part-owner of the Buckaroos, but I will support you in every other way, including taking care of the babies or helping pack them up and bringing them along when you travel."

If I wasn't already one hundred percent head over heels in love with him, his commitment to me would have done it. "What about the Buckaroos?"

"It's time for Bo to take the helm. I'm not retiring, but I'll take a step back so that I can be with my wife and children and still help Reed out as well."

Never in a million years did I think I would be able to achieve the dream of coaching in the men's league and having a happy ever after. And yet here I was, about to marry the man of my dreams after negotiating a near-perfect coaching package with Todd. My demands had been fairly simple. I didn't

ask for a raise. Instead, I asked for an assistant coach, private flights when we traveled, a place for the babies in my office and when traveling, and hiring Betts to take over marketing for the team. Todd agreed. He didn't even negotiate. He just said yes.

So as I stood in front of the mirror, ready to commit my life to Pierce, I had everything in the world I could've ever wanted and more.

"Ready?" Analyn asked.

"Yes. More than ready."

We walked from the sunroom where I was getting ready, down the hall to the ballroom where the ceremony and reception would be held. We were holding the wedding in an old log lodge overlooking the desert. It had been built in the nineteenth century by a wealthy silver mine owner, so while it might've been made of logs, it was the size of a mansion and just as opulent. Today, it was operated as a boutique lodge by none other than my boss, Todd Marshall.

"Are you okay, honey?" my mother asked as I waited outside the door to the ceremony.

"More than okay. Go sit. Make sure the boys are behaving."

She laughed. "I'm not that capable." She kissed me and entered the ballroom. I didn't feel the need to have anybody walk me down the aisle. My mother fussed a little bit thinking one of my brothers should do it, but I was my own woman, making my own choice to give myself to Pierce.

The music started, and Analyn, Ruby, and Betts entered the ballroom first. I followed, my gaze going immediately to Pierce. Next to him stood Porter, looking so handsome standing in as best man for Pierce. Reed and Bo were attendants as well.

I glanced at my mom who was weeping while next to her, my brothers looked uncomfortable in their nice suits. When they saw me looking at them, they smiled and all gave me a thumbs-up.

If I were capable of it, I might have run down the aisle and flung myself into Pierce's arms. Instead, with one hand holding flowers and the other gently rubbing my belly, I made my way to him, emotion welling inside me at the way his blue eyes shone with love for me. As I drew closer, he stepped forward, holding his hand out to me.

He took my hand, pulling me in close, and leaning down, he kissed my cheek. "You're so fucking beautiful Naomi."

I blushed.

The sermon seemed to take forever, but then, finally, the minister introduced us as husband and wife, and Pierce kissed me, sealing our hearts and souls together. I finally understood what elation felt like.

After the ceremony, we had the reception, and it was lovely how happy everyone was for us, regardless of whose team they were a part of. Everyone but Betts. Not that she wasn't happy for me, because I knew she was. But I could tell that being here was difficult for her.

When I first asked Analyn and Ruby about Betts as we were preparing for the wedding, Analyn shared how Betts had been engaged, but that he had not only hit on Analyn, but he had been cheating on Betts. I knew if my happily ever after was ripped away from me, I would be devastated, although it was a good thing that Betts didn't marry a philanderer.

Ruby had paired Betts up on a date with Laina's teacher, Pete, who was a really nice guy. Ruby had been certain they'd be perfect for each other, but as I watched Betts drink yet another glass of champagne, I could see she didn't feel the same.

As Pierce and I mingled with our guests, I sought out Analyn and Ruby. "Is Betts okay? I'm worried about her."

Analyn and Ruby looked over at the table where Betts sat pouring herself another glass of champagne.

"Maybe you should send your boss over," Ruby said with a nod across the room to Todd.

I frowned. "Why?"

Ruby shrugged. "It's just the way he looks at her, you know."

Analyn nodded. "Yeah, I've seen that look before." She turned her attention back to me. "It was on Pierce when he would see you."

I laughed. "Todd and Betts? I don't think so. The guy is a serial entrepreneur and is easily bored. I'll be honest, I don't think he has a sex drive. I don't think he's been with a woman since he divorced."

"I don't know," Ruby said with a shrug.

I turned my head to look at Todd, wondering what the heck they were seeing. He was standing in the corner, looking down at his phone, which was what I would expect him to be doing. I was about to tell Analyn and Ruby that when his head lifted and his gaze went directly to Betts like he knew exactly where she was.

"Maybe he's just thinking about work." After all, Betts worked for him now.

"Well, I've never heard sex called work before, but okay," Ruby joked.

"Did someone say sex?" From behind me, Pierce's hand slid over my belly, and his lips settled on my neck.

Analyn laughed. "Slow down there, big fella. Looks like you've done enough."

"How about a dance, then?" Pierce didn't wait for an answer as he turned to me and took me into his arms, and we glided across the floor. Well, he glided because he was sexy, handsome, and graceful. I wasn't any of those things, but I was okay with that. Giving up my figure was worth it to have three healthy babies.

"So, Mrs. Jackson—"

I let out a swoony sound. "I love the sound of that."

He grinned. "Mrs. Jackson. I'm told it's time to cut the cake, and Porter wants to help."

I nodded. "Of course. We're a family now."

Pierce's eyes shone with reverence. I knew it made him happy that I had accepted Porter fully into my life. I wasn't his mother, because he had one, but I still loved him, and I was pretty sure Porter loved me back, although he could still be stingy with his emotions.

We headed over to the cake, and Porter joined us, each slicing a piece and each sharing it with the other. Our guests ahhed and clapped when we had a group hug.

"You look tired," Pierce whispered in my ear as Porter cut himself another piece of cake.

"I'm getting there."

"How about you and I go up to the suite and you can rest?"

I pressed my hand over his heart, a heart that was now mine. "What about the honeymoon?"

Another thing I loved about Pierce was how he could still look at me with lust in his eyes even though I was the size of a small house.

"Well, you're going to need your rest for the honeymoon. I intend to take full advantage."

All my girly bits tingled, and it had nothing to do with three babies kicking my bladder or milk starting to come to my breasts.

We checked in with Ruby and Bo who said they'd take Porter for the night. Then we said our goodbyes and went up to the honeymoon suite. Pierce helped me lie down on the bed, and then he lay down behind me,

spooning his long body around me, his hand coming over my body and resting on the babies.

He kissed my temple. "Have a good rest, Mrs. Jackson. Be still, babies. Mommy has to rest."

My heart did a little dance in my chest as I closed my eyes and settled against him.

It was funny how just a few months ago, I wanted this man but was too afraid to love him. I'd been sure I'd end up fired or heartbroken or both. But by loving him, I had everything a woman could want and more than I asked for. I'd bet on Pierce and I'd won.

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EPILOGUE II

Todd

Life was such a bore. Everyone would call me a selfish asshole for thinking so. After all, I had more money than I could ever spend. All my companies were successes, even the most recent one, an obscure hockey team in the desert of Nevada. It was a purchase I made on a bet by my good buddy Levi. And, as with the case of all my companies, I had come out on top. I had taken this ragtag team, did the unthinkable by hiring a woman to coach it, and then several weeks ago won the league championship. Even better, I recouped all the money I had sunk into it and then some. But now that the challenge was gone, I was back to being bored off my gourd.

I stood at the side of the room as I watched the coach of my team, Naomi Withers, become Naomi Jackson by marrying the coach of a rival team. It was quite possible that the financial success of the team was due to all the drama surrounding Naomi and her love life. But in the end, it didn't matter. I'd won the bet with Levi and Reed Hampton, the rival team's co-owner, and now I was in need of another challenge in my life.

I looked across the room at my newest hire, Elisabeth Adams, whom everyone called Betts. When Naomi negotiated her contract for the next season, she insisted that I hire Betts, a marketing expert who'd been laid off when her company had been sold. I was sure Naomi wanted me away from marketing, considering how much I had encouraged the media to gossip about the team. Now that I'd achieved my goal, I had no problems hiring Betts and others to take on the task I'd been doing over the last year. As I

said, the project was done, so now it was time to let others run it so I could move on to the next.

Betts looked as bored as I felt, but her answer was to consume glass after glass of champagne. I believed Betts was happy for Naomi, but I could see watching her friend find happiness was difficult for her. I didn't know her story, but based on her actions at this wedding, I suspected she had heartache in her life. Join the club. I had tried marriage once. I even had a son from it. My wife had liked the money, but not how much I worked to earn it. I suppose that was better than the alternative of her liking the money and not caring if I was never around. But in that marriage, I learned that I wasn't cut out for commitment. I couldn't make her happy. I did my best to be involved with my son when the marriage finally ended, but now at sixteen, he seemed to have little use for me except, of course, for my checkbook.

When my marriage ended, I was free to focus on my business, and I grew it into one of the largest in the country. It wasn't just one business, it was many, because I loved the challenge of starting something new and taking it all the way to the top. But after a moment of success came the boredom and the itch to find something new.

In all the years since my wife and I parted, a woman had never again factored into my life. A few times, I felt the itch to have an orgasm and would hook up with a woman, but I generally found the experience not very satisfying. Ultimately, I learned that a little bit of porn and my own hand were all I needed, and even that desire was far and few between. Sex just didn't hold an interest to me anymore, or at least that's what I had believed until the day Betts walked into my office for her interview.

When pious people described a temptress, the image they used fit Betts to a T. Long, wavy auburn hair, a curvaceous body, and long legs. I'd fantasized about her wrapping her legs around my hips before our interview even ended. I had a moment to wonder whether I should hire her, but I determined that I had promised Naomi that I would, and I figured that reaction was just a fluke. Except it wasn't. Every time I saw Betts, I was hit straight in the groin with an overwhelming lust. It was fucking annoying and yet, at the same time, I found myself craving it. It was better than boredom.

As I watched her, I felt the stir of my dick again, so I straightened away from the wall, put my phone in my pocket, and headed out of the ballroom.

This lodge was another investment of mine, but not really a project like I did with the hockey team. Initially, I had bought the place for myself to

escape the busyness of work and all the lights and glitz of Las Vegas. When I bought it, I had all the systems updated. The place maintained its Nineteenth-Century charm, but underneath the old façade were the newest and the best systems and technology money could buy. Recently, I started renting it out to corporate groups and now, for a wedding.

As I left the ballroom, what I really wanted to do was go up to my suite and end the day. But I owed it to Naomi to give her the wedding of a lifetime, so I made a beeline to the kitchen to check on the staff and make sure that everything was running smoothly.

Confirming that it was, I left and decided to head to the library, thinking I would get a brandy and sit quietly for a moment before returning to the reception. As I rounded the corner, I passed the powder room where Betts was standing just outside, looking down at the side of her dress and swearing.

"Is something wrong?" I asked.

Her head jerked up at me, her eyes wide. She let out a breath and leaned against the wall, making me wonder just how much she'd had to drink. "I got my dress caught on something and now it's ripped."

I looked down to where her hand was clutching the seam of her dress. A tear along the seam exposed a smooth leg.

Fucking hell. I shifted and turned away, hoping she didn't notice the tent beginning to appear in my slacks.

"And of course, I don't have a sewing kit on me. But I can't walk back in there with my dress about to rip apart."

I should've offered to go in and get one of her friends for her, but I didn't. "Here, come with me." I led her down to the library where it would be private because it seemed like going into a private space was a good idea. I didn't have a sewing kit there. I didn't have a sewing kit anywhere. Maybe one of my staff did. I could call them. But I didn't.

When I shut the door behind Betts, I pulled the boutonniere from my lapel and knelt down next to her.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

I held up the pin. "I figured I'd pin the seams together until we could find a sewing kit."

I reached out to take the fabric of the dress, discovering it was more torn than I had realized. My fingers brushed over her soft skin and the lace top of her stocking. I had the urge to lean forward and run my tongue over the smooth skin of her thigh and then rip her stocking off with my teeth. I bit my

tongue to keep myself from acting on this impulse as I did my best to focus on bringing the two seams together and pinning them into place. It wasn't easy because my hands were shaking. Maybe I'd had too much to drink too.

When the pin was in, I took a breath and stood up. I stared into her amazing green eyes. I'd never seen a color like that in eyes before. "Are you all right now?"

She stared at me, but her expression was unreadable. A tendril of her red hair had fallen, and without thinking, I used my hand to push it back, the tips of my fingers brushing over the soft ivory skin of her cheek.

Her breath hitched, and I wondered if maybe she was feeling the chemistry between us too. What would she do if I acted on it? If I pressed my lips to hers? If I let my hands roam her body and discover the secrets under this sexy dress?

But I was her boss. As much as I wanted to rid myself of the boredom in my life, I wasn't about to risk my empire by fucking one of my staff.

Or was I?

[Continue reading Betts and Todd's story here](#)

Did you know that Bo Tyler has had two fake marriages in the past?

[Read about his first fake marriage here.](#)

"I have to think about it, Bo."

He nodded. "Of course. I understand." He reached into the front pocket of the flannel shirt he wore. He pulled out a scrap of paper. "Here's my phone number. It's my personal cellphone. That's how much I trust you, Analyn. If you have any more questions or you're going to give me the blowoff, or maybe you'll agree to a few fun dinners, call me and let me know."

"I will. I'm sorry, I can't just outright agree to it."

He waved my concern away. "No, I get it. It's a crazy request." He grinned at me. "I'm kind of a crazy guy." He walked over to the door and opened it. Then he turned and looked at me with concern in his expression. "Am I stepping on Reed's toes? I could tell he didn't like the attention I was paying to you last night. I figured when you were leaving the rink alone and then agreed to come for drinks with me, it meant the feeling was unrequited on his side."

Unrequited? "No, there's nothing between Reed and me." The lie was burning a hole in my gut. Or maybe not a lie since Reed and I weren't a couple. But it still felt wrong.

"Okay, good. Listen, even if you decide not to be my pretend girlfriend, if you ever want to go out for drinks again or hang out, let me know. It was nice to talk to somebody who was from close to home."

I laughed. In my mind, Chicago, Illinois wasn't really close to his tiny hometown in Wisconsin. But maybe our both being Midwesterners made us kindred spirits with each other.

"I'll keep that in mind."

[Read Bet on It HERE.](#)

[Get A Friendly Wager - Bo and Ruby's scorching hot fake marriage secret baby romance here.](#)

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BET ON IT (SNEAK PEEK)



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DESCRIPTION

Being a billionaire had become boring until a stranger showed up to a conference and spiced things up...

Curvy, sassy, and dangerously younger than me...

Analyn was everything that a former hockey player needed to stay away from.

I was used to women falling all over me.
But Analyn's pretty mouth that never shut up was still tempting.
Especially when I made a bet that she couldn't resist.

Analyn had no idea she was setting herself up for failure.
Little Miss Sassy came back to me, this time looking for a job.
And I knew it was my turn again to suggest a wager.

Our one-night stand had to be forgotten.
But I couldn't *not* notice that cute pencil skirt she'd wear to the office.

All eyes were on me... on *us*.
And my eyes were on the only woman I could *bet* would never trust me.
Or would she?

PROLOGUE

Analyn

M*en are scum.* Especially Chase Tolliver, the man I was sure was going to propose to me. I was right. Oh, did he ever propose to me. Except it wasn't marriage. It was an open relationship.

As it turned out, we'd been in an open relationship practically since we started dating. I just hadn't known it.

When he'd suggested the new arrangement, we were at a fancy restaurant in Chicago, my heart beating a million miles a minute, at first in joy and then in shock. Did he really mean that he wanted an open relationship? Did it go both ways?

I pointed toward a handsome man sitting at another table and asked, "So if I wanted to sleep with him, you'd be all right with that?"

He gave me an affable smile. "Sure. That's the point, isn't it?"

I wasn't sure what hurt more—that he didn't feel sex should be monogamous or that there was no sign of jealousy at the idea of my sleeping with another man. Both were bad. Both indicated that I wasn't in the type of relationship I wanted.

"And what if I didn't want that?" I'd asked him.

He didn't say anything at first, but that pause told me everything I needed to know. He hadn't been faithful while we dated. He wouldn't be faithful in a marriage. A marriage he hadn't even proposed. Chase wasn't the man for me, after all.

I put my napkin on the table. "Let me save you the trouble. You're

welcome to screw around with all the women you want, but when you need a plus-one or a girlfriend, don't call me."

I stood and walked away from the table to leave the restaurant. When he didn't call after me, I began to wonder if my reaction was exactly what he wanted. He'd set me up to break up with him so he wouldn't have to break up with me. Coward.

Men are scum and cowards.

The best way to get over a breakup is to spend time with your best friend. Unfortunately for me, my best friend lived in Las Vegas while I was in Chicago. No worries. I simply packed a bag and hopped a plane and was now spending a week with my best friend, Betts. In the few days I'd been there, we had done all the things required to get over a man, which involved copious amounts of ice cream and wine. We were having such a great time, she invited me to be her roommate if I wanted to move to Las Vegas. I was seriously considering that idea.

Unfortunately, tonight Betts was on a date with her boyfriend, Paul. They had an on-again-off-again relationship that had been off when I arrived, but then he called earlier tonight, and it appeared that they were on again.

She felt bad leaving me at her place alone while she made up with Paul, but I assured her that it was okay. I wanted her to be happy, and if Paul was the guy who was going to make her happy, then she needed to see him.

After she got all dressed up and headed out to meet Paul, I putzed around her condo for a little bit, but I didn't like being alone. I started to think about Chase, and instead of thinking what an asshole he was, I got down on myself.

What was wrong with me that I wasn't enough? I determined the best way to combat self-pity was to go out and live it up. I was in Las Vegas, Sin City, after all.

There had to be a reason the motto of Las Vegas was, "What happens in Vegas stays in Vegas." Surely, that meant I could let go of my inhibitions in an effort to forget Chase and not worry about any ramifications. That sure sounded better than hanging around Betts's condo feeling sorry for myself.

I did a quick Google search looking for the best places to go that weren't about gambling, or at least only about gambling. In Las Vegas, I swear there were slot machines in the bathrooms. But I didn't have any money to lose, so I just wanted a nice club where I could drink and let my hair down.

I decided on the Golden Oasis. According to Yelp, it was the coolest club because it included tech features like holograms with famous celebrities of

Hollywood's golden era. I dressed for a night at a club, which included a red dress that clung to my ample curves, styling my long, dark hair into thick waves, and putting on enough makeup to suggest I was interested without being trappy.

I studied the result in the full-length mirror in the guest room of Betts's condo. "Eat your heart out, Chase."

I ordered a rideshare that dropped me off in front of the club. I walked in and was pleased to see that it was as cool as the Yelp reviewers and images had made it seem. On one wall, a hologram of Marilyn Monroe in her iconic stand over a vent moved until air blew her dress out. A few drunk men joked around like they were trying to look up her dress. Women took selfies of themselves modeling the same stance as Marilyn.

The drunk men notwithstanding, the place had a young, hip, yet sophisticated vibe. I patted myself on the shoulder for making a good choice.

I made my way to the bar, taking a seat on the stool. I should have ordered something exotic, but I couldn't think of anything offhand so I started with a plain white wine.

As I drank, I watched the activities in the club. A crowd filled the dance floor, where new arrangements of old standards played. More holograms of Hollywood's shining stars shimmered among the dancers.

I finished my wine and ordered a cocktail that included cranberry juice and vodka and continued to watch the crowd. I could tell the people who were single, looking for a good time, apart from those who were couples.

Couples just had a vibe about them. It was like I could see the bond between their hearts. The more I thought about it, Chase and I didn't have that bond. I thought we had true love, but clearly, we didn't. It was time I stopped grieving over losing something I didn't have.

What better way to forget one man than by spending time with another one?

I didn't know where that thought came from, but after a glass of wine and a cocktail, it made perfect sense. A titillating thrill shimmered through me at the idea of meeting a stranger in a bar. Betts would probably be worried, because neither she nor I was the type to go clubbing and hook up with men.

Did I want to hook up? No, I told myself. But I wouldn't mind having a man notice me. Or pay attention to me. I could enjoy the company of a man without it ending up as a hookup, right?

I scanned the bar looking for someone with the potential of enjoying an

evening of drinking and maybe dancing. There were many men to choose from, but some I dismissed off the bat, like the ones trying to look up Marilyn's dress. Sure, I'd like to spend my evening with someone handsome and sexy, but it would be nice if they had a little substance as well.

My gaze settled on a man sitting at the end of the bar looking bored and maybe disgruntled. Like his life hadn't turned out the way he thought it would. *Welcome to the club, buddy.*

He appeared older than me, maybe in his mid-forties, but he was definitely handsome. He was the epitome of distinguished, with short brown hair with a little pepper of gray, lines along his eyes that hinted at wisdom or experience, and a strong, chiseled jaw. He wore a T-shirt that showed muscle definition a man half his age would envy. I decided he was the perfect one for me to make friends with tonight.

I made a beeline toward him, taking a seat in the stool next to him. "Can I buy you a drink? And before you say no, or yes, I just want you to know the only reason I'm over here talking to you is because you look like you're alone, and so am I, and I'm looking for someone to have a good time with tonight."

His head turned, showing pale blue eyes that made me think of a meadow stream. His arched brow suggested he thought I was a lunatic.

Only then did I realize how he could take my words.

I gave my head a quick shake. "I mean a good time as in having drinks and talking and dancing. You look like you could benefit from having your mind taken off whatever it is you're ruminating over. And I'm here to forget a man, whose name will never cross my lips again."

I half expected him to get off the stool and walk away without a word. Instead, he tilted his head to the side. "What makes you think I was going to say no?"

His question took me off guard, mostly because I expected him to respond to my bad attempt to buy him a drink.

I shrugged. "I don't know. I've never actually gone to a bar and talked to a stranger. You might think I'm crazy. I'm not, unless approaching a stranger in a bar is crazy."

His lips twitched upward. "Sometimes, crazy is a good thing. Makes life interesting."

I nodded.

"I could use something interesting in my life right about now." He held up

his hand toward the bartender. "Josh."

Yay. It was working.

The bartender headed over to us. "What can I get you?"

My new friend looked at me. "What would you like?"

"I'm buying, remember? What do you want?"

He flashed a grin, revealing a dimple, and holy cow, he really was handsome. He turned to Josh. "I'll have a bourbon and water."

"And I'll have another one of those cranberry vodka things."

Josh went to fix our drinks.

"You must come here a lot if you know the bartender's name," I said.

"I come here enough. It's not really my ambiance, but the owners run a good club. I know one of them and have been bugging him to open one like this but with a sports theme."

I frowned. "Aren't there a lot of sports bars?"

"Yes, but I mean like this with the holograms. Imagine being able to sit with a hologram of Babe Ruth or Wayne Gretzky."

"Wayne who?"

He closed his eyes and shook his head.

I felt a little dumb not knowing who this Wayne guy was.

Finally, he opened his eyes, his baby blues showing humor. "Wayne Gretzky, probably the single best hockey player ever."

"I'm sorry, I don't know hockey."

He sighed, like he'd heard that more than once. "The point is a place where fans can come and be with their all-time favorite sports giants." Movement caught his eye, and he raised his hand again. "As a matter of fact . . ."

A couple approached him at the bar. "Hey, Max, Amelia." He turned to me. "This is . . .?" He laughed sheepishly. "I'm sorry, I haven't gotten your name."

"Analyn."

"This is Analyn. She might be crazy, but in a good way."

The heat of a blush came to my cheeks, but I extended my hand to the man and woman.

"This is Max Clarke and his wife, Amelia. They own this place."

"Nice to meet you." I'd never met the owner of anything. In movies, it always seemed like knowing the owner, or the owner knowing you, meant you were a big deal. I wondered who my new friend was.

Max laughed. "We were having dinner when we realized that the kids were over with Amelia's brother and his wife and decided that we would have a night on the town. In fact, we're talking about maybe getting a suite at a local casino."

"Not just any suite," Amelia said, waggling her brows at her husband. "The suite that started it all."

I watched them with envy, wondering why I hadn't been able to have that sort of relationship with Chase. I didn't know Max and Amelia, or about the suite that started it all, but in the few seconds I'd been with them, I knew that they had something special.

"Well, don't let me keep you from your night on the town," my drinking buddy said.

"You have a good evening. Both of you. It's nice to meet you, Analyn." Max turned his attention to my new friend. "And the next time my brother Sam is in town, we'll get together and talk about that sports bar idea of yours."

"Sounds great."

As Max and Amelia walked off, Josh, the bartender, served our drinks.

I held up my drink to click with his, but first . . . "I think you should tell me your name, and then we can cheers."

He held up his bourbon and water. "I'm Reed."

"Here's to crazy, new, interesting friends."

"Cheers to that."

We clicked our glasses and sipped, and then we started talking about anything and everything. Well, maybe not everything. We didn't talk about work, or even much about our personal lives short of telling him about my ex and his desire for an open relationship.

Reed showed the right amount of disgust at the idea. "I don't think I'll ever understand that. If you find somebody you want to be with, it seems to me you need to hold on tight and not let anything get in the way."

I studied him. "Have you ever had that?" I wondered if he was divorced or widowed. He couldn't be married and believe in monogamy unless he was playing me and his reaction was all an act. I sipped my drink and pushed that thought away. It didn't matter. We were in Vegas, and once I went home to Chicago, it wouldn't matter.

He shook his head. "I haven't had much luck in that department."

I must have gaped because he laughed. "Why does that surprise you?"

"Because of all this." I made a motion toward his face and the hard planes of his chest etched in the fabric of his T-shirt.

He shrugged. "I suppose I'm looking for somebody who wants a little bit more than this."

I nodded. "I hear you. Well, actually, I don't because I don't have this . . . " I made a motion to my own body. Don't get me wrong, I don't think I'm unattractive, but I'm no super model.

He frowned. "What do you mean, you don't have this?" He motioned to me. "If you weren't here sitting with me, any one of the single men—hell, maybe even some of the married men—would be coming over here to make your acquaintance."

I shook my head as I sipped my drink. "That's nice of you to say, but I doubt it."

"I bet you that if I left, there would be a man, several probably, who'd show up. Whereas I've come here plenty and never had a woman hit on me."

"I did . . . hit on you . . . I mean . . . well . . ." God. Why did everything I say suggest I wanted to have sex with him? I let out a sigh.

"Perhaps we'll have to agree to disagree because I don't really want to take that bet."

I went all warm inside as I took his words to mean he was enjoying my company, awkward as it was. "I guess it just goes to show that there's much more that goes into a relationship than just attraction."

He held up his bourbon. "I'll cheers to that, too."

We continued talking and drinking. I wasn't drunk, but the inhibitions were down, the music was pumping, and I could feel it vibrating in my blood. "Do you happen to dance, Reed?"

He shook his head. "Not very well."

"Me neither."

"I don't believe it."

"I bet you're better than me," I said, playing off the "bet" he'd made earlier.

He grinned, and for a minute, I was blindsided. "I'll take that bet." He stood, and I was able to note that he was tall. Tall and broad, like a football player. He held his hand out to me. I placed my hand in his, and it was large like the rest of him. I had a moment to remember the adage about a man's hands being reflective of the size of his package. I let out a giggle and immediately tried to take it back. How mortifying.

"What's so funny?"

I shook my head. "Nothing. I was just noting the size of your hands."

His eyes narrowed, and I swore there was a wicked feral quality to it. "It's true, you know, about hand size."

All my girly bits flared to life. "No, I wouldn't know."

The music was a fast rhythmic beat, but he put his hand on my hip to keep me close to him as we danced on the crowded dance floor. I might have thought he'd respond to my comment and was a little disappointed he hadn't. I reminded myself that I didn't want this to be more than a night of drinks, dancing, and scintillating conversation.

He was right. He wasn't a great dancer, but neither was I. Neither of us cared as we allowed our bodies to move to the beat. I felt free and uninhibited. I wasn't worried about what others thought. I just let go and lived in the moment. It was the most fun I'd had in a long, long time. In fact, I'm not sure I ever had so much fun with Chase.

The song ended and the DJ came on. "Time for the true Mr. Blue Eyes himself." A hologram of Frank Sinatra appeared near the stage. The music swelled, and the hologram sang *Strangers in the Night*.

My chest filled with a strange sensation as the words of the song mixed with Reed pulling me close. "Shall we keep dancing?"

"Yes, please." I didn't want the night to end. I felt like Cinderella, afraid of the clock hitting midnight and this wondrous night coming to an end.

"I suppose we haven't resolved the bet. I'm pretty sure I've lost."

I shook my head. "I think it's a tie."

He laughed as he pulled me to him for the slower dance. As we moved, our bodies drew closer until I was flush against him. My hand settled on the hard, warm plane of his chest. Lower, I felt something else hard. Something that proved the point about large hands. I looked up at him.

He gave me a sheepish smile. "You'll have to excuse my friend."

Arousal rushed through my body. I wanted to strip this man down and drag my tongue over every inch of him. It was unsettling and exciting, and I laughed, feeling a little bit giddy about it all.

He leaned his head closer, his lips just along my ear. "If you had any interest in seeing the proof about hand size, I'd be happy to show you."

I'm pretty sure I groaned. Not a groan of dismay, but a groan like I was about to orgasm right there on the dance floor.

I wasn't a prude, but neither was I a woman who normally went home

with strange men for a hookup. But the bartender, Josh, knew him. And the owner, Max Clarke, and his wife knew him. That had to mean he was an okay guy, right?

Plus Josh, Max, and his wife knew he was talking to me. If I turned up dead, they'd be able to tell the police I was with him. God, I watched too much true crime TV.

I pushed that away and reminded myself that I was here tonight to live life out loud and not worry about ramifications, of which there would be none because this was Vegas, baby.

"Your hands are impressive," I said with a sexual bravado I'd never felt before.

His hand slid down to my ass, tugging me a little bit closer, letting me feel the steely length behind the zipper of his jeans. "How about we find a place more private to dance?"

The next moments were a blur as we left the club and entered one of the nearby casino hotels where Reed had a room. Then we were in the elevator, where he pressed me against the wall, his hard length teasing me and his lips giving me a searing kiss that almost had me orgasming right then and there.

Our hands were all over each other's body as the doors of the elevator opened, and we managed to make our way into the hall and toward the room that he'd rented.

By the time we entered the room, he had lifted my dress so that when the door closed behind us, he'd slipped his fingers into my panties and yanked them down. Thank God I went with the lacy red thong.

Then he dropped to his knees, lifting my leg over his shoulder. His hands ran along my thighs as he looked up at me. "I hope you don't mind my putting off showing you the proof of my size. If I don't go down on you now, I'm going to go fucking mad."

"Okay," I squeaked as the intensity of his eyes and the hoarseness of his voice stole my breath. He was like a fantasy come true.

The minute his tongue slid through my folds, my world tilted on its axis. His tongue was hot and wet and oh, so very talented.

I gripped the door handle to keep me from tumbling over. My hips gyrated, and the one leg I was standing on trembled.

His tongue licked, flicked, and sucked and at one point, dipped inside me.

"Oh, my God."

His lips moved away, sucking on the inside of my thigh.

I whimpered, wanting him back on my clit. "Don't stop."

He looked up at me again. "I'm not stopping. You taste so fucking good, I don't want it to end too fast."

Yeah, no. I couldn't wait. Maybe his other women could hold off, but I'd never needed to come so badly in my life. "I'm sorry. I need to come."

He gave me a sweet smile. "Don't be sorry. If you need to come, then I'll make you come."

Then his mouth was on me again, and holy smokes, I felt like I was on a runaway freight train about to fly off a cliff, but in a good way. He inserted a finger inside me, and his lips wrapped around my clit. The two of them working together shot me off to the stratosphere. My entire body went rigid and then shuddered as wave after wave of pleasure rolled through me.

He made an "mmm" sound, as if he were having a sweet dessert. Then he slowly stood, his immense body blocking me in. He brought one hand in front of me, holding it in front of my face, splaying his fingers wide. "Are you ready to experience the proof about hand size?"

I nodded because I still was unable to form words. He took my hand, bringing it up to his lips and kissing it and then pulling it down, pressing it over his hard shaft.

I looked into his eyes, finding my voice. "I'm going to need more proof than that." I found my strength next, pushing him away from the door and toward the bed, knocking him back until he was lying on the mattress.

I did a striptease, feeling wanton and sexy and at the same time safe. His eyes flashed with wild passion as my dress dropped to the floor along with my bra.

"So fucking sexy."

I crawled over him, straddling his thighs as I unbuckled his belt and then undid the button and zipper of his jeans. I tugged and tugged at his jeans and boxers until his dick sprang free. The rumor about hand and dick size was true, and then some.

Reed—one month later.

I really shouldn't complain. How many men in the world could make money hand over fist in business while spending the morning in their office drinking coffee and watching the hockey highlights from last night's game?

I bet there were many who couldn't, yet here I was, sitting at my desk while I watched the home team star player, Bo Tyler, score two goals on the big-screen TV in my office. I justified having the TV because as CEO of a billion-dollar daily fantasy sports site, I needed to know what was going on in sports. It was a fucking fantastic excuse to watch TV.

At the end of the game highlights, the commentators switched to showing Bo's after-game antics in which he was caught celebrating his success by getting drunk and sneaking onto a golf course to play drunken golf with glow-in-the-dark golf balls.

I shook my head as I watched him get escorted off the course by the golf club's security. I smiled wryly, wondering how my best friend, Pierce Jackson, coach of Bo's hockey team, was faring this morning. He had to be happy about winning the game, but he wasn't going to be thrilled about Bo's nocturnal golfing habit.

I clicked off the TV, tossing the remote on my desk. As I looked at all the paperwork scattered on it, I had to remind myself again how lucky I was. As

the owner of the number-one daily fantasy sports company, I made more money than I could ever spend in my lifetime.

My kids—hell, my grandkids—probably wouldn't be able to spend it all. Not that I had kids or grandkids because I didn't and it was unlikely I ever would.

My dating life was shit.

I was a forty-five-year-old ex-hockey-star turned billionaire who couldn't find a woman who would stick. And it wasn't from a lack of trying.

During my hockey days, I didn't date. I hooked up. But once my business hit a million dollars in net worth not long after I started when I was forced to retire from hockey, I decided I'd find someone to share my newfound wealth. But every woman I dated dropped off the radar after a few dates. It was annoying, although today, I couldn't remember much about any of them, except for one.

Analyn.

Ever since that night a month ago, she had become my fantasy sex sport, starring in my dreams and my daytime jerk-offs. I couldn't quite pinpoint what it was about her that stuck with me, compared to the other women I had dated.

Yes, she was beautiful and sexy, but so were the other women. There was something sweet and vivacious about Analyn. There was an authenticity about her that was refreshing. She said what she thought and didn't act with any guile or pretense.

When she'd first come to sit next to me at the bar, I wasn't sure what to think. To be honest, I wasn't in the mood to be picked up by a woman. I went to the bar to lament, as had become my habit, on how boring my life had become. I wasn't sure I had ever gotten over the fact that my hockey career came to an end earlier than I would've liked due to an injury. Now I was a billionaire with the world at my feet, but I was alone and bored out of my gourd by life.

Sometimes, I thought I should have gone into coaching, like Pierce had. But at the time, I didn't think I could handle watching all the players on the ice and not be able to skate with them. Hockey had been my dream, and then my life, and then it had all come to an end.

Of course, I understood what a whiner complaining about my charmed life made me. When I quit playing hockey and started my business, my dissatisfaction only continued to grow. I thought maybe if I were to find a

good woman and have a family, that would be the answer. As it turned out, finding a good woman wasn't so easy.

Now, over ten years since my forced retirement from hockey, I was still unmarried and childless. There must be something wrong with me that after a few dates, the women would disappear. It took Analyn one night. I woke up the day after having the most amazing sex I'd had in a long time, maybe ever, ready to fuck like rabbits again, only to find the bed empty. The disappointment was acute.

But it wasn't just that there wasn't going to be any more sex with her that bothered me. I really enjoyed her company. I would've liked to have seen her again. I was aware that she was from Chicago, but maybe I could have flown out to visit her or flown her here to visit me. On the one hand, it seemed like a lot of work to date a woman long-distance, but since she was the first woman in a long, long time to get me out of my funk, it would've been worth it. Imagine the phone sex!

But it wasn't to be. Not only had she left while I was sleeping, but there was no note. I wondered what happened when she woke up next to me. Had she regretted it? Had I done something to offend her? Maybe in the early morning light, without the haze of alcohol, she realized how much older I was than her. I had to be at least twenty years her senior, practically old enough to be her father. I shook my head free of that thought because it was disturbing.

The intercom on my desk buzzed, pulling me out from my ruminations. I poked the button. "Yes, Catherine?"

"I just want to remind you that you're interviewing for the new social media marketing manager today. The first candidate is in twenty minutes. Would you like me to bring in the file for the applicant now?"

I scraped my hand over my face. Sometimes, I really hated my job. "No. I'll look at it when it's time."

"Very well."

The line clicked off, and it occurred to me that Catherine often spoke to me in a tone that made me feel like she was disappointed in me. Considering I was a billionaire who spent his day whining, I couldn't blame her.

A few moments later, there was a knock at my door, and Catherine poked her head in. "I brought you some coffee. It sounded like you could use it."

That was the other thing about Catherine. She was fucking efficient. She was so good, it was probably why I found my work boring. She could

anticipate anything, so I very rarely had to deal with any sort of crisis. Everything at work ran smoothly, almost like I didn't even need to be here. There was a thought.

"Thank you. I appreciate that."

She walked around my desk to stand next to me as she set the mug on the blotter. She rested her hip on the desk and smiled down at me. She was a professional, and at the same time, we'd been working together long enough that there was a familiarity between us. I wouldn't say we were friends, but we definitely had a connection that made us work together well.

"I suppose you caught the news footage of Bo last night," she said.

I picked up the mug, taking a sip of the hot, dark brew. Another thing that Catherine excelled at was coffee. "I did. I imagine Pierce is having a conniption fit."

She laughed. "No doubt." She tilted her head to the side. "Were you like Bo when you were playing?"

"No." Not even a little bit. I had dreamt of playing professional hockey my entire life, so when I finally made it, I was focused on staying there. That wasn't to say I didn't sow my oats and party. I just didn't do it to the level that Bo Tyler was able to do it. Bo got away with it because he was so fucking good on the ice. It was possible he'd surpass Gretzky as the greatest of all time.

Catherine gave my shoulder a light push with her perfectly manicured hand. "Oh, come on. You can tell me."

I shook my head. "Nope. I was living the dream back then. I wasn't going to fuck it up, no way, no how." I supposed it wasn't good to use the F-word in front of my administrative assistant, but she didn't seem to care. In fact, I think a part of her appreciated that while we had a professional relationship, around her, I could be myself.

She laughed and then straightened from my desk. "Well, I'll give you a few minutes. I'll let you know when your appointment is here."

"Thank you, Catherine."

I watched as she left, reminding myself how lucky I was. I had an extremely successful company, in part because my administrative assistant was the epitome of efficiency. She was smart and clever, and when she needed to be, she was the best damn gatekeeper any CEO could have. I had friends that asked whether I'd ever fucked her on my desk because she was also attractive. The answer was no, I never had, and in fact, I had never

thought about it.

Catherine had a lot of things going for her, but I didn't feel sexually or emotionally attracted to her. The truth was, while I occasionally might have been sexually attracted to a woman, I had never been emotionally attracted or felt a pull beyond my dick for any woman except Analyn. And goddammit! Now I was thinking about her again. Maybe I needed to go out and get laid to get her out of my mind. With my luck, I'd fantasize about her, maybe even say her name while I came, ruining it with the woman I was with.

I forced myself to focus on work, pulling up recent data files to see how well the company was doing. There was a time when looking at my numbers gave me a thrill. Today it was more of the same.

A few moments later, Catherine knocked at my door again.

"Your appointment is here. I've put her down in the conference room."

I nodded and stood, putting on my coat and straightening the tie I'd loosened when I'd arrived. I felt like a dead man walking as I exited my office, which again made me feel pathetic considering how fortunate I was in my life.

I walked with Catherine down the hall to the conference room. Catherine entered first, and I followed behind.

I stopped short when I saw the curvaceous dark-haired woman standing next to the conference table. Holy fuck, it was Analyn.

Her eyes rounded as recognition came. Well, at least she remembered me. The way she had left, I wondered if she would. I had spent that night getting to know every inch of that woman and knew that I would never, ever forget her.

"Analyn Watts, this is Mr. Hampton, the CEO of Dream Team." Catherine handed me the folder with Analyn's application. "Mr. Hampton, this is Analyn Watts."

Watts. We hadn't shared our last names a month ago. I'd cursed that since I couldn't find her, but then I realized that had been the point. She hadn't wanted to be found.

"Would you like me to get you another cup of coffee? Ms. Watts has already declined one."

My gaze stayed on Analyn as dueling emotions ran through me. On the one hand, I felt hope. Here was the woman I couldn't get out of my mind. Maybe I'd be able to see her again.

But another part of me had a growing anger at the way she had left after

that spectacular night we'd had. It was stupid of me to be pissed off. It'd been a hookup. There had been nothing about that night to suggest that it was any more than that. But by the time I was drifting to sleep that night, I knew I wanted more than a hookup, but she had taken off without a word, taking away that opportunity.

"No, thank you, Catherine. That'll be all for now."

Catherine left the room, shutting the door, leaving me alone with Analyn. I had so many questions that I wanted to ask her and none had to do with the job. I reminded myself that she was expecting a job interview, which had me wondering why she was here. Had she lied to me about being from Chicago?

I motioned to the chair in front of her. "Have a seat, Ms. Watts." I had to be professional, and if she thought maybe I didn't remember her, that would be okay too. Petty, I know.

She stared at me, and for a moment I thought she was going to leave. I arched a brow, in my mind, challenging her, asking her if she was going to bolt again. She let out a sigh, as if she was resigned to the moment. For some reason, that angered me more.

She pulled out the chair and sat down.

I sat in my chair, opening the file. "Let's start by having you tell me, have you ever walked out on anyone?"

End of preview. [**Get the complete story here.**](#)

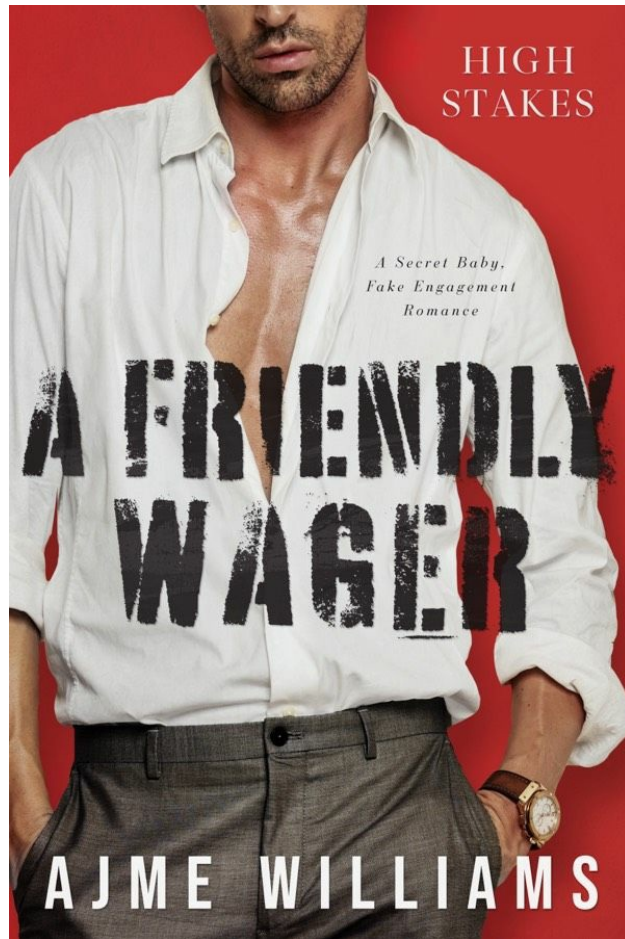
HIGH STAKES

BET
ON
IT

*An Age Gap
Billionaire
Office Romance*

AJME WILLIAMS





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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ajme Williams writes emotional, angsty contemporary romance. All her books can be enjoyed as full length, standalone romances and are FREE to read in Kindle Unlimited .

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